



Work Life Services Newsletter May 2023

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Pets Fill a Special Role in Seniors' Lives

Having a pet can be a boon to body and soul -- especially as we age. "Seniors can benefit substantially from pet ownership," says Richard B. Ford, D.V.M., M.S., a professor in the College of Veterinary Medicine at North Carolina State University.

Pets offer companionship, something to nurture, unconditional love and a sense of security in new situations. And pets can relieve stress -- which may help explain why studies have found that pet owners have lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

The nurturing role

"Taking care of a creature that cares about you and responds to you is a real antidote and preventive medicine for loneliness and depression," says Lynette Hart, Ph.D., professor and director of the Center for Animal Alternatives at the University of California at Davis.

The fact that you have to attend to a living creature gives structure to your life. If you have to feed your pet, you're more likely to get moving in the morning. The opportunity to nurture fills an essential need that can no longer be filled by grown children or by grandchildren who may not live near.

Pets provide us with the kind of nonjudgmental love we all need but probably don't get enough of. Everyone needs to laugh and play, not matter what our age. There's great joy in tossing a ball around or playing keep-away with your dog and Rover's favorite toy.

The social role

Pets can also fill a social role in seniors' lives. "For seniors who are uncomfortable with social relationships or in starting new ones after a spouse has passed away, having a pet offers an opportunity to meet other people, to talk about your pet," adds Dr. Ford, professor of medicine at North Carolina State University's College of Veterinary Medicine.

Researchers at the University of California at Davis outfitted seniors with tape recorders, then sent them out to walk their dogs. They found the dogs accounted for a lot of conversations. The owners talked constantly to their pets, and when they encountered a friend, the dogs were a major topic of conversation -- even when the pet owners were walking without their dogs.

"It's like talking about the weather, only a lot more interesting," says Dr. Hart. This socializing effect is also true for disabled persons -- if they have a dog, peers are much more likely to approach them.

The physical benefits

Pets also carry physiological benefits, says Dr. Ford: "Walking a dog is exercise for both you and your pet."

Just petting an animal lowers your blood pressure (and that of the animal). Seniors who take care of a pet tend to do better eating, exercising, caring for themselves and getting around.

Some studies have found that pet owners have lower cholesterol levels -- and that a year after a heart attack, people who have pets have a better survival rate than those who don't.

Seniors who own pets visit their doctors less often than those who don't have pets, according to one study by the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). That's true even for seniors undergoing major stress, such as dealing with the loss of a loved one.

"Owning a pet in some way counteracts the effects of stress," says Judith M. Siegel, Ph.D., professor at UCLA's School of Public Health.

Finding a pet

Interested in a pet? Dr. Ford suggests calling your local humane society or animal control society, a veterinarian or a dog trainer. Avoid mismatches by selecting a pet appropriate to your lifestyle and mobility.

Training a boisterous puppy that will require a lot of exercise might seem too daunting. However, says Dr. Ford, "a lot of adult dogs given up to shelters are the last to be adopted. But some of them make the best pets for seniors because they are already housebroken and well trained, with good temperaments."

If you don't feel up to having a pet at home full time, one of your local animal societies might be able to link you with a volunteer willing to share a pet with you for a few hours each week. And in some programs, volunteers bring pets into nursing homes.