

furry comfort

Animal-Assisted Therapy for Chronic Illness

From mood elevation to proven pain relief, research shows pet ownership could be a prescription for better health.

By Trudie Mitschang



ANYONE WHO HAS owned a pet will agree that animals are a great source of unconditional love and support. But, for a patient with chronic illness, a furry friend can provide much more than faithful companionship and a good cuddle. Studies show that animals can help with everything from lowering stress and blood pressure to battling depression and healing chronic pain.

“The evidence favoring the health value of pets is so compelling that if pet therapy were a pill, we would not be able to manufacture it fast enough,” says Larry Dossey, MD, author of *Reinventing Medicine*. Dr. James Rising, MD, DVM, a physician and veterinarian in Wallace, Idaho, agrees. In fact, he goes so far as to “prescribe a dog” for some of his patients. “Then I’ll tell them to go to the animal shelter and have it filled,” he says.¹

While much of the medical literature focuses on the role of pet ownership in disease prevention, a number of studies have explored the benefit of animal companionship for people who live with a wide range of chronic illnesses and disabilities. In one study, researchers explored the relationship between pet ownership, AIDS and depression and found that people with AIDS who had pets reported less depression than those with AIDS who did not have pets. Other studies have uncovered equally positive effects of pet ownership on patients with Alzheimer’s disease, autism and mobility or hearing disabilities.²

The History of Animal-Assisted Therapy

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is the term most often used when animals are utilized as a therapeutic treatment option for disease or illness. Although AAT has gained increased acceptance in recent years, the concept is hardly new. Florence Nightingale is believed to have used animals in healthcare for the first time in 1860. She recorded that small pets were good companions, especially for the chronically ill, and described the benefits of an animal-companion as a source of therapy to her patients. She also used pets with wounded soldiers in the early 19th century and determined that pets were influential in the healing process.³

Sigmund Freud has also been credited with recognizing the role of animals in therapy. Freud believed the calming presence of his own canine was especially useful with the children he worked with, and was known for bringing his beloved chow chow into his therapy sessions.³

Another name linked to pioneering research surrounding AAT is Dr. Boris Levinson. A practicing child psychologist in the 1960s, Dr. Levinson theorized that his patients were less anxious and were less resistant to therapy when his dog, Jingles, was involved in the sessions. He noticed that one of his patients, who

had previously refused to speak during sessions, would interact and speak to Jingles. Dr. Levinson proceeded to observe similar results in other children who had difficulty communicating. Based on his collective experience, he went on to author *Pet-Oriented Child Psychotherapy*, which later earned him the moniker “the father of AAT.”⁴

PET OWNERSHIP LOWERS BLOOD PRESSURE RESPONSE TO MENTAL STRESS.

While much of the early research into AAT focused primarily on dogs, over time, cats, horses, birds and a variety of other animals have been used therapeutically, with equally promising results. According to Pet Partners, a national leader in demonstrating and promoting AAT, “Therapy animals aren’t just dogs. Cats, horses, rabbits, pigs, birds, llamas and alpacas, guinea pigs and even rats are eligible for evaluation through the Pet Partners program.”⁵

Citing numerous studies, the Pet Partners website touts the following patient-specific benefits offered by therapeutic companion animals:⁶

- Fibromyalgia patients spending time with a therapy dog instead of in an outpatient waiting area at a pain management facility showed significant improvements in pain, mood and other measures of distress.
- A walking program that matched sedentary adults with therapy animals resulted in an increase in walking over a 52-week graduated intervention, with participants stating their motivation for adherence was “the dogs need us to walk them.”
- The presence of an animal was shown to significantly increase positive social behaviors among children with autism spectrum disorder.
- Pet ownership lowers blood pressure response to mental stress.
- Pet owners have higher one-year survival rates following heart attacks.
- Pet ownership was associated with a reduced risk for non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma and diffuse large cell lymphoma.
- Human health savings of \$3.86 billion over 10 years related to a decrease in doctor visits in studies in Austria and Germany have been linked to pet ownership.

Pets and Chronic Pain Relief

Nancy Gordon, founder of Paws for Comfort, has personal experience with the healing power of pets. A fibromyalgia sufferer who endured crippling chronic pain for years, Gordon found relief when she was introduced to a rare dog breed called the Xoloitzcuentli (Xolo), also known as a Mexican hairless. Gordon got her Xolo when she discovered the breed's size and unique body warmth make it ideal for use as a living "heating pad" for muscle pain.⁷

According to Gordon, the symptoms of her chronic fibromyalgia have been significantly lessened thanks to "Toaster," her pet Xolo. She has since become an enthusiastic proponent of the breed, which has a centuries-old reputation for healing. "Before I discovered Toaster, my pain management required a microwaveable neck wrap around my neck almost 24/7. When I discovered Xolos, I was amazed at the healing power of their bodies when pressed against the skin for 15 to 30 minutes," Gordon explains. "I believe that animals are angels for us, healing us in more ways than we can imagine," Gordon says. "They provide us with compassion and unconditional love. They help us remember universal love and the pure pleasure of play, which can be forgotten by those tired and beaten down from a pain-filled day."¹¹

BEING AROUND PETS APPEARS TO FEED THE SOUL, PROMOTING A SENSE OF EMOTIONAL CONNECTEDNESS AND OVERALL WELL-BEING.

Two articles on the National Fibromyalgia Association's website note that Xolos' usefulness in pain relief is due to their hairless nature, which allows their body heat to be easily felt — and to provide surprising warmth when placed against a person's skin. Because Xolos are hairless, they are also hypoallergenic and odorless, making them excellent pets for anyone with asthma or allergies.

Using hairless dogs as heating pads is obviously an unconventional pain management solution, but additional research supports the benefits of animals in chronic pain relief (wearing the pet not required). In a 2012 study, it was concluded that

therapy dog visits in an outpatient setting provided significant reduction in pain and emotional distress for chronic pain patients. The study also found therapy dog visits significantly improved emotional distress and feelings of well-being in family and friends accompanying patients to medical appointments.⁸

More research is needed before AAT becomes a mainstream pain management solution, but with many studies supporting the use of pets in alleviating everything from chronic aches to post-surgical discomfort, AAT seems to provide a relatively easy and cost-effective intervention with no negative side effects.

The Feel Good Factor

Chronic illness and depression tend to go hand in hand. Whether a patient is having a bad day due to a physical setback or is battling a more serious bout of the blues, AAT may offer healing and hope. AAT is recognized by the National Institute of Mental Health as a type of psychotherapy for treating depression and other mood disorders. Being around pets appears to feed the soul, promoting a sense of emotional connectedness and overall well-being. "Some of the problems associated with depression are social withdrawal and feelings of loneliness," says Steve G. Kopp, a licensed mental health counselor and marriage and family therapist with Genesis Health Systems. "Animal-assisted therapy gives a person a feeling of companionship and acceptance."⁹ Animal therapy can have profound effects, Kopp adds, explaining that when patients soothe animals they are interacting with, they often end up soothing themselves.

There's no question that snuggling a puppy simply feels good, but research also points to physical changes that occur within the body during patient/pet interactions. According to a 2012 paper published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, the increased oxytocin observed during human-animal interaction is proposed as the key reason for its positive psychosocial and psychophysiological effects.¹⁰ Oxytocin, a hormone secreted by the posterior lobe of the pituitary gland, is sometimes known as the "cuddle hormone" or the "love hormone," because it is released when people snuggle or bond socially, resulting in feelings of warmth and affection.

Science aside, there are several practical reasons why pets provide mood-boosting benefits. If chronic illness has caused mild to moderate depression, a pet can offer:

- *Uncomplicated love.* Chronic illness can significantly strain relationships with family and friends. A pet can offer judgment-free affection and will never say, "You don't look sick."
- *Responsibility.* Taking care of someone other than oneself

might feel daunting, but experts say that adding a little responsibility to one's life can actually be helpful. Caring for an animal adds a new and positive focus to life while giving a sense of accomplishment.

- **Activity.** For those barely getting off the couch, a dog can give them a reason to take a brisk walk around the block.
- **Routine.** Having a daily schedule helps people with depression. An animal's natural routine can offer much-needed structure.
- **Companionship.** Chronic illness is isolating. Having a pet is proven to ease feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Safety Concerns for the Immune-Compromised

Patients who are immune-compromised can tremendously benefit from AAT, but safety concerns do exist. While each patient will need to assess, with their physician, the benefits versus the risks of pet interaction, it is a fact that infectious disease transmission from pets to people is a potentially dangerous possibility. For most patients, however, proper safety precautions can ensure a loving owner/pet relationship that offers more health benefits than hazards.¹¹

One of the most common ways infections can pass from pet to owner is from contact with feces or urine. When cleaning up after a pet, patients should be sure to wear gloves, use a pooper scoop and make sure to wash hands thoroughly afterwards.

Patients will also want to prioritize their pets' health. Regular worming is vital since many of the intestinal parasites pets get can infect humans, too. In a household with an immune-compromised member, monthly deworming is optimal. Animals should be treated against fleas and vaccinated regularly. It is also important to take animals to the vet at the first sign of illness, particularly vomiting, diarrhea, coughing and sneezing. Many of the bugs that cause these problems in pets can also pass to humans.

Patients with cats should try to discourage hunting, which could expose them — and patients — to any number of infectious diseases. For this reason, many doctors will advise keeping cats indoors.

Snuggling with a pet is one of the primary ways we show and receive affection. However, immune-compromised patients should discourage pets from “kissing” their face to avoid unwanted germ transmission. Likewise, they should be extra careful when it comes to pet bites or scratches. If an injury breaks the skin, the area should be washed and medical advice sought. Chances of injury can be reduced by avoiding rough play and regularly trimming pets' nails.

Finally, pets should be chosen wisely. Some patients may

gravitate toward more exotic pets thinking they may require less maintenance and interaction than a dog or cat, but pets such as reptiles are often infected with salmonella, while birds can be a carrier of Cryptococcosis and psittacosis, two highly infectious airborne respiratory illnesses.¹¹

PATIENTS WHO ARE IMMUNE-COMPROMISED CAN TREMENDOUSLY BENEFIT FROM AAT, BUT SAFETY CONCERNS DO EXIST.

Welcome Companionship

Life with chronic illness is difficult. In addition to the physical symptoms caused by the illness itself, there is the mental and emotional toll that comes from a dire medical diagnosis. Exploring the mood and health-enhancing effects of animal ownership can offer a welcome antidote to loneliness, mental distress and physical pain, while providing much-needed loving companionship. Whether choosing a shelter animal, a pick-of-the-litter puppy or a trained service animal skilled in AAT, adding a furry friend to a patient's life might just make getting through the tough times a little bit easier. ■

TRUDIE MITSCHANG is a contributing writer for *IG Living* magazine.

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