

THE PET EFFECT ON STRESS

Contributed by Heidi Roth, RDN, CHHC

Did you know that managing your stress could be as important for your long-term health as your diet, exercise, and sleep habits? While short-term stress can be a motivator (hello, fellow procrastinators), chronic stress is harmful. It can raise blood pressure, disrupt our sleep, and make us look and feel older than we are! Decades of research suggest that effective stress management leads to fewer aches and pains, less anxiety, and decreased risk of chronic disease including heart disease and diabetes.

When you think of relief, perhaps you think of taking a walk, doing some breathing exercises, or using a meditation app. But how often do you think of your pets?

There's a reason it's called "pet therapy"! Whether it's the warm weight of a cat on your lap or the excited tail wags at the door, pets have a profound, calming effect on our nervous systems.

What the Research Shows

Spending time with a pet triggers a cascade of positive responses inside our bodies. Petting a dog or cat for just a few minutes can lower cortisol, the body's primary stress hormone. At the same time, it raises oxytocin, the "bonding hormone" associated with feelings of love, trust, and relaxation.

Studies have also found that pet owners tend to have lower blood pressure and heart rates than people without pets. They also tend to recover faster after stressful situations. The simple act of being in the presence of an animal you love is, quite literally, good for your heart.

Pets Promote Healthier Routines

Dog owners, for example, often get more physical activity simply because their dog needs to be walked. Those daily walks provide movement, fresh air, and a natural mental break from screens, emails, and daily responsibilities. One of the best ways to get to meet your neighbors and build community ties is to have a dog. Research has shown that pet owners are significantly more likely to know their neighbors and feel that their neighborhoods are friendly.

For people dealing with depression or low motivation, it can be a reason to get up in the morning, knowing you need to take care of and feed your pet. Mental health professionals often note that this responsibility can be a powerful antidote to loneliness, withdrawal, and hopelessness. When everything feels pointless, your dog still needs a walk, and your cat still needs to be fed. And that might be exactly what you need as well.

Managing Stress with Mindfulness

Unlike us, pets live in the present moment. They don't ruminate on the past or catastrophize about the future. Watching them, or even joining them in this presence, can interrupt cycles of anxiety and bring us back to the NOW.

Physical touch plays a role as well. The act of stroking soft fur can activate the parasympathetic nervous system, the body's "rest and digest" mode, which counters the "fight-or-flight" mode when we are stressed.

Here are some ways to be mindful with your pet:

- When you get home, give them your undivided attention. No phones, just: "yes, I see you, and yes, I missed you, too!"
- Take time to pet them while consciously practicing deep, slow breathing. Try placing your hand on their side and matching your breath to theirs. Notice if they start to relax, too. They may sigh deeply, stretch out, or gently close their eyes.
- Sit in silence with them, simply watching without judgment or interference.
- Savor the moment. Remembering that their lives are short can help you cherish every moment with them.



- Find joy in their funny antics and gratitude for the laughter they bring.
- Observe them living in the moment, soaking up the sunshine.
- Five-senses check-in: During grooming or petting, focus on one sense at a time. Notice the texture of their fur, the sound of their breathing, and their unique scent.
- Practice mindfulness by reading your pet's body language. Do they enjoy eye contact or find it intimidating? If you stop petting them, do they paw you for more? Give them their space if they move away.

Every Pet Counts

It's worth noting that benefits aren't just limited to dogs, cats, and furry animals. Studies have shown that watching fish in an aquarium can bring about a calm, focused state as well, which is why you find aquariums in waiting rooms of hospitals. Birds, horses, and even reptiles have all been found to offer emotional comfort.

Thinking of Getting a Pet?

There are some things that are hard for sure- not being able to pick up and go away for the weekend on a dime, the barking, cleaning up after them, feeling guilty when leaving them, the vet bills... the list goes on. However, in a survey done several years ago by Mindful Magazine, people reported that their pets not only made their lives better, but also inspired positive values in them, including:

- "Generosity of spirit."
- "Unconditional love."
- "Respect for all animals."
- "Loyalty."
- "Letting go."
- "Kindness and humility."
- "Compassion."
- "Companionship."
- "Playfulness."

No Pet Yet?

Many shelters and rescue organizations enlist volunteers to help walk and socialize the animals in their care before they find forever homes. This is a great way to spend time with a furry friend while also helping animals in need in your community!

The next time you feel overwhelmed, put aside the screens, step away from the world, and spend some time with your animal companion. They will remind you how to breathe and simply be.

How will you share a mindful moment with your pet?



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