

Pets could improve personal health

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

Rather than heading to the pharmacy for solutions to common ailments, a majority of people may be able to stop at the nearest pet store or animal shelter and find a finned or furry remedy instead.

Studies that link positive health benefits to pet ownership abound. According to WebMD, one study found that 48 stockbrokers who adopted a pet experienced lower blood pressure readings in stressful situations than did people who did not own pets.

Another study found that individuals suffering from serious diseases, such as cancer or AIDS, are far less likely to experience depression if they have a strong tie to a pet. Plus, pets have proven beneficial to seniors struggling with loneliness.

Any pet can try a person's patience at times, especially when a kitty has used a sofa as a scratching post or when a pooch needs to be let into the yard at 3 a.m. But for many pet owners, the benefits of having a pet far outweigh the negatives. Here are some of the many ways that pet ownership can be good for one's health.

—Lower blood pressure: Petting a dog or cat can lower blood pressure, as can watching a fish swim around a tank. Those with hypertension may want to purchase or adopt a companion animal to help lower their blood pressure.

—Reduce stress: Stress is something people face on a daily basis. According to a National Health Interview Survey, 75 percent of the general population experiences at least "some stress" every two weeks, and many times that stress is moderate to severe. Research has indicated that when people spend time with a pet their levels of cortisol, a hormone associated with stress, is lowered while their level of serotonin, a hormone associated with improved mood and well-being, is increased.

—Lower cholesterol: Lifestyle factors associated with pet ownership, particularly a focus on increased physical health and activity, can help lower cholesterol levels. Also, having a pet works to reduce stress, which may keep individuals from looking to fatty foods as sources of alleviating anxiety.

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—Fight depression: Many therapists have prescribed pet therapy as a method to alleviating and recovering from depression. A pet is an unconditional friend and can provide that listening ear a person needs to talk through problems. Also, walking and taking care of a pet devotes attention away from problems and inward thinking.

—Improve physical activity levels: Heading to the gym is one way to get a workout, but spending an hour walking the dog or tossing around a ball for a game of chase and fetch is another way to get the heart pumping. Many dog owners benefit from the “forced” exercise that goes with daily walks. Some people choose to exercise with their pets, enjoying the companionship and the physical activity.

—Reduce stroke incidences: There has been evidence that cat owners are less likely to suffer strokes than people who do not have cats. Researchers are not sure of the connection but surmise that cats have a more calming nature than other types of pets.

—Greater opportunities for socialization: Humans are social animals and need to interact with others. Pet owners have a tendency to want to share time and experiences with other pet owners. Pets can provide opportunities for people to get together.

—ADHD therapy: Children and adults with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder often benefit from working with a pet or having a pet as a family companion. Playing with a pet is a great way to release excess energy and focus on tasks. Also, a pet with his or her unconditional love can help someone with ADHD overcome self-esteem issues. Similar results are possible when pets are used as therapy animals for children with autism and other behavioral disabilities.

—Reduce propensity for allergies: Children who grow up in homes with cats and dogs are less likely to develop common allergies and even asthma, research suggests. In fact, children who live around two or more dogs or cats before their first birthday are less likely to have allergies of any sort, according to a study published in “The Journal of the American Medical Association.”

Research presented at the 10th International Conference on Human Animal Interaction found pet owners were the least likely to have to visit the doctor. The survey of more than 11,000

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respondents from Australia, China and Germany found that over a five-year period pet owners made 15 to 20 percent fewer annual visits to the doctor than non-pet owners.

The companionship and love pets provide could be a key benefit in promoting good personal health.

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