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PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

## **Therapeutic Value of Pets: Finding Love in Our Furry Friends**

By Janie Feldman, PsyD

Ever notice that pet lovers tend to really love their pets? It's as though they love them as much – or more – as some family members. This is not uncommon, for many dog and cat owners do have a very strong emotional bond with their feline and canine family members. There are really good reasons for this special kind of love affair.

**Physical benefits.** For one thing, there are physical benefits to having a furry friend in your life. Having a dog promotes walking, jogging, hiking, and just being outdoors with your pup – all of which have well known benefits. When you pet your pet, you can almost feel yourself relaxing as the stress melts away with every touch. In addition, having pets lowers blood pressure, and can lower your risk for heart attack and stroke. Furthermore, having cats and dogs in your home will increase your immunity as well as lower your risk for developing allergies.

**Social benefits.** There are also social benefits to having dogs and cats. Having these pets, especially walking dogs, serves as instant ice breakers. People often approach others when they have their pets with them. Greeting someone else's pet serves as a great conversation starter. Not only does having a pet bring companionship between you and your pet, there can be an increase in togetherness in the family over bonding with the animal in your home. Your cats and dogs can be the topic of conversation, shared activities, and chores that can build independence and responsibility in your children. Having Fluffy or Fido gives parents the opportunity to model caring behaviors, enabling children to learn how to care for others.

**Psychological benefits.** Finally, there is a special psychological benefit to having a dog or cat in your life. Having your pet can bring a special sense of purpose as you care for your animal. This is especially beneficial to the elderly, empty nesters, and folks who live alone. Increasingly more common is the presence of puppies on college campuses to alleviate students' stress, especially right before final exams. Therapy pets accompany volunteers into hospital wards, hospice care, and other places where their unconditional love and affection have soothing, therapeutic effects on the folks they visit. Service dogs receive specialized training to help the blind move independently, identify when diabetic people experience hypoglycemia or hyperglycemia (when they have a drop or increase in blood sugar), and help people with anxiety, depression, or behavioral difficulties such as autism function in a more satisfying, socially appropriate manner.

**Difference between Companion Dogs, Therapy Dogs, and Service Dogs.** It can be confusing to know the difference between Companion Dogs, Therapy Dogs and Service dogs. Essentially, the differences lie in the amount of specialized training a dog receives.

Companion Dogs are well-behaved, well-trained dogs who provide comfort to their people. They don't have the same specialized training as Therapy Dogs or Service dogs, but will make great pets for people who need their comforting companionship, but do not require specialized skills.

Therapy Dogs receive special training to provide affection and comfort to their humans. Their calm dispositions make them great pets for people who want to share them with others who may need their affection such as hospital patients or college students. While they do receive specialized training and certification, they have no federal mandates stipulating that they can accompany their humans into restaurants and other public places.

Service Dogs receive highly specialized training and certification in specific areas of support. The Americans with Disabilities Act mandates that these animals may accompany their humans into any public place, including air planes and restaurants. Their training is specific to the type of people they can service, whether it is people with diabetes, folks with psychological disorders such as PTSD or anxiety, and people who have medical conditions such as being blind or having diabetes or epilepsy.

**Research Dogs.** In addition to personal benefits of having dogs as pets, dogs in research are helping scientists detect cancer. By sniffing out the plasma of ovarian cancer patients compared to women without disease, dogs are training to help researchers find new ways to detect cancer much earlier than existing medical techniques. This can save many lives because ovarian cancer is difficult to detect until later stages when it has spread. Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's Penn Vet Working Dog Center are also trying to determine which method is most effect in detection: using plasma, secretions, urine or breath to detect cancer and other diseases.

**In conclusion,** having a dog or cat in your life provides you with a great amount of unconditional love, affection, and important physical, social and psychological benefits. When considering bringing a new animal into your home, remember if possible to adopt your new pet, not shop. There is an overabundance of unwanted puppies, kittens, dogs, and cats of all kinds filling shelters waiting for adoption. There are more unwanted pets than there is space for them. Adopting an unwanted pet (or two!) has an added benefit of saving a life, and your rescue pet will remind you each and every day how special that is for you both. Bringing a pet into your world will mean the world to you both. And, if you already have a pet, you know what that means.

**Resources.** Here are some resources for further reading, or to help you find a pet to meet your personal needs.

Autism Speaks "is dedicated to promoting solutions, across the spectrum and throughout the lifespan, for the needs of individuals with autism and their families through advocacy and support; increasing understanding and acceptance of autism spectrum disorder; and advancing research into causes and better interventions for autism spectrum disorder and related

conditions.” <https://www.autismspeaks.org/blog/2016/07/15/service-dog-or-therapy-dog-which-best-child-autism>

Project Chance “provides service dogs trained to assist individual children to help them achieve maximum potential and independence in executing therapeutic, social, and physical tasks throughout their lives. Project Chance also provides therapy dogs trained for use in classroom settings. Project Chance provides the opportunity for donors, foundations, corporations, and advocates to invest in clinically prescribed and professionally trained dogs with the specific skill sets needed to aid children diagnosed with autism and other developmental disabilities.”

<http://www.projectchance.com/dogs.html>

4 Paws for Ability, Inc. “mission is to:

- Enrich the lives of children with disabilities by the training and placement of quality, task trained service dogs to provide increased independence for the children and assistance to their families.
- Enrich the lives of veterans from recent conflicts who have lost the use of their limbs or their hearing while in active combat.
- Educate the public to accept the use of service dogs in public places.
- Assist with animal rescue when possible.”

<http://4pawsforability.org/autism-assistance-dog/#>

Canines 4 Hope provides dogs who receive training to help people with PTSD, “located in Palm City, Palm Beach County, South Florida is a certified Service Dog and Dog Obedience Training Academy specializing in personalized **dog training** for **Service Dogs**, **Assistance Dogs**, **Therapy Dogs** and **Alert Dogs** nationwide for over 20 years!”

<http://www.canines4hope.com/psychiatric-service-dogs-training-south-florida.htm>

Eyes Ears Nose and Paws “is a nonprofit organization that trains and places assistance dogs. Our programs create a healthier community by increasing independence for individuals with disabling medical conditions, improving opportunities for individual control over medical care, and encouraging therapeutic interventions that improve physical and mental health.”

<http://www.eenp.org/main/diabetic>

Petfinder is the premier organization supporting pet adoption. You can find your next pet online with a pretty powerful pet search capability. “For the past 20 years, Petfinder has helped 25 million pets find their families through adoption.” <https://www.petfinder.com/> Our mission is to help ensure that no adoptable pet is euthanized for lack of a good home.

<http://www.petfinderfoundation.com/>

Paws With A Cause<sup>®</sup> “enhances the independence and quality of life for people with disabilities nationally through custom-trained Assistance Dogs. PAWS<sup>®</sup> increases awareness of the rights and roles of Assistance Dog Teams through education and advocacy.”

<https://www.pawswithacause.org/what-we-do/service-dogs>

Home for Good Dog Rescue (HFGDR) “is a 100% foster-based, non-profit 501(c)(3) dog rescue established in 2010 in Summit, New Jersey with offices in Berkeley Heights, New Jersey. We rescue dogs from high-kill shelters in South Carolina and Georgia that are overflowing with unwanted dogs on the brink of being euthanized. We then transport the dogs to New Jersey where they are placed in loving foster homes while they await adoption into loving homes for good!” <https://homeforgooddogs.org/adoptable-dogs/>

University of Pennsylvania’s Penn Vet Working Dog Center conducts research and trains dogs to provide assistance to people via detection and other avenues of support. Its mission states its goal is to “Serve as a consortium to unite programs that employ detection dogs to benefit society throughout the US and around the world. Collect and analyze genetic, behavioral and physical data; and integrates the latest scientific information in order to optimize the success and well-being of detection dogs. Prepare for future demands and facilitate research by developing a detection dog breeding/training program that will implement, test, and disseminate the knowledge gained.” <http://pennvetwdc.org/research/research-projects/ovarian-cancer-detection/>

Human-animal bond. <https://www.avma.org/kb/resources/reference/human-animal-bond/pages/human-animal-bond-avma.aspx>

Benefits of the human-animal bond. <https://petpartners.org/learn/benefits-human-animal-bond/>

Top 5 Benefits to Owning a Pet. <http://www.animalplanet.com/pets/sources-2/>

Health Benefits of Pets. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/health-benefits/>

**Janie Feldman, PsyD**, licensed psychologist in Warren, NJ, has over 20 years’ experience providing psychotherapy, consultation, and assessment to adults, teenagers, and children. Dr. Feldman conducts Friendship Groups, a form of social skills training in a group therapy format. Utilizing Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, Dr. Feldman offers effective treatment for anxiety, depression, OCD, ADHD, and other mental health challenges. Appearing live on the cable television show “Real Life with Mary Amorosa,” she fielded callers’ questions and discussed reactions to the 9/11 terrorist attack, surviving marital affairs, managing children’s behavior and exploring female aggression. Dr. Feldman has written numerous articles and blogs, and frequently posts informative and inspirational tweets on Twitter. Follow her at @DrJanieFeldman or visit her at <http://www.drjanie.com/>.