How Pets Contribute to Quality of Life

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Fitness

In the present times, when everybody is so engrossed in his/her life, hardly anyone finds the time to indulge in a fitness routine. The lack of a fitness buddy can adversely affect the exercising will of many people. Pets can be a great exercise partner. Quite simply, pets force you to move and be more active. Taking you dog for a walk every day is a great way to get into the habit of everyday exercise.

Ninety-two percent of the respondents to a survey conducted by the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) during 2002 indicated that they derive significant health benefits from their pets. Particularly, thirty-one percent stated their physical fitness has been improved by their providing of exercise for their companion animals.

Walking you dog regularly means you’re much more likely than most other folks to get the government recommendation of at least 150 minutes of exercise per week. And not just that, but dog walkers also are more likely than non-dog owners to amp it up beyond a simple walk getting some moderately intense exercise into the week as well.
Pets in the Workplace

Employees who bring their dog to work with them often times see increased productivity and joy on the job. Many employees will work happily throughout the day, and even overtime, if their pet is present.

Without the stress of having to rush home to tend to their pet’s needs, employees work more productively and with less stress. Pets also provide emotional support to their humans throughout the work day. Additionally, walking a dog or playing with a cat gives an employee mini work breaks that elevates brain power and stimulates creativity.

According to a 2001 survey conducted by the American Pet Products Manufactures Association:

• 73 percent of the companies surveyed said pets create a more productive work environment
• 27 percent reported a decrease in employee absenteeism
• 73 percent indicated pets led to a more creative work environment
• 96 percent said pets created positive work relations
• 58 percent of employees stayed late with pets in the office.
The unique bond we share with our pets dramatically enriches our lives, our physical health, and our emotional well-being. Many studies have shown that while we are taking care of our pets, our pets are taking care of us.

• **Pets Help to Lower Blood Pressure** - A recent study at the State University of New York at Buffalo found that people with hypertension who adopted a cat or dog had lower blood pressure readings in stressful situations than did those who did not own a pet. (Dr. Karen Allen, State University of New York at Buffalo)

• **Pets Help to Reduce Stress** - Walking with a pet helps to soothe nerves and offers instant relaxation. Studies conducted worldwide have shown that the impact of a stressful situation is lesser on pet owners, especially males, than on those who do not own a pet. (Josephine M. Wills, Waltham Centre for Pet Nutrition, United Kingdom)

• **Pets Help to Prevent Heart Disease** - Because pets provide people with faithful companionship, research shows they may also provide their owners with greater psychological stability, thus a measure of protection from heart disease. (National Institute of Health Technology Assessment Workshop: Health Benefits of Pets)

• **Pets Help to Lower Health Care Costs** - People with pets actually make fewer doctor visits, especially for non-serious medical conditions.
Mental Health

The psychological benefits provided by pets or interaction with domestic animals is almost limitless. Everyone has the potential to “feel better” or to “prevent the blues” by owning or interacting with pets. From elder care facilities to hospitals to schools to our very own homes, pets enhance our emotional, cognitive, and behavioral well being.

- **Social Interaction** - People who are socially withdrawn, lonely, depressed, living alone or have inadequate support systems can benefit from pet ownership. People report that when they are out walking with their dogs strangers are much more likely to stop and talk with them—mostly because there is a dog to say hello to. So, in that respect, having a pet can help to increase social interactions with other people, thereby decreasing depression, isolation, loneliness.

- **Structure and Routine** - Caring for a pet involves feeding, exercising, and grooming regimens that can provide a person with structure and routine in their daily lives that can help to decrease symptoms of depression.

- **Ward-off Depression** - Research looked at 60 years of age and older, who were not living with human companions, but were living with a pet. The likelihood that the non-pet owners would end up being diagnosed as clinically depressed was four times higher than that found in the pet owning people of the same age. There was also evidence that the pet owners required fewer medical services and were much more satisfied with their lives. (Coren 2009)

- **Increase Happiness** - A positive interaction with a dog causes the release of endorphins in the brain, which produces a natural anti-depressant effect.

- **Decrease Anxiety** - People generally are more relaxed and calmer when petting an animal.

- **Laughter** - Pets do many cute, adorable and funny things, which can create many happy memories and giggles.
In domestic violence situations, abusing pets is a way to control, intimidate and hurt other members of the family. Victims are often afraid to leave abusive situations because of concern for their pets or other animals. At least 13 state laws have been passed to ensure survivors can include protection of their pets in restraining orders. Many other states are following suite with similar legislation of their own.

In Louisiana – R. S. 46:2135 enacted in 2008, states that a petition for temporary restraining order may include but is not limited to……. *Granting to the petitioner the exclusive care, possession, or control of any pets belonging to or under the care of the petitioner or minor children residing in the residence or household of either party, and directing the defendant to refrain from harassing, interfering with, abusing or injuring any pet, without legal justification, known to be owned, possessed, leased, kept, or held by either party or a minor child residing in the residence or household of either party.*

Pets can offer abuse survivors:

- Non-judgmental companionship
- Safe, non-threatening touch
- Entertainment, joy, happiness and humor
- Some pets can provide safety in ways such as trained guard. Feeling safe and secure is important for trauma/abuse survivors.
- Pets can assist survivors with social anxiety
- Pets can assist with depression and low self-esteem
- Pets offer unconditional emotional support for children and adult survivors that may be in the process of testifying in court.
Service dogs and other service animals have been vital to the daily functioning and improvement of the lives of people with disabilities. This can be in the form of guide dogs for the visually impaired, hearing dogs, social or therapy animals, seizure dogs and service animals. The types of animals can include but are not limited to dogs, cats, monkeys, and miniature horses. These service animals are actually covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) since they actually assist individuals with disabilities gain equal participation in society. Under the law, these animals are not considered pets but service animals. However, even though this may be viewed in the eye of the law as a working relationship, we can't help but fall in love and accept them as part of our family. Some organizations actually train animals and offer them free to those in need such as Canine Companions for Independence.

While we seem to focus on what an animal can offer us, we forget that some may need us, such as animals with disabilities. These animals are the ones who are passed by in the shelter and given up because the family doesn’t have the time or the means to take care of them. Their disability may have been caused due to genetics, accidents, abuse, trauma and many other reasons. Even though they may have a disability, they still have a lot to offer. In fact, many animals with disabilities offer life changing inspiration, hope, and acceptance. These pets can play just like other animals just sometimes in different ways. When deciding to add a new member to your family, keep in mind those pets with disabilities and what they can bring into your life.
Pets and the Military

Although this document focuses on wellness related benefits of pets, we want to acknowledge the incredible service that animals provide to the military’s efforts through both their work (sniffing out bombs and landmines, etc.) and the comfort they bring the service men and women who sacrifice so much and are so far from home. For a heart-wrenching story that highlights the loyalty of a particular dog named Eli to his handler soldier go to http://www.mysanantonio.com/default/article/Fallen-Marine-s-family-adopts-Eli-his-military-1005564.php -- but make sure you have tissue on hand.
Sources

**Fitness**
http://www.aahanet.org/
http://www.runnersworld.com/topic-ext/1,7121,86-238-527-0-0,00.html
http://www.runnersworld.com/dogrun/

**Work**

**Medical and Mental Health**
http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/health_benefits.htm
http://www.preciouspets.org/newsletters/articles/healthbenefits.htm
The Health and Psychological Benefits of Bonding with a Pet Dog: A pet dog can improve your mental and physical health. Published on June 7, 2009 by Stanley Coren, Ph.D., F.R.S.C. in Canine Corner

**Disability**
ADA Business BRIEF: Service Animals
http://www.ada.gov/svcanimb.htm

Canine Companions for Independence
http://www.cci.org/site/c.cdKGIRNqEmG/b.3978475/k.3FiC/Canine_Companions_for_Independence.htm

PetsWithDisabilities.org
http://www.petswithdisabilities.org/rescue.html

Panda: A Clicker Trained Assistance Horse
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLdO2cBAusw&feature=player_embedded#at=135
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=heHyc9DiHbA&feature=related

Helping Hands: Monkey Helpers for the Disabled (Monkey College)
http://www.monkeyhelpers.org/ourfamily/monkeys/video/

**Military**