

THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF PET OWNERSHIP

by Bruce A. Blitman

Many of us have experienced the joy of cuddling and playing with our pets. They enthusiastically greet us when we return from a long, difficult day at work or from a short trip to the store. They are our friends, confidantes and protectors. When we are in their presence, we feel better. Science and research supports this. Studies show that interacting with our pets is a meaningful way to lower blood pressure, reduce stress and possibly add years to our lives.

A 2012 report on the psychosocial and psychophysiological effects of human and animal interaction, petting dogs in particular, leads to immediate and scientifically measurable results. This report, written by Andrea Beetz, Kerstin Uvnas-Moberg, Henri Julius and Kurt Kotrschal, and published by *Frontiers in Psychology*, correlated evidence from 69 individual studies to show that interaction with a friendly companion animal reduces stress via changes in the body's normal oxytocin, cortisol, epinephrine and norepinephrine levels. Artificial increases in hormones can lower heart rate and blood pressure, improve the immune system, increase the ability to manage pain, reduce aggression, enhance empathy and improve learning capability. Oxytocin, sometimes called the "cuddle" or "trust" hormone, promotes feelings of wellbeing and love. Cortisol, the "stress" hormone, heightens memory function and lowers sensitivity to pain. Epinephrine and norepinephrine, which are naturally present in "fight or flight" situations, improve reaction, vigilance and memory. Eileen Soler, *Stress relief: Puppies in the workplace*, South Florida PETS, May/June 2015, http://now.dirxion.com/South_Florida_Pets/library/South_Florida_Pets_05_01_2015.

An article "5 Ways Pets Can Improve Your Health", written by Jeanie Lerche Davis appeared in a WebMD feature discussed other research studies which document other health benefits that are derived from our interaction with pets. According to this research, our pets truly are "friends with benefits." The full article can be read at <http://www.webmd.com/hypertension-high-blood-pressure/features/health-benefits-of-pets>

The Humane Society of Broward County has recently developed a new program, Snuggle Delivery, which brings instant stress relief to office workers while also raising money for the shelter. For a donation, the shelter will bring puppies and kittens to your office. The number of office workers determines the number of pets that will visit. Companies with up to 20 employees can cuddle five puppies or kittens; 21 to 50 employees will get a visit from eight puppies or kittens; a 51 to 100 member staff can get 10 to 12 puppies; employee groups of 101 or more can play with up to 13 puppies. Cats, which are harder to transport, must be specially requested. This is an excellent way to bring temporary stress relief and relaxation to your workers, without having the full-time responsibilities of pet ownership. For more information, please visit the shelter's website at: <http://www.humanebroward.com/snuggles> or call (954) 266-6824. **B**



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