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Pets as therapy: benefits for all ages

If you're someone who enjoys seeing your dog's face light up at the mention of "walkies!" or finds stroking your cat incredibly calming, you're not alone. From children with neurodevelopmental issues to elderly people feeling loneliness, pets can help all kinds of people through life's challenges.

Pets and mental health

Most pet owners are proud of how they care for their animals but how do our pets take care of us? It turns out they can have a hugely positive effect on how we feel:

- **Anxiety and stress** - just 10 minutes of playtime with a cat or dog can lower levels of a major stress hormone called cortisol in our bodies, while stroking them can lower **blood pressure**¹.
- **Depression and happiness** - as the stress hormone cortisol decreases, the amount of the happy hormone serotonin increases, making us feel much happier and reducing symptoms of depression².

A survey by **Dogs Trust** found that on Blue Monday - anecdotally thought of as the most depressing day of the year in the UK - more than 8 in 10 UK dog owners feel their dog helps them feel happier if they're feeling down³. While Blue Monday, which falls on the third Monday of January, isn't backed by science, factors that have contributed to its creation can affect our mental wellbeing. For example, this date being **short and dark**, post-Christmas debt and possible **blues**, and that **Monday feeling** of returning to work.

On the back of this, pet charities – such as [Pets As Therapy \(PAT\)](#) – have set up across the UK to give animal companionship for those who need it. For example, specially trained therapy dogs visit airports, care homes, hospices, hospitals, prisons, and schools, encouraging smiles and bringing people a sense of calm.

Although therapy dogs are bred and trained to have friendly temperaments, a household pet needn't be an official therapy dog – or even a dog at all – to share many of the same mood-boosting qualities.

Anyone can experience the mental health benefits of pets, but for some, using pets as therapy can be significant:

Pets as therapy for...

Children with autism, ADHD, and ADD

Growing up with pets as a child can boost mental well-being, support cognitive development, and improve many important life skills – including emotional intelligence, mobility, and vocabulary.

For a child with a neurodevelopmental disorder, such as [autism](#) and [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder \(ADHD\)](#), the benefits can be even more far-reaching.

These benefits include:

Vocabulary, social skills, and self-esteem

Many children with autism or ADHD find it much harder to chat with people than they do talking to pets. Having a pet for a friend can be a great way for a child to practise and become more confident talking with other people. Their pet can also be a great topic to talk about with others if they are feeling stuck for what to say.

Routine and consistency

Children with ADHD and autism tend to be calmer and happier when following routines that help them to know what's going to happen next. Dogs share this desire - and feeding them, walking them, and relaxing with them at set times can benefit both child and pet.

Stress and meltdowns

Mild-tempered pets, like friendly dogs and guinea pigs, are good at calming children with autism during moments of panic or aggression⁴.

Focus

Many children with ADHD find it hard to stay focussed on one thing, yet having a dog can help reduce symptoms of inattention⁵.

General happiness

Studies have shown that children smile more when around their pets. This includes those with autism and ADHD.

When it comes to pets as therapy, it's not all about dogs. According to Foster Care Associates, a UK child fostering agency, cats, guinea pigs, and rats also make suitable pets for children with autism⁶. Like dogs, these furry friends can make a friendly, strokable, and lovable playmate for your child - unlike dogs, they can be kept in a classroom so your child can enjoy interactions at school. What's more, small creatures like guinea pigs also come with a much lighter price tag.

Struggling teenagers

Adolescence can be a stressful time, but research shows that spending time with dogs can make life that little bit more manageable. One 2019 study found that 10 to 19-year-olds who struggled with [anxiety](#), [stress](#), [anger](#), and related disorders felt improvements in their mental health following therapy dog visits⁷. This mental health boost also had positive real-life consequences. For example, many students became less disruptive and more engaged in social situations.

As a result, therapy dog sessions are becoming increasingly popular in UK universities. They are often brought in around exam times to help counteract some of the stress and pressure many students feel.

People with PTSD

After going through or seeing a terrifying event people may have [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), or PTSD, which can cause severe anxiety. It's important to find the right treatment for you, and in recent years there has been promising results for animal lovers with PTSD:

One study looked at therapeutic horse-riding⁸. It found that:

- Around seven out of ten people were likely to have improved PTSD symptoms after three weeks of horse-riding.
- Around nine out of 10 people were likely to have improved PTSD symptoms after six weeks.
- Of all PTSD symptoms, a person's ability to cope and better control their emotions improved the most.

People with physical health concerns

Pets as therapy needn't just be about pets and mental health. As well as emotional support, some pets offer physical health benefits. This applies to dogs, horses, and any other animals that need exercise, in the process it encourages us to be regularly active.

Regular exercise is particularly important if you need to combat or avoid weight-related health problems, such as reducing your risk of cardiovascular problems or [type 2 diabetes](#). Physical activity can also aid recovery from surgery, [heart failure](#), [stroke](#), and other conditions that can affect your motor skills.

You don't need a dog to go on daily walks, but having a dog naturally integrates this exercise into daily life – and when you're having fun with your furry best friend, this can feel more like fun-time than physical time. In fact, [dog-walking is great for your all-round health](#), because spending time outdoors can also do wonders for your mental well-being.

Elderly dealing with loneliness

The strong bonds we form with our pets can positively influence our lives. Perhaps the most obvious outcome is that taking care of a pet can make us feel less lonely. This is true at any age, but for the elderly in the UK, loneliness is a major issue – affecting around 1.4 million people⁹.

With this in mind, pet support programmes try to let elderly people without animals benefit from the joys of pet ownership¹⁰. The effectiveness of these programmes provides hope that this crisis of loneliness can be tackled in more places in the future.

Further reading

1. [Harvard Health Publishing: Having a dog can help your heart – literally.](#)
2. [Ambrosi et al: Randomized controlled study on the effectiveness of animal-assisted therapy on depression, anxiety, and illness perception in institutionalized elderly.](#)
3. [Dogs Trust: As Blue Monday strikes, new research shows dogs bring joy.](#)
4. [Hall et al: What factors are associated with positive effects of dog ownership in families with children with autism spectrum disorder?](#)
5. [UCI Health: ADHD: could dogs be the answer?](#)
6. [Foster Care Associates: How animals can help autistic children.](#)

7. [Jones et al: Incorporating animal-assisted therapy in mental health treatments for adolescents.](#)
8. [Johnson et al: Effects of therapeutic horseback riding on post-traumatic stress disorder in military veterans.](#)
9. [Age UK: Loneliness research and resources.](#)
10. [Cryer et al: Pawsitive connections: the role of pet support programs and pets on the elderly.](#)

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