

Looking For Some Joy? Get a Dog!

How man's best friend benefits us physically and emotionally



By Eileen Spatz

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Nothing brings a smile to one's face faster than seeing the exuberant joy of our tail-wagging, four-legged friend the moment we return home. In an instant, all the day's stress and fatigue are wiped out by the loving greeting of the family dog. Their world revolves around us, and they never fail to remind us of their unconditional love.

Dogs Keep Us Healthy

Much research has been conducted on the connection between dog ownership and wellbeing. A study¹ published in the British Journal of Health Psychology, authored by Dr. Deborah Wells, sought to identify the various health benefits of owning a dog. The data showed a direct correlation

between dog ownership and lower blood pressure, cholesterol, and a reduced presence of serious health afflictions. In addition, Well's research found that in dog owners who had suffered a heart attack, there was an 8.6 percent higher one-year survival rate over the patients who did not own a dog.

Wells cites a number of reasons for the increased health benefits among dog owners. In addition to the obvious physical health benefits associated with regular exercise attributed the bond between human and dog is very powerful and can have an overall positive impact on mental health wellbeing.

What about Emotional Wellbeing?

Anyone faced with serious setbacks in life—loss of a loved one, loss of a job, a divorce, a health scare—knows how utterly distraught they may find themselves in the aftermath. Stress, grief, anxiety, and pain are powerful contributors to an increase in serious health problems. But the unconditional love of the family dog, lying by your side and soothing a broken spirit, can provide a sort of buffer against these negative responses. The companionship alone of your furry friend has the power to lift your mood.

There are actual neurochemical changes in a person's blood after interacting with their dog. These include changes in cortisol, oxytocin, prolactin and serotonin levels, and the data are documented in a study² conducted out of the University of Missouri's Center for the Study of Animal Wellness by Rebecca A. Johnson, Ph.D. Johnson found a reciprocal relationship between dog and human; that both the human and the dog displayed positive health effects resulting from the bond.

Get Off that Couch!

Who can argue the benefits of getting outdoors and walking? Countless studies have confirmed that regular weight-bearing aerobic exercise has a multitude of health benefits. More significant to overall wellbeing, though, are the psychological benefits of taking daily walks with your dog. Even

when you least desire leaving the house--it's too cold outside, you are too tired, or any of a plethora of reasons why you would prefer to plant yourself in front of the television--a brisk walk is beneficial.

Once that leash is on your dog and you step outside, the senses become alive with the sights and sounds of nature. Within moments, your whole mindset is shifting towards introspection or prayer or processing the day's events. As you march along with your happy dog, you may notice the change in the trees' leaves with an oncoming season, or the butterflies that are suddenly whirling around. You may notice the variety of songs of the chirping birds.

There is also the social aspect of walking your dog, which also has a positive impact on wellbeing. Dog people love meeting dog people. Even if the verbal exchange is brief, just the interaction with others who share your love for a pet dog is uplifting. Often, you may find yourself smiling as you observe the dogs playing and wagging their tails, and sometimes the conversation that has ensued between you and the fellow dog owner leaves you inspired or feeling joyful.

In all, the multitude of health benefits, both physical and psychological, of owning a dog contributes to an overall increase in positive wellbeing for both humans and dogs. I can't think of a better reason to go check out the local animal shelter.

Written by Eileen Spatz, freelance writer

1 Deborah Wells, PhD, study, Canine Behavior Centre of Queens University, Belfast, Northern Ireland, 2007.

2 Rebecca Johnson, PhD, study, University of Missouri, Center for Study of Animal Wellness, 2004.