

They Call It Puppy Love

Pets of every kind warm our hearts, not just puppies. Now studies show that they can make us healthier.

For many years I cared for patients at nursing homes. I loved the afternoons I would spend with them. I made sure to touch them and to give them a hug.

More often than not, when I made rounds at the nursing home, I'd bring one of my children with me. The patients loved seeing the kids and talking to them.

One day my son, Scott, and I went to see Rosie. We pulled our chairs next to her wheelchair.

"It's so good to see you!" she exclaimed. She tousled Scott's crew cut and shouted, "What's up, Skinny?"

"It's good to see you, too, Rosie. What's up with you?" I inquired.

She looked around and then leaned toward us. "Boys," she whispered, with a mischievous smile on her face, "I've got a new love in my life—a new man. And boy oh boy, does he ever make me feel young!"

As I was running through the likely nursing home candidates in my mind, I watched Rosie tilt her head back. She inserted two fingers between her lips and unleashed a whistle that could have awakened the dead. "Here, Rusty!"

We could hear the clicking of his toenails as her new "boyfriend" sprinted down the hall and into Rosie's room. The large golden retriever leaped onto the arm of her wheelchair, knocking it back a bit. As he licked Rosie's face, she laughed and laughed.

Rusty transformed that nursing home. He improved Rosie's overall health. And he changed my view of pets in health care.

PETS FILL A VOID

Researchers have found that loneliness is one of the leading causes of death in the United States and a major risk factor for heart disease. An increasing number of well-designed studies involving hundreds of thousands of people around the world are concluding that loneliness not only hurts us physically, emotionally and spiritually, but it can also actually kill.

Love, social support, intimacy, security, safety, satisfaction, connectedness and community—these terms all relate to a common theme in the medical literature. When we feel loved, nurtured, appreciated, valued, cared for and supported, we are much more likely to be happier and healthier.

People who avoid loneliness have a much lower risk of getting sick, and if they do become ill, they have a much greater chance of surviving. Your relationships matter. And they matter a lot.

But it's not just relationships with people that can help us become highly healthy. More and more research shows that pets can help us become more highly healthy. A number of studies have shown that pets decrease feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Even in children, pets make a difference. Researchers have found that the positive self-esteem of children is enhanced by owning a pet. Another study showed that a child's cognitive development could be enhanced by owning a pet. Seventy percent of families surveyed reported an increase in family happiness and fun subsequent to pet acquisition.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

A growing body of medical research has shown that pets in the

home may actually have a protective effect against developing pet allergies, at least for the first seven years of life. One study found that contact with pets develops nurturing behavior in children who may grow to be more nurturing adults.

Researchers have found that the presence of a therapy dog can lower behavior distress in children during a physical examination at a doctor's office and may be useful in a variety of health care settings to decrease procedure-induced distress in children. Presence of a dog during dental procedures can reduce the stress of children who are nervous about coming to the dentist.

Pet owners, when compared to people without pets, respond to stress with lower heart rates and lower blood pressure. They complete tasks with fewer errors. The author of this study concluded, "the findings demonstrate that pets can buffer reactions to acute stress as well as reduce the perception of stress."

Other studies show that people with pets seem more protected from the impact of stressful life events and as a result visit their doctors less often. Pet owners are less depressed than those without pets. In one study, stockbrokers with high blood pressure who adopted a cat or dog had lower blood pressure readings in stressful situations than did people without pets.

Heart attack survival rates are higher for people who own pets. In one cardiac study, only 1.1 percent of those who owned dogs died during the study, compared to 6.7 percent of those who did not have a pet. In another study, which followed patients for one year after discharge from a hospital after a heart attack, 6 percent of pet owners died in that year compared to 28 percent of those who did not own pets.

Studies have shown that Alzheimer's patients have fewer anxious outbursts if there is an animal in the home. One study found that displaying tanks of brightly colored fish curtailed

disruptive behavior and improved eating habits of individuals with Alzheimer's disease.

And walking a dog or just caring for a pet can provide exercise and companionship. Several studies show that dogs and humans can help each other get fit. In one study, 80 percent of dog owners participating in a weight-loss program completed the 12-month program. Only 68 percent of non-dog owners participating in the weight-loss program completed the program.

One insurance company, Midland Life Insurance Company of Columbus, Ohio, asks clients over age 75 if they have a pet as part of their medical screening—which often helps tip the scales in their favor. Just 10 minutes of physical interaction with a beloved pet can lower blood pressure and increase finger temperature—both clear signs of relaxation—according to a number of research studies.

In one study carried out in a hospital cardiac care unit, researchers discovered that a 12-minute visit with man's best friend helped heart and lung function by lowering pressures, diminishing release of harmful hormones and decreasing anxiety among hospitalized heart failure patients. Benefits exceeded those that resulted from a visit with a human volunteer or from being left alone.

THE SPIRITUAL CONNECTION

Now, although I'm not a theologian, over the last couple decades, my patients have confronted me with theological inquiries about their pets. And perhaps, if you're a pet lover, you've considered the same questions:

1. Why did God give us pets in the first place and why do they affect us the way they do? The truth is that the Bible does not specifically answer these questions for us. However, since pets are so obviously good for us and good to us, isn't it fair to consider them a good gift. And the Bible is clear that

all good gifts are from God.

Our pets have much to teach us. They can show us how to live in the moment and love it without worrying about tomorrow. Our pets show us how to love with all the body and soul. They can teach us how to relax, how to play and how to trust. These are all good things.

2. Do our beloved pets go to heaven? Once again, the Bible is silent on this question. However, what God has prepared for His children is wonderful beyond comprehension (see 1 Cor. 2:9). Our every need will be met.

When one of our cats died, our daughter, Kate, was grief stricken. At church that week, our pastor gave Kate a big hug and told her how sorry he was that her cat had passed away. With big tears streaming down her cheek, she asked him if her cat would be in heaven when she got there.

He smiled and lovingly told her, "Kate, if you need your cat in heaven, then I believe that he'll be waiting there for you." I was thankful for his wise counsel to my child and have shared it over the years with my patients who are grieving the loss of a pet.

So, if you are enjoying the company of a pet, then you are already filling a prescription for increasing your health and happiness. If you have the time, ability and the home arrangements to care for a pet, consider going to the Humane Society and picking out a dog or cat to care for and love.

If you don't want to own a pet, follow my friend Cynthia's example and volunteer at an animal shelter on weekends. The big smile I see on her face every time she talks about her work at the shelter leads me to believe that her weekly "dose" of puppy love is making her more highly healthy.

Walt Larimore, M.D., is one of America's best-known Christian family physicians and the author of *God's Design for the Highly Healthy Person* (Zondervan), from which this article was adapted. He lives with his wife, Barb, in Colorado. Visit [for more information on this subject and many other health-related topics.](#)