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FlipSide: Your pet is taking care of you, too

By [Shannon Deery](#)

Shannon Deery

Herbert Hoover High School

"Ugh, that dog drools and slobbers all over everything! Gross! I don't know how you stand it."

If you're a dog owner, you may have heard this or something like it before. Some people just don't understand why anyone would want to own a dog. This is for those people.

Humans have known for centuries that pets provide something other humans cannot: unconditional love. Their companionship is that of a perfect friend. They listen without judging and are always happy to see you no matter what.

Pets also lower stress levels. For instance, a program at UC Merced in San Diego found that therapy dogs helped students during finals week. Throughout the day, students poured into the library to spend time with the dogs there.

Many participating students said it helped them unwind and relieve stress; pet owners missing their own dogs at home said it also helped with that. Less stress means that students may perform better on their finals and also come through the difficult week unscathed.

Lowering stress can help with other medical problems, too. Many studies have found that pet owners have lower recorded incidences of depression, high blood pressure and anxiety-related health issues.

Even people already on medications to control high blood pressure may have better results when they own a pet; a University of Buffalo study of stockbrokers with high blood pressure found that those with pets had less blood pressure spikes caused by tension and stress.

Dogs help control obesity levels as well because pet owners are more likely to be active walking, riding bikes or otherwise interacting with their animals. This helps improve heart health, too.

People with illnesses like Alzheimer's Disease, autism and Down Syndrome benefit from dogs. According to a veterinary professor at University of California Davis, caregivers report that there are less anxious outbursts from Alzheimer's patients when there is a pet in the house. And therapy dogs have been shown to help people with autism and Down Syndrome improve behavior and interaction skills.

Plus, dogs can be a good social networking tool. Often while walking outside or sitting at the vet, you can start up a lengthy conversation with new people. You may even find yourself chatting with a stranger who spots the 200 pounds of dog food in your cart at the grocery store! This helps jumpstart friendships with people who have similar interests as you.

Even if you don't use your pet to find new friends, it can help combat loneliness just by being there. Studies have found that nursing home patients report feeling less lonely when visited by therapy animals.

Animals also create a sense of responsibility. Your pet relies on you, so it's up to you to care for it. For some people, pets give them a reason to get up on the morning.

Animals can help people recognize the value of a life, too. This is especially true with troubled or abused teens. There have been highly successful programs involving at-risk kids caring for animals. The animals often heal the children in ways that other humans couldn't have.

Sometimes people use allergies as a reason not to get a dog, but a pediatrician from the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that children - especially infants - have lower incidences of allergies when they are exposed to furry animals at a young age. Babies who have pets in the home have higher levels of immune system activity and lower levels of eczema. An increasing number of studies are showing that exposure to pet dander and dirt can help lower incidences of asthma as well.

Dogs not only have a positive effect on children's health, but also on their behavior. Children who grow up taking care of pets tend to be less selfish and may also be less aggressive.

People have owned and loved animals for hundreds of years. Perhaps we have always known that pets do something special for us, from completing us in a way other humans can't to helping prolong our lives.

For those who haven't discovered the value and joy of having a pet, consider getting one. You'll be doing something to prolong your life and increase your vitality - plus it's cheaper than yoga and warmer than a health drink!