



THE *power of* PETS

By Robert Jones | The Village Business Institute

Do you have a pet? Do you consider your pet to be part of the family? I do. We adopted Toby, our 12-year-old goldendoodle, over a decade ago. When we adopted Toby, we were his fourth home in a year and a half. Toby is a smart, curious, and slightly troublesome part of my family, and while there are times he can drive me to the brink, he has proven to be a valuable part of my mental health.

A survey by the Human Animal Bond Research Institute in conjunction with Cohen Research Group found

that **74% of pet owners reported an improvement in their mental health** because of their pet, and **54% reported that pet ownership helped with physical improvements.**

Based on my experience with Toby and his need for walks, there is a clear connection between pets and physical health. But how do pets help with our mental health?

According to a 2016 article on Mental Health America's website, there is a phenomenon known as the **Pet Effect**, a "mutually beneficial relationship

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4 TIPS TO FIND THE RIGHT PET FOR YOU

Choosing a pet is a little like choosing a new roommate. You want to make sure your habits and lifestyles mesh before you make such a long-term commitment. Every animal has different needs when it comes to care, behavior, cost, housing, feeding, and training. Here's what to consider when you're thinking about adopting a new pet:

1. CONSIDER THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE AT HOME

How many people are in your family and what are their individual needs? Small children may have difficulty with puppies or kittens; both are only babies, and they may not know how to play well together.

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between people and animals that positively impacts the mental health and wellbeing of both.”

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) outlines some potential effects pets have on our mental health, such as decreases in cortisol (also known as the stress hormone) and blood pressure. In another study outlined by the NIH, pet owners showed signs of decreased loneliness, increased feelings of social support, and an improvement in mood.

Helpguide.org suggests tapping into our senses for quick stress relief. For example, touching the soft fur of a dog, listening to the peaceful purr of a cat, or watching fish in a tank can bring about a calm feeling. For people living with anxiety, one coping mechanism can be the slight pressure of a weighted blanket; this could possibly be experienced by feeling a snake wrap around your arm or hang from your neck.

Pets can also play a significant role in combating compassion fatigue, according to the American Institute on Stress. The reason is that pets accept all affection, which means that if you are paying attention to them, they will listen. This allows for you to vocalize your struggles and think out loud for possible solutions. Pets are also invulnerable to provider burnout. As people, we have our own issues and stressors, and while many of us want to help a friend, sometimes we must set that boundary to take care of ourselves first. A pet will never succumb to that issue and will listen intently.

WHAT IF I DON'T HAVE A PET OR CAN'T GET A PET BECAUSE OF A LIVING SITUATION? SHOULD I CONSIDER GETTING AN EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ANIMAL?

While I believe every animal *is* an emotional support animal, I don't believe every person needs an emotional support animal. Some people have used the excuse of an emotional support animal as a way to get around an apartment policy disallowing pets. This can diminish the need that some people have for an actual emotional support animal. If you have met with a physician and a therapist and there is a determination that an emotional support animal would be helpful, please get one.

However, if you do not need an emotional support animal but want to have interactions with animal, one of the best suggestions that I have is to volunteer at a local animal shelter. These animals have so much love to give that spending a Saturday morning walking dogs or playing with cats can fill your emotional bucket. And when you are in a place to get a dog or a cat, you will be more aware of your options.

I truly value the power that my dogs have given me over the years. When I've struggled, they have been there with a gentle paw on my leg or a snuggle. They have challenged me to get off the couch when I didn't want to, and their smile when I walk in the door after a long day continues to melt my heart, lift my spirits, and renew my faith in myself, because for anything to love so unconditionally is truly powerful.

toby

4 TIPS CONT.

If you want your young kids to be very involved in the pet-raising process, you may want to try a pet that requires less maintenance, like a guinea pig or fish, while older kids may fare better with a dog. At the end of the day, your pet takes care of you just as much as you take care of it. How will your kids fit into that situation?

If you don't have kiddos, it's still important to think about other people in the home. Your roommate may say she's OK with you having a dog as long as you take care of it, but that dog will still interact with her. Barking, potty accidents, pet hair and general cleanup are unavoidable, and you'll probably need her to take care of your pup overnight while you're away once or twice.

Sit down everyone you live with and talk about how involved (or uninvolved) they want to be in your pet's life, and how much they're willing to help you raise it.

2. ASSESS YOUR SPACE

Now that you know how the people living with you feel about your new furry (or feathered) friend, think about how large or small your pet should be. High-energy dog breeds won't have room in a small apartment to run around inside and will need more time outside to compensate. Can you take your pet outside? Would he or she need your supervision, or is there an enclosed yard?

It's also important to consider whether your pet will be sleeping in the same room as you. Most pets sleep at night, but rodents sleep during the day and can make a lot of noise while you're trying to catch some shut eye.

3. CONSIDER YOUR DAILY FREE TIME

One of the biggest differences between pets is how much undivided attention they require. For example, dogs may require multiple walks each day. How much time can you commit?

4. CONTEMPLATE THE RELATIONSHIP YOU WANT WITH YOUR PET

Cats may be cuddly but are far more independent than dogs. That said, most cats are still affectionate and playful, as long as you socialize them at an early age. If you'd prefer more of a pet soul mate, a dog might be right for you. There's a reason they're called man's best friend.

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