



FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

PET OWNERSHIP

This month I have been living alone as my husband is doing relief work in Puerto Rico. One thing that I have enjoyed is getting a rescue kitty. It has been great to see her silhouette in the window when I get home at night, and to be greeted at the door, as well as to have company through meals, the evening and nights. But the responsibility also means I need to get home as quickly as I can and that everything else must be put on hold until I tend to her needs. It's made me think about the pros and cons of pet care.

Research shows that caring for an animal can provide tremendous benefits for aging adults, improving not only quality of life, but health and well-being. "Just 15 minutes bonding with an animal sets off a chemical chain reaction in the brain, lowering levels of the fight-or-flight hormone, cortisol, and increasing the feel-good hormone, serotonin. The result: heart rate, blood pressure and stress levels immediately drop. Over the long term, pet and human interactions can lower cholesterol levels, fight depression and may even help protect against heart disease and stroke (Byrne 2015, aplaceformom.com)."

- **Pets can encourage physical fitness**, such as walking a dog or playing with a cat. This is great for weight-control.
- **Pets are good for the heart.** Studies show that pet interaction reduces the risk of a heart attack and hastens recovery.
- **Pets stimulate social interaction**, they get you out with other people. Few people can walk past a dog in the park without stopping to talk or make a doggie play date. Plus, there are all the people who help you provide care to your pet.
- **Pets are great companions.** They reduce loneliness, isolation and depression. Pets can also calm emotions like anxiety. Pets create a presence in your home and are very interactive. They give love unconditionally and don't fret when a person isn't verbally interactive. Pets can fill some of the emptiness left by loss and the need for touch with love and affection.
- **Pets help create structure**—there need to be regular exercise and meal times during the day.

- **Caring for a pet gives a sense of purpose**—a reason for being. Some memory-care and other senior care communities have pets for comfort and purpose. Older adults also make great pet foster parents.

- **Having a pet can also help a person feel safer in their home.**

Other experts question these results, noting increased fall risk, increase of stress caring for a pet and the impact of loss.

It is important to consider the decision to get a pet carefully. Pets live for 10–18 years. Where will you be in a decade? Two? Will you still be able to provide good care for your pet? Do you have a back-up plan of who would take the pet if you couldn't care for it—either short or long-term? Will you need help taking the pet to the groomer or vet? Can you afford the care? Will you be home or travelling often?

Be realistic about your abilities and get the right pet for you (not the bouncy strong puppy if you are unstable on your feet). Make sure you also train your pet not to be a hazard, weaving around your ankles or sleeping in the dark beside your bed, or out of your control (there goes a squirrel!).

Having a pet is not the right decision for everyone. If you are a pet person, considering these questions can make the experience more successful for all involved.

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