



## The Benefits of Human and Animal Interaction

There are a lot of pet owners in this country; 65% of households in the United States have at least one pet, and some people could not imagine living without one. Animals are increasingly incorporated into therapeutic settings targeting improved mental and physical health, and the science of Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) researches how relationships with animals can influence both human and animal health.

One particular area of research that is growing is the role of HAI in healthy aging; animal-assisted activities and animal-assisted therapy. One study found less deterioration in the ability to perform activities of daily living for older adult pet owners compared to non-pet owners (age 65+). Existing research in both pet ownership and animal-assisted activities/therapy has demonstrated promising findings for a variety of outcomes of health and well-being for older adults.



### Physical Health:

- **Heart Health** – frequent interaction with a pet can lower blood pressure and cholesterol decreasing the risk of cardiovascular disease. (Note: The American Heart Association issued a scientific statement suggesting that pet ownership (particularly dogs) may reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.
- **Increased activity** – Walking, grooming or playing with a pet increases the frequency of physical activity and exercise which has countless health benefits.
- **Healthy Behavior** – Pet owners tend to take better care of themselves. Caring for a pet helps to develop a routine; encouraging owners to eat regularly or complete chores and other tasks.

### Social Benefits:

- **Increased Interaction** – Walking a dog gets senior owners out of the house and increases opportunities to socialize with neighbors.
- **Encourages Conversation** – A pet is often a great conversation starter and provides common ground with others, especially other pet owners.
- **Stimulates Memory** – Visiting with an animal can allow seniors to tap into memories of childhood pets and past experiences.
- **Involvement in Activities** – Encourages pursuing current activities, leading to social bonds and interaction with others.

### Emotional Benefits:

- **Decreased Loneliness** – Pets provide companionship, giving isolated seniors a source for affection, conversation and activity.
- **Stress relief** – Being with a pet increases levels of serotonin, the “feel good” hormone that relieves stress. It also provides physical contact, which helps control anxiety.
- **Better Self-esteem** – For seniors discouraged by their age, appearance of limited abilities, pets are welcome company, reminding seniors that they are still capable of being loved and needed.
- **Sense of purpose** – The companionship of an animal provides a reason to get up in the morning, and helps eliminate feelings of worthlessness or helplessness. Knowing that they are loved and needed enhances seniors’ mental health.

The residents of a nursing home or a senior now requiring a caregiver at home once lived full, independent lives before they reached this point; seniors can feel out of touch with themselves and susceptible to low self-esteem, depression and/or anxiety. Introducing pets into a senior’s daily routine can help reduce their loneliness, and lack of purpose because they now have companionship and something to care for, restoring their self-worth.

Pet therapy for the elderly has also proven to be a powerful tool for what is known as “Sundowners Syndrome,” evening period of increased agitation and confusion in those with Alzheimer’s disease. Animals’ non-verbal communication and profound acceptance can be soothing for those with difficulty using language.

There are a lot of challenges to research in this area, and although initial studies are promising, there is room for the improvement in the quality of research being done. This field of study is at an exciting and critical turning point, with potential for significant growth in our understanding of how animals can impact older adults in ways that may support meaningful changes to policy and practice in the future.

The following website was sourced and referenced for this article:

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