

‘Paw’sitive vibes: The healing power of pet therapy

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San Francisco airport was recently in the news for a rather delightful reason. A charming 14-year-old rescue cat named Duke Ellington Morris, wearing a pilot’s hat and a dapper shirt collar, became the latest addition to its famed Wag brigade. The latter is a team of certified stress relief animals that are hired to alleviate the stress and anxiety of flyers and make their travel more enjoyable. Well, this endearing piece of information is another validation of the healing power and emotional support that pets provide.



Unconditional love and companionship

There is no doubt that pets shower true affection, demonstrate acceptance and provide constant companionship, which creates an indelible emotional bond with their human guardians. This bond instills comfort, mitigates feelings of solitude, and cultivates a sense of inclusion. “Pets display an inherent aptitude to perceive and reciprocate human emotions. They extend indispensable emotional support by maintaining a non-judgmental presence, actively heeding, and bestowing comfort during instances of upheaval or sorrow. This bond plays a crucial part in enhancing mental health by fostering a sense of security and emotional wellness,” says healer Dr. Madhu Kotiya.

It is well known that cuddling with a furry friend has physical and mental health benefits in addition to the obvious enjoyment of having them in one’s lives. “Dogs, for instance, understand a few words, but they are better at reading our tone, body language and gestures. Like any good friend, a dog will look into your eyes to gauge your mood. Taking care of them can boost children’s self-esteem and activity. The elderly also benefit from pets by getting valuable companionship as they bring genuine happiness and love into their lives,” says Dr. Malini Saba, psychologist and chairman, Anannke Foundation, who is a mother to five dogs and four cats.

Happy and calming vibes

Pet owners vouch for the fact that quality time spent with furry friends is indeed a great mood booster. It helps you get rid of all the negativity and channel your zeal into something optimistic. “When I come back home after a long working day, the way my pet dog Bruno waits at the door and starts happily jumping around the house, instantly enhances my mood. He has always been a stressbuster for my parents and me,” says Juilee Ghadigaonkar, account director, Aria Communication. Cats are wonderful at understanding human emotions too. “Cats are not as expressive in their affection as dogs. However, they do it in their own way. A head butt, rubbing against our legs, showing their bellies looking for rubs is their way. My five-year-old Lily keeps me happily entertained for hours with her antics,” says Barnita De, vice president, product management, Odessa. Having a pet and taking it out for a walk is a wonderful way to connect with others and improves socialisation.

According to Dr. Somnath Sengupta, clinical regional head, Sukoon Health, spending time with pets and engaging in activities such as petting or playing with them, can increase the production of oxytocin, a hormone associated with bonding and relaxation. This can lead to a decrease in stress levels and promote a sense of calmness and well-being. Additionally, engaging with pets can stimulate the production of serotonin and dopamine, two neurotransmitters that play a crucial role in regulating mood and promoting feelings of pleasure and happiness.

Positive Effects on Physical and Mental Health

Most often having pets aids in increased physical action. Going for regular walks and having a feeding schedule for them helps people get consistent and disciplined in certain aspects of their own lives apart from overall improvements in cardiovascular health and fitness. “Specific conditions have been shown to improve after having a pet. Pet owners are significantly less likely to suffer from depression and have lower blood pressure in stressful situations (especially borderline hypertension),” adds Dr. Malini Saba.

For people with anxiety disorders, pets can provide a sense of security and help reduce these symptoms. Studies have indicated that petting a dog or cat can lower cortisol levels, a stress hormone. “My daughter has anxiety issues and is on treatment for that. Whenever she is having a breakdown or is distraught, Lily understands it. She comes close, watches her, and even settles on her lap in an attempt to calm her,” adds Barnita De. Therapy dogs have been used to assist patients with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and reducing anxiety. These animals have been shown to create a safe and supportive environment, allowing individuals to open up and engage in therapy more effectively. Moreover, pets have been found to have positive effects on children with autism, helping them improve social skills and emotional well-being. “Growing up with pets can give exposure to bacteria and allergens, which potentially enhances the resilience of the immune system,” says Dr. Meghana Dikshit, author, brain and performance expert.

The role of pets in coping with loss and grief is undeniable. They not only provide solace and support during phases of bereavement and loss, but also offer a non-judgmental conduit for expressing emotions. Tending to a pet also imparts a sense of purpose and routine, which proves particularly beneficial during the mourning process. “Bella, my German Shepard played an invaluable role in supporting me during my Covid recovery, which was also the time I lost my mother. I was battling recovery, severe stress, grief and anxiety. During those dark days, Bella was my constant support. And I could pour my heart out to her for hours. She would sit, patiently listen and even slept by my side, providing a sense of comfort and security. Taking care of Bella became my responsibility during my recovery and I ensured she was fed and taken on regular walks. This routine gave me structure and purpose when everything else seemed chaotic. It reminded me to take my own medications on time. Walking Bella outdoors was a lifeline for me and her playful nature was my therapy, which contributed to my recovery significantly.”

Needless to mention, while pets offer invaluable support, it is of utmost importance to take professional help for mental health issues. According to experts, individual experiences may vary but the overall impact of pets on mental and emotional well-being is well-documented and continues to be an exciting subject of ongoing research and exploration.