

puppy LOVE

Furry and Feathered Friends Are Good Medicine for People

DO YOU REMEMBER "THE FLINTSTONES?" Every day when Fred Flintstone came home from work, Dino, his pet dinosaur, knocked him down and slathered him in kisses. That scene never gets old because people with pets fondly recall their own pet's excitement to see them every day. "Every single patient, when I ask about his pet, instantly smiles or laughs," says Edward Creagan, MD, professor of Clinical Oncology at the Mayo Clinic Medical School, Rochester, Minn.

This bond between pets and owners has researchers praising the benefits of pets on health and well-being. Studies show that pets promote a variety of health benefits – physical and mental, as well as social. Spending just 15 to 30 minutes in the presence of a pet can reduce your anxiety and stress levels, lower your blood pressure and even help your heart.

Your four-footed friend actually spurs chemical and hormonal reactions throughout your body when he greets you at the door or you pet him while he naps in your lap. "Interaction with pets has been found to lower cortisol levels, which rise

in response to stress, and increase levels of serotonin, which regulate depression," says Rebecca Johnson, MD, director of the Center on Aging at the Sinclair School of Nursing, University of Missouri, Columbia.

Researchers also have found cardiovascular benefits and lowered blood pressure in pet owners, probably due to those and other hormonal and chemical changes. Alan Beck, MD, director for the Human-Animal Bond, School of Veterinary Medicine, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Ind., examined patients who had suffered heart attacks. After one year, 94 percent of pet owners were still going strong – giving them a 22-percent advantage over those without pets.

Pet owners visit the doctor less often, too. A 1990 study found that dog owners had 21 percent fewer doctor appointments than those without pets.

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is your pet a therapy candidate?

If you're a pet owner, why not let your pet bring joy to others? Pet therapy at nursing homes is on the rise, and volunteer pets and owners are needed. Pets must go through a training program to make sure that they follow commands and can handle the attention. Your local humane society can help you find a program.

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“With pets, people can touch them, hold them and snuggle with them. There is something about the power of an intimate touch,” says Sandra Barker, PhD, professor of psychiatry and director for Human-Animal Interaction, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Va. “What would you rather have in your lap – a heating pad or a purring cat?”

– LISSA POIROT

Which pet is best for you?

If your energy or mobility is limited, choose a pet carefully.

cats Cats are purr...fect if you don't have a lot of time to devote to your pet and you aren't allergic to them.

BEST CATS: Short-haired cats like the Bombay and Russian blue.

PLAYFUL CATS: Siamese or mixed-Siamese breeds, such as Tonkinese.

CATS TO AVOID: Long-haired cats, such as Persians (require lots of grooming).

dogs Small dogs are ideal for apartment living, but may get underfoot and cause falls. Dogs need exercise – plan on walking 20 to 30 minutes daily.

BEST SMALL DOGS: Toy poodles, bichons frises and papillons.

BEST BIG DOGS: Collies, Airedales, golden retrievers and Labradors.

DOGS TO AVOID: Terriers, including Jack Russells (very willful) and Dalmatians (very excitable).

birds Birds don't require much space. Choose easy-to-clean cages.

BEST BIRDS: Lovebirds, parakeets and cockatiels (very responsive to their owners).

FUN BIRDS: Canaries and finches (fun to watch).

BIRDS TO AVOID: Tropical birds (can live into their 70s and are quite costly and loud).

fish Fish don't require much space. Many tanks are self-cleaning, but water in the tanks needs to be changed monthly.

BEST FISH: Goldfish, guppies and swordtails; small catfish (help keep the tank clean).

FISH TO AVOID: Tropical fish (require precision in water pH levels and lighting; expensive).

– L.P.

3 REAL WAYS to find balance

Today everyone talks a good game about having a balanced life. But how can someone with arthritis juggle real-life demands with health demands? Psychologist Jonathan C. Smith, PhD, founder and director of Roosevelt University Stress Institute in Chicago, offers practical advice.

1 Examine your beliefs. Maybe what's making your life off kilter is your conviction that you just don't have time to add a yoga or tai chi class, that your marriage will suffer if you take time out for yourself or that you have to do everything perfectly. Ask yourself in writing, “Why can't I fit 'X' in?” Is your answer rational? If not, write a more rational counter-belief like, “I can't be perfect at everything.”

2 Account for your time. List every hour on a sheet of paper and fill

in your activities. Organize activities into groups, like watching TV, work and commuting. Are you spending too much time on any one activity? If yes, pare it down.

3 Make a schedule. Write out your ideal balanced plan. Remember to schedule slack time – say, half an hour in the morning and evening – for the unforeseen. And don't forget to schedule a reward for the days you stick to this new, balanced life.

– DOROTHY FOLTZ GRAY

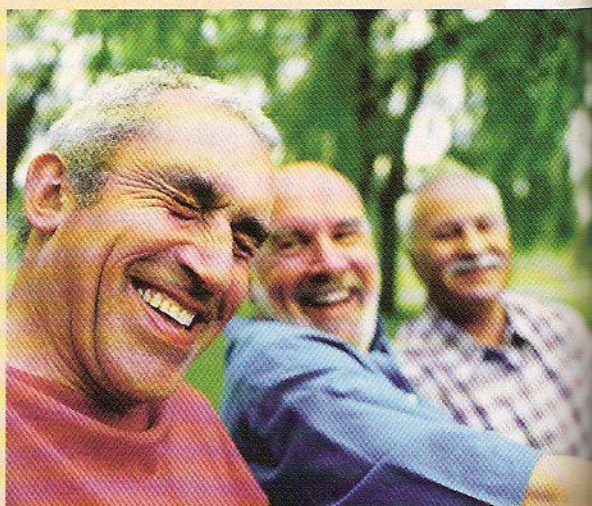
BUILD UP YOUR SOCIAL CIRCLE

Friends, buddies, chums, confidantes – whatever you call them, friends add spice to our lives. In fact, having a strong group of friends is key to being happy, according to a study of 222 college students at the University of Illinois, Champaign. The happiest students in the study reported rich and satisfying social relationships.

Don Gabor, author of *How to Start a Conversation and Make Friends* (Fireside, 2001), offers the following tips:

- Go to places where you can meet people. Join a gym, club or church group or volunteer.
- Smile, make eye contact, say hello and start a friendly conversation when the opportunity arises.
- After learning that you have mutual interests, suggest doing something outside of your initial meeting place.

– LINDA BROWN



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