

ANIMAL CONTACT AND THE OLDER PERSON: COMPANIONSHIP, HEALTH, AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE¹

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Abstract

There is growing evidence that companion animals have value for people of all ages, especially older adults. Older adults who own animals appear to experience less stress and require fewer visits to their physicians than non-owners; while animal ownership generally has value, the most remarkable benefits to health are for those who own dogs. As a result, support has grown for protecting the right of pet ownership for older people living in the community and encouraging animal contact for those living in long-term care settings.

In the past, pet visiting programs performed at institutions were done with animals brought from local humane societies. The societies enjoyed the publicity and the opportunity to “socialize” animals that they hoped to adopt to the public. The current trend in visiting programs is to use organized private volunteers that bring their own pets. There is also at present a growing interest among institutions in maintaining their own animals to enhance the therapeutic milieu. Animals are a diversion from routine and provide companionship.

It is well documented that people denied good human contact or interaction do not thrive well. Animal companionship is one way people can be protected from the ravages of loneliness. All indications are that companion animals play the role of a family member, often, a member with the most desired attributes. For some, animals replace the children who have grown and moved away or perhaps were never born; for others, they are playmates and afford increased opportunities to meet other people. Animals can permit the older adult to be alone without being lonely.

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Introduction

No less than 56% of U.S. households (53 million), in 1994, have companion animals and more than half of these owners have more than one animal.¹ In addition to animals that live in the home, 2% of the households own an average of 2.54 horses for a horse population of 4.9 million.²

In Australia, approximately 60% of the 6.2 million households have one or more pets; 53% of the households have either a dog or a cat³. Examples of pet (dog, cat, or bird) ownership in European households include Belgium (71%), France (63%), The Netherlands (60%), Britain (53%), Italy (59%), the GDR (37%), Ireland (70%), Spain (44%) and for all 17 European countries survey (52%)⁴. In Spain, households with pets include, dogs (16%), cats (12%), and cages-birds (16%)⁴. All existing cultures keep pets, although the favorite species vary. The number of pet animals is only one facet of the “pet phenomenon”. For full appreciation, one must understand the many who are benefactors of the “pet experience”⁵. As clearly demonstrated by the data, companion pet ownership is neither rare nor random and is an integral part of all societies.

Our long history of humans in relationship with companion animals has been comprised mainly of studies of the detrimental effects of animal contact, addressing infectious diseases, zoonoses, parasitism, and traumatic injury from bites and kicks. Nevertheless, at the same time, all cultures have maintained a commitment to care for and protect animals kept for companionship.⁶

Animals and Human Health

In 1980, there was the first epidemiologic report documenting the value of pet ownership. People hospitalized after a heart attack found that 94% of those who happened to own pets were alive after the first year compared with 72% of those who did not own any animal. The ownership of any animal correlated with improved survival, not just dog ownership.⁷ The years following was a period of study documenting a variety of effects animals had on humans. There is now evidence that contact with natural surroundings and companion animals is important to human health.⁸ For the most part, the research was modeled after what was known about the effects humans had on other humans. It is well documented that people denied good human contact and interaction do not thrive well.⁹ At the very least, it appears that human companionship has the following beneficial effects:

l Decrease Loneliness

l Stimulate Talk

l Encourage Touch and Care

l Focus of Attention

l Stimulate Exercise

l Encourage Laughter

l Encourage Social Contact

There is growing evidence that companion animals afforded similar health enhancing attributes for people¹⁰ and these may be especially important to older people.¹¹ Some of the roles humans play for other humans may be played by animals.

Decrease loneliness. One way people can be protected from the ravages of loneliness is animal companionship. Nearly 20 years ago, the first pet intervention study compared elderly people (65 years of age and older) living alone that were given either a plant or a small bird and television ownership was also considered. Having a bird appeared to improve morale and increase visitors; the birds served as a “social lubricant.”¹² More recent and more sophisticated epidemiologic studies of elderly people found animals improve psychological status of their humans particularly if the people live alone and they are well attached to their pet.^{13,14} Elderly women, who did not live alone and who were closely attached to their pets also had better relationships with their spouses and were reported happier than those who were not close to their animals.¹² In a different study, animals did not appear to play a significant role for those living with partners, however morale scores were 4-6 times higher for pet owners who lived alone compared to non-owners who lived alone.¹⁵

In one study, nearly 1,000 non-institutionalized elderly Medicare patients were evaluated prospectively. Those subjects who owned pets appeared to experience less distress and required fewer visits to their physicians than non-owners. While animal ownership generally had value, the most remarkable benefits to health were for those who own dogs.¹⁶ Most of the people noted that the pets provided them with companionship, a sense of security, and the opportunity for fun/play and relaxation. Animals allowed people to experience bonding. In addition, Siegel¹⁷ suggested that pets have a stress-reducing effect.

Older adults living in institutions rarely have the opportunity to have their own animals. Therefore, many nursing homes now have Animal Facilitated Therapy (AFT) programs where non-elderly people visit and bring animals; interestingly, the volunteers often find the experience rewarding, lessening the barriers between the generations.¹⁸ In the past, pet visiting programs to institutions used animals brought to them from local Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCAs), who enjoyed the publicity and opportunity to “socialize” the animals that they hoped to adopt to the public. The trend now is to use organized private volunteers that bring their own pets.¹⁹ There is now also a trend for institutions to maintain their own animals. The *Delta Society* has guidelines for the use of animals in nursing homes^{20,10} and the veterinary community is increasingly serving the important role of consulting on animal selection, basic training, and maintenance.

While there are some risks associated with any active intervention and animal contact in general, including animal bite, allergy, zoonoses and falls caused by the animals or their excreta—to date, there is no indication that AFT programs are particularly dangerous and there are few reports of adverse

effects. In any event, many feel AFT programs are an acceptable risk if it lessens the despair that often comes with feelings of loneliness.

Stimulate talk. Nearly all pet owners talk to their pets²¹ and while nearly half of adults confide in their pet, more than 70% of adolescents do so.²² In one study, most of the elderly people receiving home assistance reported that they confided in their pets more easily than in other people.²³

We found that the differences observed between different species of pets are influenced by the husbandry needs of the animals and social stereotypes, but almost all people find comfort talking to their animals.^{24,25} Unlike when talking to other humans, people experience a decrease of blood pressure talking to pets, indicating that they are more relaxed conversing with animals than with people.^{26,27} Even in the presence of unfamiliar dogs, people experience a temporary decrease in blood pressure.²⁶ Subjects talking to their companion dogs, cats, and birds speak more slowly and with a more relaxed mode,²¹ which, in itself, tends to reduce blood pressure.

Encourage touch and care. Children learn important values and attitudes from animals. For instance, by preschool, children can appropriately appreciate the differences between dogs, cats, puppies and kittens; they know adult animals are care-givers, not babies. Male children, as they age, usually increase their knowledge about animals. During this same time there is usually a decrease in their interest in and care for human infants. Perhaps because pet care is not associated with gender,²⁸ boys in particular may benefit from being introduced to the importance of nurturing with the aid of their pets.

Observational studies in the United States show that in public places women almost always use more intimate touch with other people than do men.²⁹ In contrast, men, at least in public places, exhibit the same signs of intimacy with pets as do women.^{20,32} It appears that for all ages, caring for animals is a focus of nurturing and source of comfort.⁶ Nearly 74% of the elderly people, who were receiving home assistance in the study previously noted, reported that touching their pets made them feel better.²²

In another study, in two different nursing home facilities, 85-93% of the residents were observed touching or grooming visiting dogs an average 15-25 times per person per visit.³⁰ It is totally reasonable to assume that animals will be particularly beneficial for older people.

Focus of attention. Under laboratory conditions, people of all ages experienced significant decreases in blood pressure in the presence of animals, petting their dog, or even just watching aquarium fish.^{25,31} People who had the opportunity to contemplate an aquarium were able to undergo dental surgery in very much the same level of comfort as those who were hypnotized prior to the procedure.³² The decreased physiological arousal indicated by the reduction of blood pressure is associated with stereotypical changes in facial expression and vocal pattern. The face becomes more relaxed with a decrease in muscle tension, especially around the eyes.³³

Research subjects, being asked to read allowed, considered a source of mild stress, also experience significantly more positive cardiovascular responses when viewing scenes with animals

present than scenes without them.³⁴ Apparently even pictures or drawings of animals have the ability to lessen physiological stress, which will be discussed later. Apparently, animals can hold our attention in comforting ways and therefore lessens stress.

One of the problems of retirement is lack of identity and feelings of uselessness. Focussing on a pet helps define a person, like one's job or hobby, and as such provides identity and common ground for discussion with others. Also, without clear roles and purpose, the elderly person, especially if alone, may lack initiative to address ordinary but important routines. Often children or grandchildren provide motivation for life's activities³⁵ but in their absence, we suggest that animals can play the role of family focus.

Stimulate exercise. Many interview subjects report that they use their pets as an excuse to walk or engage in physical activity. Psychiatrist Michael McCulloch studied patients who experienced depression and related illness after suffering serious physical disabilities; all those with pets reported that the animals stimulated useful physical activities, which otherwise would not have been part of their lives.³⁶

Animals may also have less dramatic effects than increasing survival rates or reducing anxiety. Serpell³⁷ reported that dog owners experienced fewer minor health problems and increased the number and durations of their recreational walks. The effects persisted over the 10-month study period and there was no clear explanation for the results. In any event, animals encourage exercise, and there is universal agreement that appropriate exercise has value.

Beside walking, playing with animals stimulates activity and, in one study, 84% of men and 75% of women reported playing with their pets often.³⁸

Encourage laughter. One long recognized but often ignored value of animal contact is that many people find joy and even humor in interacting with animals. Animals often permit people to laugh at themselves or their surroundings; animals play a major role in cartoon humor. The writer, Norman Cousins described the role of laughter in diminishing pain, even reducing the inflammatory process that afflicted him.³⁹ McCulloch's study of psychiatric outpatients, previously mentioned, found that all of his patients reported that animals helped them laugh and maintained a sense of humor.³⁵ Today laughter is recognized as a useful medical intervention and animals are a frequent source of joy and humor.

Encourage social contact. Our experimental observations of normal and handicapped subjects in public situations have suggested that the presence of pet animals improve the social attractiveness of those subjects. People appear to perceive other people who are in the company of animals in a more positive way, awarding them more favorable attributes, than they do people who are without animals.⁴⁰

The cause of this may lie in the general tendency to overestimate the importance of personal factors, relative to environmental considerations, in making judgements about a person or situation. This effect is well recognized and been named “the fundamental attribution error.”^{41,42,43}

We have shown this “fundamental attribution error” occurs when people are observed with animals or even photographs of people with animals—in both cases such people are assumed to be more favorable than the same people without animals present. Even photographs containing animals lowers blood pressure and lessens stress.³³

A good real-life example of this is that people perceive more positively and with more favorable attributes those who appear prosperous than those who appear poor. Another example is the stereotyping of elderly people being less physically and psychology competent than they may really be.⁴⁴ Of course the “error” can be used effectively to help a person, as when a politician purposely poses with human or animal baby when appealing for voter approval. The effect is so strong that both men and women over 65, who own pets describe themselves with more favorable attributes than non-owners.⁴⁵

There are many naturally occurring events in people's lives that are enhanced because of animal companionship. People walking with a dog experience more social contact and longer conversations than when walking alone.⁴⁶ Wheelchair-users were more likely to experience positive social interactions when with a dog.^{47,48}

The effect that animals improve the perceived quality of the environment has many therapeutic implications as well. Psychiatric inpatients were more comfortable talking and participating in group therapy sessions in the presence of birds than in the same room without animals present.⁴⁹

Laws and Guidelines

As a result of all the studies over the years, support has grown for encouraging animal contact for those in long-term nursing home settings and protecting the right of pet ownership for older adults living in the community. Nevertheless, there is a long history of laws, regulations, and traditions that prohibit animals, especially in urban areas. These often directly conflict with the inclusion of animals in nursing home settings and with animal ownership for older people who live in their own homes. It is necessary to change public expectations and codify legislation that at least would permit restructuring of earlier laws. A good example of the turning tide of opinion, in the U.S., was a resolution adopted at the White House Conference on Aging held in 1981. The resolution encouraged federal, state, and municipal governments and health professionals to establish policies and regulations that would stop the forced separation of older persons from their companion animals upon entering housing projects for the elderly. The reasons given were (to quote in part):

“¼ the companionship of animal pets is a source of security, helps to keep aged persons physically active and responsible through the caring for their pets, fulfills their need for giving and receiving affection, and has been proven to have measurable therapeutic effects on their physical and emotional health ¼.”

It is time to start basic planning to improve the lives of older people by improving their ability to enjoy voluntary animal companionship.

Nursing Homes. Animals in institutional settings have been described as “social catalysts” encouraging interaction among patients and between patients and staff, indeed, improving the overall morale for all.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the presence of animals in nursing homes poses special problems because these facilities are not like the home environment. Their residents are relative newcomers to their surroundings, which often include living and eating quarters smaller than the ones they were used to in their own homes. At the very least, the numbers and kinds of animals permitted must be carefully considered. Only animals with which people are most familiar and comfortable should be considered. In addition to dogs and cats, many of the smaller mammals, birds, and fish can serve the same purpose while fitting into some living situations more easily. We should remember that birds and fish have been shown to have many beneficial health effects.⁶

Because disease-susceptible people tend to be concentrated in nursing homes, special attention must be paid to the health of the animals placed there. Dogs should be well-trained, housebroken, and free of internal and external parasites. Larger, older dogs that are trained not to enter any resident's room unless invited might make for a safer environment.

Cats should be litter-trained and declawed. Both species should arrive already sexually neutered with current vaccinations and both should be kept away from food preparation, linen, or utensil storage areas. Special care should be taken that dogs and cats not get under foot and cause falls.

It is absolutely essential to have specific staff members responsible for the care of any animals on the premises. A veterinarian must examine the animals routinely and be on call. A sick or dying animal will not only pose health problems, but be a source of grief for the residents. All personnel should be alert to any situation that may be inhumane or compromise the animal's well-being. Also, the rights of residents who prefer not to have contact with animals must be protected.

Housing for the Older Adults. In the U.S., the vast majority of older adults are not in nursing homes but live in the community, indeed, only about 5% of elderly people live in institutional settings at any one time.⁴³ Nevertheless, most elderly people do not own animals, especially if living alone; only 29.2% of households of single older persons have an animal, 16.2% have dogs and 14.4% cats. Older couples and those working have more but still less than younger persons.²

For those who do chose to include animals in their lives, it is time to plan for housing developments that someday will permit older people to have contact with animals.

Common reasons for older persons not wanting pets are related to animal behavior problems, responsibility, expense,⁵¹ and impaired health of the owner.⁵² A source of information about animal care, problems, supplies, and veterinary care should be established. Perhaps humane societies and animal food companies could involve themselves in this endeavor. Many humane societies sponsor programs for sterilizing pets, but I still know of no society that assists with the basic care of an animal or helps those who cannot afford life-saving veterinary care. Programs to foster animals for people needing medical care would provide comfort to the owner and help those who do not own their own animal to experience some of the joys of animal companionship. At Purdue University's School of Veterinary Medicine, we are developing a network of alumni veterinarians who find owners among their clients for animals whose owners can no longer care for them. This "peace of mind" program provides just that for owners who fear for their animals well-being in case the animal out survives them.

Housing facilities for the older adults should provide areas where dogs can be walked without posing a special burden for the owner or the neighborhood. Guidelines for such areas exist.⁵³ About 20 years ago, no local health law received as much national publicity as New York City's "Scoop Law" for dogs, which was soon copied by most U.S. cities. Basically, owners who required to retrieve and dispose of their dog's waste. Compliance was good and the interests of both owners and nonowners were respected.⁵⁴ In that tradition, so-called "dog runs" were also established in areas of high dog ownership, and with proper planning, also served the best interests of the whole community.⁵² Planning for companion animals should be as much a part of environmental design as anticipating wheelchair ramps and proper lighting.

On September 23, 1980, a Philadelphia newspaper ran an article with the following headline:

**No-Pet Rule a Killer?
Elderly Woman Dies
After Giving Up Terrier**

The article reported that a 77-year-old senior housing project resident died of a “broken heart” when housing officials forced her to give up her beloved pet terrier. I do not know whether the woman actually deteriorated and died because of the loss of the dog, but the fact that it was perceived to be the cause raises some important questions about how laws and regulations affect people.

We do need regulations governing the management of animals, especially in high density areas. For the most part, such laws exist, although the enforcement level varies. Almost all municipalities have mechanisms to take action against animal owners whose actions endanger others.

Laws and regulations have reflected a prejudice against the ownership of animals by older people. We owe it to them to develop laws and guidelines that will prolong their days and improve the quality of their daily lives.

Conclusion

In sum, it is well documented that people denied good human contact and interaction do not thrive well. One way people can be protected from the ravages of loneliness is animal companionship. Pets, for some, afford increased opportunities to meet people, while for others, they permit people to be alone without being lonely. Indeed, once you recognize the roles animal play in our lives, it is easy to understand why there is now a commitment to study animal and human health and to foster efforts that will allow both animals and people to live together for the benefit of both.

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