



## **Stress Management And Pet Therapy**

**Mrs. Mira J. Sinojia**

Smt. K. S. N. Kansagara Mahila College, Rajkot  
Department of Business Management, Saurashtra University, Rajkot

### **Introduction**

#### **Everyday Stress**

In today's world almost everyone experiences stress on a daily basis. Coping with the responsibilities of family and work combined with the pressures of tight schedules and mounting bills just touches the surface of the many stressors in people's lives.

When thinking of ways to reduce stress in life, usually techniques like meditation, yoga and deep breathing come to mind. These are great techniques, to be sure. But getting a new best friend can also have many stress relieving and health benefits. While human friends provide great social support and come with some fabulous benefits, this article focuses on the benefits of furry friends: dogs and cats!

Research shows that, unless you're someone who really dislikes animals or is absolutely too busy to care for one properly, pets can provide excellent social support, stress relief and other health benefits—perhaps more than people!

#### **Owning a Pet Can Be a Great Source for Stress Relief**

Pets--those furry, four-footed friends--can provide excellent support and stress relief for us who live in such a hectic world. In my opinion, there is nothing better in this world than the unconditional love you get from a dog or cat in your life.

I have always found that pets offer love and companionship without asking much in return. They offer a great strategy for stress management as well as much needed stress relief. For those of us who love animals, you know it is almost impossible to stay in a bad mood when you look into the soft eyes of a dog or have a soft furry cat rub up against your leg. Further, I find it even easier to snap out of a dark mood when I engage in conversations with my dogs. They always seem to agree with me and listen quite assuredly with no judgment attached!! I just love my dogs for the same.

Pets can be your best friend! Sometimes they are even better than a human because they are not judgmental and are always willing to listen. Pets can be there for you in different ways from humans. As they listen, they can keep your secrets, sit with you patiently in comforting silence, snuggle, act as comic relief, and be the perfect antidote for loneliness. After a trying day, there is nothing I like more than coming into the house and



being greeted by my four-footed friends. They are always happy to see me and don't mind listening to any complaints I might offer about the day!

## **Pets All Over The World Have Been Making People Happy And Providing Stress Management For Years!**

A **pet** is an animal kept for companionship and enjoyment or a household animal, as opposed to wild animals. The most popular pets are noted for their loyal or playful characteristics, for their attractive appearance, or for their song. Pets also generally seem to provide their owners with non-trivial health benefits; keeping pets has been shown to help relieve stress to those who like having animals around. There is now a medically-approved class of "therapy animals," mostly dogs that are brought to visit confined humans.

### **How Owning a Dog or Cat Can Reduce Stress / The Health Benefits of Pet Ownership**

- 1. Pets Can Improve Your Mood:** For those who love animals, it's virtually impossible to stay in a bad mood when a pair of loving puppy eyes meets yours, or when a super-soft cat rubs up against your hand. Research supports the mood-enhancing benefits of pets. A recent study found that men with AIDS were less likely to suffer from depression if they owned a pet. (According to a press release, men with AIDS who did not own a pet were about three times more likely to report symptoms of depression than men who did not have AIDS.)
- 2. Pets Control Blood Pressure Better Than Drugs:** In a recent study, groups of hypertensive patients who have got dogs or cats were found to have lower blood pressure and heart rates than those who didn't get pets!
- 3. Pets Encourage You To Get Out And Exercise:** Dog owners do spend more time walking than non-pet owners, at least if we live in an urban setting. Because exercise is good for stress management and overall health, owning a dog can be credited with increasing these benefits.
- 4. Pets Can Help With Social Support:** When we're out walking, having a dog with us can make us more approachable and give people a reason to stop and talk, thereby increasing the number of people we meet, giving us an opportunity to increase our network of friends, which also has great stress management benefits.
- 5. Pets Stave Off Loneliness and Provide Unconditional Love:** Pets can be there for you in ways that people can't. They can offer love and companionship, and can also enjoy comfortable silences, keep secrets and are excellent snugglers. And they could be the best cure to loneliness.
- 6. Pets Can Reduce Stress—Sometimes More Than People:** While we all know the power of talking about your problems with a good friend who's also a good listener, recent research shows that spending time with a pet may be even better! Recent research shows that, when conducting a task that's stressful, people actually experienced less stress when their pets were with them than when a supportive friend or



even their spouse was present! (This may be partially due to the fact that pets don't judge us; they just love us.)

7. **Reduce Stress-induced Symptoms:** In a study of people undergoing oral surgery spent a few minutes watching tropical fish in an aquarium, the relaxation level was measured by their blood pressure, muscle tension, and behaviour. It was found that the subjects who watched the fish were much more relaxed than those who did not watch the fish prior to the surgery. People who watched the fish was as calm as another group that had been hypnotized before the surgery.
8. **Adds years to life:** Pets, thus, add years to the life of their owners by inducing them to exercise regularly and provides them with other social and mental relief.
9. **Lifestyle Balance:** Adopting healthy lifestyle changes can play an important role in easing symptoms of depression, stress, bipolar disorder and anxiety. Caring for a pet can help with those healthy lifestyle changes by:
  - Increasing exercise
  - Providing companionship
  - Helping meet new people
  - Reducing anxiety
  - Adding structure and routine to your day
  - Providing sensory stress relief

## How Pets Can Affect Mood And Health

Studies have begun to scientifically explore the benefits of the human-animal bond. Studies have found that:

- Pet owners are less likely to suffer from depression than those without pets.
- People with pets have lower blood pressure in stressful situations than those without pets.
- Playing with a pet can elevate levels of serotonin and dopamine, which calm and relax.
- Pet owners have lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels (indicators of heart disease) than those without pets.
- Heart attack patients with pets survive longer than those without.
- Pet owners over age 65 make 30 percent fewer visits to their doctors than those without pets.
- A pet doesn't have to be a dog or a cat. Even watching fish in an aquarium can help reduce muscle tension and pulse rate.

One of the reasons for these therapeutic effects is that most pets fulfill the basic human need to touch. Even hardened criminals in prison have shown long-term changes in their behavior after interacting with pets, many of them experiencing mutual affection for the first time. Stroking, holding, cuddling, or otherwise touching a loving animal can rapidly calm and soothe us when we're stressed. The companionship of a pet can also ease loneliness, and some pets are a great stimulus for healthy exercise, which can substantially boost mood.

## Pet Therapy



The therapeutic use of pets to enhance the mental and physical health of a wide variety of individuals, including people with AIDS or cancer, older adults living in institutions, and individuals with mental illness, has received increasing amounts of attention. You do not have to be a member of any of these groups to benefit from owning and caring for a pet, however. For many people, pets are also a wonderful way to reduce stress.

Pets provide stress reducing effects for a number of reasons. First, pets (unlike "more complicated" humans) are usually relatively consistent with regard to their behavior (they wag their tails, sit on our laps, swim around their tanks, eat, and sleep in certain patterns, at certain times, etc.). Compared to humans, our relationships with our pets are predictable. If we feed and properly pay attention to our pets, they in turn will show us unconditional affection

(this reciprocity only applies to certain pets, like dogs, cats, etc., but you get the idea). Animals will not argue, "stab us in the back," or engage in indirect, confusing or contradictory behavior that can cause us to feel stressed. In addition, this consistency, predictability, and unconditional love can be quite comforting (and stress reducing) when people feel as if everything is out of control or continuously changing.

Most people receive a sense of satisfaction, fulfillment and competence from taking care of a pet. Feeding, grooming, and otherwise caring for a pet is a form of nurturing. This nurturing behavior allows us to focus on someone (or something) other than ourselves, and feel a sense of pride in having a healthy and happy companion. A sense of competence can decrease feelings of stress, enhance our feelings of self-worth, and in turn increase our sense of being able to positively impact our environment.

Research also suggests that owning pets has direct physiological (body) effects. Pets seem to decrease blood pressure, lower heart rate, and decrease muscular tension, both in reaction to specific stressful events as well as across time (in general). In addition, if you have a pet that requires exercise; you are more likely to exercise (and gain all of the positive health and stress reducing benefits described previously) yourself.

Finally, many people gain a sense of safety and security from their pets. In particular, individuals who worry about (and feel negatively stressed by) the safety of their neighborhood, or being alone when a spouse or relationship partner travels can take comfort in the sense of being protected.

## What Type of Pet?

It is surprising that it does not matter what the pet is to get the therapeutic benefit. It could be a dog, a cat, parakeet, a gold fish or anything else. The only thing which matters is that the animal is of interest to you.

### Pets that Help Humans Reduce Stress

Many pets help humans reduce stress levels. The type of pet depends on what kind of animals you like, as studies have shown that having any pet is a stress reducer. Consider these kinds of animals that might be helpful for you:

- **Dogs:** Dogs are loyal, loving, and like an animal best friend.
- **Cats:** Cats are typically easy to own and will happily sit in your lap.
- **Fish:** A fish tank has a calming effect for any room.
- **Horse:** Riding or grooming horses can be a relaxing activity.



- **Birds:** Birds will uplift your mood with their singing.

However, it is important that the pet you have selected fit your temperament, living space and lifestyle. Otherwise it will be additional source of stress. So, look over the pet and see whether the chemistry is compatible before you decide to adopt one.

## Pets and older adults

The key to aging well is to effectively handle life's major changes, such as retirement, the loss of loved ones, and the physical changes of aging. Pets can play an important role in healthy aging by:

- **Helping you find meaning and joy in life.** As you age, you'll lose things that previously occupied your time and gave your life purpose. You may retire from your career or your children may move far away. Caring for a pet can bring pleasure and help boost your morale and optimism. Taking care of an animal can also provide a sense of self-worth.
- **Staying connected.** Maintaining a social network isn't always easy as you grow older. Retirement, illness, death, and moves can take away close friends and family members. And making new friends can get harder. Dogs especially are a great way for seniors to spark up conversations and meet new people.
- **Boosting vitality.** You can overcome many of the physical challenges associated with aging by taking good care of yourself. Pets encourage playfulness, laughter, and exercise, which can help boost your immune system and increase your energy.

## Pets and children

Not only do children who grow up with pets have less risk of allergies and asthma, many also learn responsibility, compassion, and empathy from having pets. Unlike parents, pets are never critical and don't give orders. They are always loving and their mere presence at home can help provide a sense of security in children. Having an ever-present dog or cat, for example, can help ease separation anxiety in children when mom and dad aren't around. Studies have also shown that pets can help calm hyperactive or overly aggressive kids. Of course, both the pet and the child need to be trained to behave appropriately with each other.

## If You're Considering Getting a Pet

It's important to realize that owning a pet isn't for everyone. Pets do come with additional work and responsibility, which can bring its own stress.

It also important to remember to weigh the pros and cons of different types of pets (and different breeds within different species) in light of particular personalities (the amount of time you are willing and able to devote to a pet), living situations (the size of your home, whether the animal needs to and can go outside independently), family structure (the presence of young children, other pets, etc. in your home), lifestyles (the amount of time that the pet will be alone and/or boarded in a strange place due to traveling, working, etc.), and so on. So make sure you are prepared and have the resources to properly care for your pet. Also, owning a pet is a lifetime commitment, so if you're still unsure, wait to get a pet and try some alternatives to pet ownership.



## Lifestyle Considerations That Influence Your Choice In A Pet

- **Little outdoor activity** – If most of your time is spent at home, consider pets that would be happy to stay with you in that environment. You may enjoy playing with or cuddling a cat or a bunny; watching fish or singing along with a bird.
- **High activity level** – If you're more active and enjoy daily activities outside of your home, especially walking or running, a dog might be right for you.
- **Small children and the elderly** – Families with small children or elderly living in their homes should consider the size and energy level of a pet. Puppies and kittens are usually very active, but delicate creatures that must be handled with care. Large dogs could accidentally harm or knock over a small child or adult who is unsteady on their feet.
- **Other animals in household** – Consider the ongoing happiness and ability to adjust of the pets you already have. While your cat or a dog might love to have an animal friend to play with, a pet that has had exclusive access to your attentions may dislike sharing you.
- **Home environment** – If a neat, tidy home, free of animal hair, occasional muddy footprints and “accidents” is important, then a free-roaming dog or long-haired cat may not be the best choice.
- **Landscaping concerns** – With certain pets, your landscaping will suffer. Many dogs will be tempted to dig holes in your lawn, and dog urine can leave yellow patches—some say unaltered females cause the most damage.
- **Time commitment** – Finally, and perhaps most importantly, keep in mind that you'll be making a commitment that will last the lifetime of the pet – perhaps 10, 15, or 20 years with a dog or cat; as many as 30 years or more with a bird.

## Owning A Pet Is Not For Everyone

Having a pet is not a miracle cure for mental illness. Owning a pet is beneficial and comforting **only** for those who love and appreciate domestic animals. If you're simply not a “pet person,” pet ownership is not going to provide you with any therapeutic benefits or improve your life. For other people, owning a pet may simply not be practical. Some of the drawbacks are:

- **Pets cost money.** Food bills, veterinary care, licenses, grooming costs, toys, bedding, boarding fees, and other maintenance expenses can mount up. The unemployed or the elderly, on limited fixed incomes, may find it difficult to afford a pet.
- **Pets require time and attention.** As any dog owner will tell you, there's nothing therapeutic about coming home to a dog that has been locked up in the house on his own all day long. Dogs need daily exercise to stay calm and well-balanced; most other pets require at least daily care and attention. Pets can even curb some social activity, as they can only be left alone for a limited time.
- **Pets can be destructive.** Any pet can have an occasional accident at home. Some cats may be prone to shredding upholstery, some dogs to chewing shoes. While training can help eradicate negative, destructive behavior, they remain common in animals left alone without exercise or stimulation for long periods of time.
- **Pets require responsibility.** Most dogs, regardless of size and breed, are capable of inflicting injury on people if not handled responsibly by their owners. Even cats can scratch or bite. Pet owners need to be alert to any danger, especially around children.
- **Pets carry health risks for some people.** While there are some diseases that can be transmitted from cats and dogs to their human handlers, allergies are the most common health risk of pet ownership.



## Reducing Health Risks From A Pet

Kids, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems are at greater risk for getting sick from animals. Take these steps to reduce your risk:

- Wash hands thoroughly after contact with animals.
- Keep your pet clean and healthy, and keep vaccinations up to date.
- Supervise children under age 5 while they're interacting with animals.
- Prevent kids from kissing their pets or putting their hands or other objects in their mouths after touching animals.
- Avoid changing litter boxes during pregnancy. Problem pregnancies may arise from toxoplasmosis, a parasitic disease spread by exposure to cat feces.

## Alternatives To Pet Ownership

Perhaps you are allergic to pets, travel often, or simply don't have time to give a pet the time and attention it needs. There are alternatives to actually owning a pet that can give you stress reducing benefits.

If full-time pet ownership is not right for you—or if you want to give pet ownership a trial run before making a commitment—some animal shelters offer pet “rental” programs. Dogs or cats that are available for adoption can be rented out for walks or play dates. Some hotels offer similar pet rental services. Guests can borrow a dog for a day to play with or take out on walks.

## Conclusion

And one last thing...

When you think life is too serious, too boring, or worse, too stressful, forget everything and play with your pet and laugh for a good 5 minutes!

Why 5 minutes? OK fine, 6 minutes! No. Just laugh as long as you like!

Great. So, why is it good to laugh?

It releases "happiness chemical" called endorphins. And "happiness chemicals" make you happy! So, being exposed to some humour regularly will help you be a happier person. After all, a happy person can never be stressed out!