

Senior Pet Therapy Health Benefits from Being Around a Pet

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While the memories of a cherished childhood pet can bring comfort to an aging person, even more benefits come from maintaining that human-animal bond throughout life. Even more than the health benefits of owning a pet, the right pet serves as a trusted confidant, coach, and counselor.

“Senior citizens can experience a greater quality of life, whether it be from the ownership of a pet or simply from periodic visits with a furry friend,” says Dr. Lisa MacKay of the Veterinary Wellness Center of New Haven. “The human-animal bond is evident and can be witnessed in the elderly...There is overwhelming evidence that people are living longer, more productive lives because of their pets.”

One of the best-known benefits of pet ownership—which many of us learned as children—is the emotional support a pet provides. And, as we age—no matter how well and actively we do so—we lose important people and relationships. A cat or a dog, or whatever pet we choose, can provide much-needed love, support, and continuity.

In addition to the emotional benefits, according to the CDC (the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), owning a pet can decrease blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and triglyceride levels. The companionship of a pet also can increase an active senior's opportunities for outdoor activities and exercise.

“There is something quite magical that happens when a Lab enters a nursing home,” says Penny Gray. “Residents who are mostly unresponsive to family visits just come alive.”

“There is a magnetic effect as walkers and wheelchairs make their way to where the pet therapy dog waits. In his unspoken conversation with each of them, he reminds them of being a child on the farm, raising their own kids with a dog that meant the world to them.”

In addition to the warm feelings, a growing body of research supports the therapeutic value of pet ownership for seniors with and without specific health challenges. The health benefits of owning a pet are incredible. Owners of pets have been shown to have higher one-year survival rates after heart attacks, and dog ownership, specifically, may contribute to reducing cardiovascular disease risk.

“There is hardly a way to describe how the presence of a therapy dog draws out the positive emotions that often are suppressed for those who are confined to a wheelchair. In the time they are with a canine companion, they are free.”

Dr. Lisa MacKay of the Veterinary Wellness Center of New Haven
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention