

The Role of Pets in Enhancing Human Well-being: Effects for Older People

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Introduction

The widespread ownership of pets among people of various ages and the effort and money spent on behalf of pets suggests that a majority of owners derive a significant benefit from their companionship. For families with growing children, pets can be part of the social support system⁷ and provide opportunities to educate children and for them to experience nurturance.^{4,6} For people in their later years, pet ownership may be more difficult than for younger people because of financial, physical, transportation and housing limitations or restrictions.

If definite benefits to older people arise from companionship with an animal, one could argue for encouraging pet adoption, just as exercise and nutritious diets are recommended for enhancing health. Such a recommendation would require having objective information concerning the specific circumstances where benefits are associated with pet ownership. Unfortunately, little is known specifically about which elderly people would benefit most or in which situations significant benefits would result. The purpose of this chapter is to review studies that shed light on the role pets can play in enhancing the well-being of older people.

The first section of the chapter concerns healthy aging and documents how the common preoccupation with elderly people in nursing homes is being supplanted with studies of healthy, older individuals who are responsible for their own well-being. The second section examines factors associated with pet ownership in older people. The next four sections of the chapter address particular effects of relationships with companion animals that are tailored to the life changes and common losses of elderly people.

First, the socializing effects of animals, which may be important to elderly people who have lost friends and family members, especially if they lack children or employment to draw them into community activities. Second, the way in which pets may confer a role or identity on an individual. This may be important for someone whose life has revolved around professional, spousal and parental roles which may be lost as the person ages. Third, the stress reduction or buffering aspects of relationships with companion animals. These may assume special importance when key losses (such as death of a spouse) arise that jeopardize a person's well-being. Fourth, the motivating role of animals. This may help older people in providing nurturance to others and in participating in activities. The final section of the chapter focuses on some practical considerations regarding pet ownership for older people, such as obtaining housing where pets are permitted and arranging for various aspects of care.

Sustaining Well-being in Maturity

More than ever before, good health in the latter part of life is regarded as a result of taking healthy initiatives throughout life. A reversal of unhealthy practices (such as smoking) usually improves health. Even with cardiovascular crises that typically are handled with invasive surgery, a comprehensive array of major changes in lifestyle (including exercise, dietary changes, yoga or meditation), social support and community involvement can lead to some reversals of cardiovascular pathology.⁵² In another extreme example involving AIDS patients, a program of natural therapy combined with low dosages of drugs stimulated a reversal of the invasive disease from ARC (Aids Related Complex) to the less serious HIV infection in 6 of 19 patients.³²

Evidence suggests that the aging process itself can be retarded by a healthy lifestyle that addresses the psychological challenges arising in older years. People living as married couples have been shown to maintain significantly better psychological and physiological health when aging than people living alone, especially men.⁴⁴ In addition, maintaining a regular daily routine is one of five key factors that is said to retard aging.⁹ However, much of life's familiar structure changes as one ages and healthy living requires an increasing initiative on the part of the older person.¹⁶ For example, maintaining a regular daily routine can become difficult when a spouse dies. In a long-term study, Erikson et al.¹⁶ found that elderly people pointed to relationships with children and grandchildren as a source of strength that made their lives worthwhile. For some individuals pets may play a role somewhat analogous to that of children or grandchildren. Friedan¹⁸ focused on the harmful stereotypes that hamper society's ability to draw from the wisdom of elderly people. Emphasizing the importance of staying well, she argued for new methods of providing convenience and social support to older people and even went so far as to suggest that no more nursing homes for older people should be constructed.

The antiquated view of aging as an inevitable decline with its ultimate prolonged disablement is simply not true in the western world where there are many opportunities for health and active involvement with life among people with a wide range of disabilities and diseases. Most of the research concerning the effects of interactions with pets for older people has been conducted in nursing homes or other institutional environments. Yet, the vast majority of elderly people live independently. In the USA, fewer than 5% of elderly people live in institutional settings and various estimates suggest that only between 10 and 40% of today's elderly people are expected to spend any time in a nursing home.¹⁸ While it is true that elderly people may face certain challenges and stresses more often and sustaining the motivation to remain active and use time productively becomes increasingly challenging, they may also carry greater measures of wisdom and resources to sustain them than in their earlier years.

From lifelong longitudinal studies of people who are now elderly, Clausen¹¹ found that by adolescence some individuals exhibited a group of traits that strongly predicted and influenced their success throughout life. This cluster of traits was termed 'planful competence' and included dependability, intellectual involvement and self-confidence. Individuals with these traits were more able to cope with major challenging life transitions which for other individuals were overly daunting.

The Role of Pets in the Life Cycle

As proposed by Wilson and Netting,⁷⁴ the role of pets in people's lives can be viewed from the perspective of life course development. People's histories with pets are likely to influence their

pattern of ownership, the benefits they derive from ownership, their perceptions of the pet's role and the degree to which the pet influences the person's sense of well-being. Having a close relationship with pets early in life would predict a close relationship later in life and a likelihood of benefiting from animal companionship. However, since longitudinal human studies on aging have not monitored pet ownership, it is not possible to analyze lifelong patterns of pet ownership and relationships directly. However, questionnaires and surveys that assess personal histories of pet-keeping retrospectively have been administered to mature and elderly people.

Pet ownership patterns in childhood are key influences in pet ownership patterns as adults.¹⁹ Among individuals aged 65-87 years, pet owners reported a past history of pet-keeping more frequently than did the non-pet owners.³⁴ In a study of adults, 88% of the pet owners had owned pets as children, as compared to only 28% of the nonpet owners,³⁶ and the strength of the relationship with pets was higher among pet owners who had experienced pets as children. People who have owned cats as children tend as adults to love cats and early experience with dogs predisposed a love of dogs.³⁵

Studies focusing on various features of the relationship between dogs and humans were recently reviewed.²⁴ However, apart from the role of personal history in influencing pet selection throughout life, surprisingly few studies have sought to compare relationships with cats versus dogs. The information is not available to know in what circumstances a cat might be a more appropriate companion for an older person than a dog. Presumably, the activity level of some breeds of dogs may be aversive to an older person who has physical disabilities, is frail, or is bedridden much of the time. A recent study of men with AIDS indicated that cats were well suited for the needs of individuals with compromised health.⁸ While less interactive than dogs, cats offer many aspects of the social interactions sought by lonely people.⁴⁵

Some pet owners feel closer to their animals than to family members, as was illustrated when people drew diagrams representing their family members and 38% of dog owners placed the dog closer to themselves than any other family member.⁴ While it might appear paradoxical, pet ownership is highest among families with young children, whereas relationship strength is, on average, highest in small families or among individuals who live alone.^{2, 36, 59}

Close relationships with pets in pet-owning families has been significantly related to family adaptability, presumably through family members experiencing negotiations on the roles rules and responsibilities of having a pet.¹⁴ A strong relationship with pets was also related to family cohesion, as measured by emotional bonding, boundaries, time use, decision making, interests, recreations and coalitions. This study of family functioning suggests that a close relationship with a pet may be a broad indicator of healthy human or family relationships.

In one study, elderly women aged 65-75 years who had a better relationship with their pets were more likely to be closely attached to their spouses and to be happy.⁵³ Both high income and a strong relationship appeared to be prerequisites for a positive effect of pets on morale. Pet owners with limited income had low scores on general happiness, perhaps partially reflecting the financial obligations of pet keeping.

Simply owning a pet does not assure it a significant role. Negative results were reported in a study of elderly women, where the strength of the relationship with their pets was unrelated to levels of depression.⁴³ An exploratory study of war veterans with a mean age of 63 years reported an

association of pet ownership with improved morale and health,⁵⁶ but with a full sample, no differences were observed between pet owners and nonowners.⁵⁷ These negative findings illustrate the importance of identifying the types of individuals or circumstances in which animals may contribute a benefit.

Some studies have documented healthier self-ratings among adult pet owners than non-owners and one study reported higher achievement scores among pet owners than non-owners.¹⁰ The owners valued the reciprocal relationships with the animals that were characterized by unconditional acceptance, love, affection, laughter, play and protection. The responsibility of pet ownership was mentioned as a disadvantage and was also the main stated reason for non-ownership of pets.

When men and women over 65 years of age provided self-ratings on a standardized test, pet owners described themselves with more favorable adjectives, such as nurturance, independence, and optimism.³⁴ Male non-owners scored higher than male owners and all females, on arrogance and hostility. Consistent with other studies, pet owners more often than non-owners had kept pets in past years. In interviews with elderly men and women living alone and receiving home delivery of meals, the pet owners scored lower on loneliness than the non-owners.⁵⁵

Socializing Effects of Companion Animals

The need for social contact and support is often not met for older individuals, who may have lost many friends due to death. Also, they generally no longer have employment to structure their daily schedules and provide social interactions. Health or financial constraints may curtail activities that formerly kept them socially involved. However, older individuals can remain socially engaged in various ways, through special interests such as a companion animal, by participating in community or religious organizations, or by assisting family members with childcare.

Even people who have an animal companion require human companionship. An animal companion can greatly facilitate establishing friends and much work over the past decade has focused on the socializing effects of companion animals.^{15, 29, 58} A classic study in 1975 reported the 'social lubricant' and 'ice breaker' functions of pet birds for men and women aged 75-81 years.⁴⁹ Although the participants had a high attrition rate, the group with a pet bird appeared to show social and psychological improvements.

In a recent study of people aged 65-78 years walking their dogs in their neighborhood, the dog was a major focus of conversations with passers-by, as shown in Fig. 3.1.⁵⁸ While walking, non-owners spoke very little about animals, whereas dog owners spoke about their dogs even when walking without them. Dog owners' conversations focused on the present or future (Fig. 3.2), whereas non-owners' conversations during walks featured past events. In another study even a small animal such as a rabbit or turtle, readily attracted unfamiliar passersby of all ages to converse with a woman sitting in a park.²⁹ Conversations focused on the animal, sometimes involving a personal anecdote about an animal from the passerby.

Unfamiliar passers-by have been shown to respond with friendly interest, smiles and conversations more often to a person using a wheelchair who is accompanied by a service dog than when the person is without their dog.¹⁵ Thus, we know from observations of human behavior in a wide range

of circumstances that a companion animal readily elicits friendly responses, even from unfamiliar passers-by.

In a study of elderly persons receiving home assistance,⁷⁵ all had a close relationship with their pets and most reported confiding in the pet more easily than in other people. Touching pets made 74% feel better. Once given access to a veterinarian, study participants made frequent calls, which appeared to be 'more related to a need for social interaction than to actual problems'.

Various studies conducted in institutional environments have used an experimental design to examine the effects of introducing an animal on the social behavior of people. When a dog or a photographic stimulus was presented to elderly female patients in two wards, patients showed increased social interactions amongst themselves and with the staff when the dog was present, as judged by an independent observer and in ratings by ward nurses.²⁷ In another visiting program at a residential home, residents interacting with puppies and their handlers showed improvements in their social interaction, psychosocial function, life satisfaction, mental function, and level of depression, social competence and psychological well-being in comparison with the control group.¹⁷ Nursing home patients with Alzheimer's disease showed improved social interactions amongst themselves and with staff and increased calmness, when provided with weekly interactive sessions with Golden Retrievers.⁶

The presence of a dog also increased social behaviors in another study for patients with Alzheimer's disease, but placing the dog permanently in the facility was no better for the patients than the temporary visits.³⁷ A study of elderly women patients in long-term care provided them with a weekly one hour leisure activity and a one hour animal-assisted therapy session with a rabbit for six weeks.³³ In the first sessions, more positive social responses occurred during the animal-assisted therapy session than the leisure sessions. By the sixth week, the animal-assisted therapy session maintained its strong effect and although the leisure session had increased its effect, more laughing occurred overall during the pet therapy than during the leisure sessions.

If pets facilitate socialization of people in various settings, it could be assumed that this at least partially results from interacting with the pet. Miller *et al.*⁴⁷ examined differences among 230 independently living pet owners over 50 years of age. Those who reported either some degree of inconvenience or some degree of uplift from their pets were termed the "interactors," as compared with those who reported neither inconvenience nor uplift from their pets. The interactors were slightly younger, more educated and in better health than the non-interactors. The interactors were significantly more satisfied with life and had higher positive expectations (Fig. 3.3). Twenty-five percent of the study participants were men. For the men, any uplift from pets was associated with worries in the areas of social interactions, time and money, suggesting that pets were playing a compensatory social role. Uplift from pets was reported by women who had leisure time and a lack of psychological pressure.

For older individuals whose social involvement is limited, companion animals themselves can be an accessible source of social and tactile contact. Observations of nursing home residents in two facilities during a dog's visit showed that 85-93% of residents groomed or touched the dog on average 15-25 times per person.⁵⁰ In-home observations of families' interactions with dogs indicate that dogs adjust the frequencies of their interactions with family members in response to the person's behavior and interest.⁶⁸

In a study of elderly women, pets made a difference in well-being for those living alone, but no difference for those living with others.²¹ Compared with non-owners, pet owners living alone had significantly higher morale on four of the six psychological scales, including absence of agitation, optimism, surgency (a measure of active initiative for activity) and absence of loneliness (Fig. 3.4). Pet owners living alone actually scored higher than pet owners living with others on absence of agitation, but this was not mentioned nor tested statistically by the author.

For some older individuals, a companion animal provides essential social contact. In one study of elderly dog owners who lived alone, 75% of males and 67% of females said their dog was their only friend.⁵⁴ They reported talking to their dogs as if they were human, felt that their dogs fulfilled a need for companionship and that their relationship with the dogs was as strong as with humans. The dogs gave them something to do with their time and fulfilled their need to nurture. Women especially appreciated the loyalty of dogs.

The Influence of Pets on Personal Identity

A feeling of uselessness can be an immediate consequence following retirement.²² Pets instantly confer roles (e.g. cat lover or dog owner) on those who appreciate animals. These roles are identities shared with others and they echo across past, present and future involvement with animals. When emerging themes were drawn from interviews and observations of six elderly women, the primary theme was that the pet was an integral part of the person's identity.⁶¹ It was also shown that pet-owning could enhance or detract from social relationships and that the pet was a 'significant other' in the daily lives of the subjects.

Assuming an identity as someone who loves animals can establish a link with others who have a similar identity. An ethnographic study at three geriatric facilities documented that pet visitation produced a family atmosphere symbolizing and re-creating domesticity.⁶⁰ Residents readily shared personal information about their families, their health, their roommates, their religious beliefs, their job experiences and the homes they had given up. These unintended social effects were characterized by reminiscing, intimacy and bonding with the volunteers who had brought the animals. The pets were found to facilitate interaction between people rather than being the main focus of interaction itself. Perhaps volunteers are motivated to bring pets into facilities by the ability of their pets to create a safe, enjoyable and intimate context with others who also love pets, much as in therapeutic horseback riding where the presence of horses creates a joyful occasion for the people who are gathered.²³

The Role of Pets in Stress Reduction

A concept consistent with many studies is that a companion animal can reduce transient or significant stress, buffering the effect of the stress on the person. Allen *et al.*³ documents how subjects exposed to a transient stressor such as performing a challenging arithmetic problem, showed a reduction in stress in the presence of their dog than when in the presence of a close friend. In another study, participants given the task of reading aloud experienced anxiety above baseline, in contrast with either reading quietly or interacting with a friendly unfamiliar dog, which resulted in reduced anxiety.⁷³

Individuals endure a profound ongoing stress when they lose a spouse, particularly if the spouse was virtually the sole confidant, and such a loss is increasingly likely to occur as people grow older. With the combined stress of losing a spouse and the subsequent social isolation, a person could be vulnerable to depression. In such a circumstance, pet owners reported significantly less depression than non-owners.²⁰ Among pet owners who had lost a spouse and had few confidants, those who had a strong relationship with their pet experienced less depression than those whose relationship was less strong. Related findings of more psychogenic symptoms and higher drug use among non-owners than pet owners were reported in a study of people who had been widowed within the previous 3 years.¹

Siegel's^{65, 66} study of medical visits by elderly people provided further evidence for the stress buffering hypothesis. When compared with non-owners, pet owners made fewer medical visits over the course of a year. A more pronounced effect was found when stressful life events during the 6 months before the study were considered. As shown in Fig. 3.5, non-owners experiencing stressful life events increased their medical contacts, whereas dog owners with similar stressful events did not show an increase. Dog owners reported spending 1.5 hours per day talking to their dogs and felt more secure than non-owners. Owners believed that they spent more time with their dogs than did other pet owners, that they felt closer to their pets than other owners and that there were more positive than negative effects of having pets. Siegel concluded that dog ownership influences coping ability for dealing with losses.

The Role of Pets in Facilitating Healthy Activities

As discussed earlier, when people age it becomes increasingly important that they choose a lifestyle which will help them to remain healthy.¹⁶ Older people themselves have reported psychological challenges presented by aging.⁵ One of the major contributions made by animals is providing motivation for the constructive use of time.⁴³ An animal can motivate a person to keep going, get up in the morning and follow a routine. Virtually all dog owners report that their dogs enjoy walks.⁶² Dogs also provide motivation for a wide range of interactive behaviors.

Melson's⁴⁵ studies have emphasized the importance of children being able to nurture animals, especially for the youngest or only child who lacks the opportunity to care for a younger sibling. As people become older, they may once again come to have few opportunities for nurturing; this is particularly true for men. Animals are effective in stimulating nurturing from many men and women. Among older pet owners in one study, 84% of men and 75% of women often played with their pets.⁶⁹

Perhaps the most widely known aspect of human animal interactions is pet visits to elderly people in nursing homes. Volunteers with animals have probably visited facilities in most communities in the USA and many programs occur in other countries. Although various studies have investigated the effects of such visits for patients or staff, the role of animals in motivating the volunteers to participate in this activity has received little mention. A study of participants in volunteer training workshops for animal-assisted therapy documented that for these individuals, their animals acted as social catalysts, making their interactions with other humans easier and more enjoyable.⁷⁰ Such studies are important because while animals are frequently credited with helping nursing home residents, the benefits may accrue from the human as well as the animal visitor. As shown in Fig. 3.7, Hendy's²⁸ study found that human visitors alone were as effective as pets alone or human

visitors with pets, in eliciting smiling and alertness responses from patients. Human visitors influenced the nursing home residents more than the pets, but the pets may be essential because of their ability to motivate the visitors to make, increase or extend their visits to the nursing home.

Corson and Corson¹³ described how animals acted as socializing catalysts with patients and staff and thus improved the overall morale of the institution and created a community out of detached individuals. In other studies with visiting animals, the increased motivation of the staff translated into improved morale, patient-staff communication and, presumably, enhanced care for patients.⁶

In a longitudinal study of elderly persons, pet attitudes, ownership and mutual activities with pets significantly predicted health and morale for some people.³⁹ Serpell's longitudinal study of lifestyle changes following pet adoption, although not focusing on older people, found that people adopting dogs sharply increased their time walking.^{63, 64} Siegel's study of elderly people also documented that dog owners spent 1.4 hours per day outside with the dog.^{65, 66} Exercise is now seen as essential for human health. It plays a central role in avoiding hip fracture^{12, 40} and is an essential component of cardiovascular medical programs.⁵² Dogs seem to provide the motivation for adults of various ages to participate in regular outdoor exercise which will contribute to increased health.

Practical Considerations

Although many studies have demonstrated benefits from pets, not everyone chooses, or is able, to own one. Over half of elderly, former pet owners in one study reported that they did not desire a pet.⁷⁵ In another study of older people, 39% currently preferred noninvolvement with pets.⁷² Respondent characteristics associated with non-involvement included age, poor visual acuity and limited physical mobility or use of arms. Having insufficient indoor and outdoor space was characteristic of the residential settings among people preferring non-involvement. Virtually all these respondents reported considerable involvement with animals earlier in their lives, but some had shifted to preferring a more indirect and passive involvement. A study of participation by institutional residents in various activities suggested that if assistance with pets was more readily available, the extent of participation would reflect both the personal characteristics of the people and the features of the housing environment.⁴²

Older people often reduce the size of their homes and in doing so they make choices that may support or detract from their sustaining an involved lifestyle. For people who choose to live in ground floor accommodation, outdoor access is relatively easy, which would facilitate dog or cat ownership.²⁶ However, a widespread problem is that in rented accommodation pets are often not permitted and living on upper floors may reduce the ease of pet ownership. In the USA, older people living in State or Federally assisted housing have some protected rights to own pets, while those living in privately owned housing must rely on the willingness of the property owner. A recent study in the UK³¹ found that the 'no pet' policy of many nursing homes for older people caused stress and anguish to older pet owners. Some people even missed hospital appointments because they feared referral to a home where no animals were allowed. More worrying was the lack of written policy concerning pets in many establishments. Regulations preventing pet ownership are usually drawn up to prevent potential problems. However, older people living in assisted housing in California were found to be extremely responsible pet owners and the problems

with property damage and personal injury that were anticipated when pets were first introduced, did not occur.²⁵

In a recent survey of 1595 people aged 60 years and over, living in Illinois, USA, 32.7% owned pets.⁶⁷ Ownership was highest among the younger and married residents. Of the pet owners, 86% reported that the pet was important in their choice of housing. Reasons for pet ownership, in order of priority, were love of pets, companionship, getting the owner out of the house and providing an opportunity to socialize.

Identifying Individuals Likely to Benefit

Programs where animals have been used in an attempt to benefit older people have most frequently been conducted with institutionalized elderly residents and generally have not identified the characteristics of the individuals who showed improvement. In one study with volunteers and dogs visiting twice weekly for 12 weeks, the elderly residents reported less depression, anxiety, anger, fatigue and confusion, compared to the control residents.⁷¹ Further analyses showed that individuals with strong positive past experiences and current attitudes toward pet animals accounted for the improvement, whereas individuals with less positive attitudes and experiences had not shown a significant improvement.

Among people living independently, those living alone appeared less likely to own pets.⁴¹ As contributing factors to non-ownership, they had lower incomes and lived in multi-home apartments. Some individuals who had formerly kept pets later decided not to have them. Impaired health, advanced age and more confined housing were some reasons given in a longitudinal study for giving up pet-keeping.³⁸ Among those who managed to keep pets through the third year of this study, involvement with the pet and the pet's sleeping location were effective predictors of morale and self-rated physical health.

Many critical variables influence a person's choice of pet, including the past events and previous attitudes to and relationships with pets. Current health status, the housing situation, whether one lives alone, the amount of time to be spent with a pet and the socioeconomic status are other relevant variables.⁷⁴ In interviews with older men and women in Arizona, the type of housing, close relationships with pets in childhood and health status accounted for 24% of the variance in predicting pet ownership.⁵¹

Older people living independently may have difficulties in keeping up with the various responsibilities of pet care, including grooming, veterinary care and shopping for food. Others are concerned about what would happen to a pet if they should die or need hospitalization. Volunteer or paid help where needed, would make it more feasible for some people to keep pets longer. Extensive efforts focus on bringing visiting pets into institutions, yet few organized programs provide support for pet-keeping to older people who live independently. Some imaginative programs do exist. In Scotland, there is a charity which provides emergency care for a pet, in the homes of volunteers, should an elderly owner be unable to care for the animal. In the USA there is a program which matches older people who would like a pet with older pets in need of a home. However, these pet adoption schemes must have sufficient support and follow-up to ensure that the adoption is mutually beneficial.

From the work discussed in this review, it seems clear that at least for some older individuals, a companion animal contributes to enhanced socialization, an identity, stress reduction and motivation. Therefore a future goal for the various governmental and nongovernmental organizations which assist older people should be to provide support for those people who desire to own or have contact with a pet.

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