Pets and Your Mental Health

By LaRae LaBouff

As I sit here, my dog is lying next to me chasing squirrels in his dreams. He’s my buddy and part of my family. Seeing his short face when I walk in the door after a hard day always makes me feel better and he gives really good hugs. I’ve heard for years that having pets are good for your health - lower blood pressure, better heart health, etc., but I’ve never really looked into how animals impact mental health. What is Chip’s impact on my life other than being the most amazing dog there is?

There are a lot of variables that go into the question of how an animal can impact a person’s mental health. Are you the owner or do you just see the animal once in a while? If you do own the animal, what kind of a relationship do you have with it? Obviously some people are more attached to their animals than others are. It varies from person to person and pet to pet. The internet loves to attach stereotypes to cats and their seemingly standoffish personalities, but really it’s because we love our cats and like to laugh at the funny things they do. We also like to dote on our dogs because they are adorable (see above). What kind of an effect does that have psychologically? It’s because of all of these variables and attitudes that studying the impact of animals and mental health is incredibly difficult.

Generally, the results are mixed. Some studies have found that pets can actually make mental health worse. If a person is experiencing symptoms, those symptoms can be exacerbated by the seemingly daunting responsibility of pet ownership. It takes a considerable amount of effort to be a

pet parent. They have to be fed, watered and exercised. They need companionship as much as we do and they rely on us for every basic need. When it’s hard to take care of yourself, it can be harder to know that you have to take care of someone else, and there is plenty of guilt to add to not being able to do so. Aside: Pet owners in this study were more likely to be diagnosed bipolar than the non-owners.

But let’s not be totally negative. There are definitely some benefits to animal interaction. In fact, I’ll go ahead and give you the kicker:

**Pets are more effective at lowering stress than a spouse or partner.**

They provide us with intense social bonds without the social pressures. Building a good relationship with a pet is considerably easier than building one with a person. Pets are generally accepting of their owners. They love unconditionally and you never have to put your best foot forward for them. Pets have an **acute sense of perception.** We communicate with them without even realizing it, so they can sense our symptoms and even react with what we perceive as **empathy.** I know my dog acts differently when he knows I’m not doing well. He doesn’t leave my side and has a much more calm demeanor.

Animals can also give us a sense of accomplishment and self-worth. The responsibilities I mentioned earlier? The response can go the other way. We can feel good about the fact that we can take care of this other being. Knowing that they rely on us can provide us with the motivation to do what we need to do to be healthy. Keep in mind that pets are not limited to dogs or cats. Birds, fish, horses, reptiles. They all have their benefits.

What about those that cannot have a pet? Don’t they deserve the same benefits? Many people, especially in urban areas, can have trouble finding housing that allows pets. Even those places that do often have limitations on species, weight, breed and number of pets. There are also people that, for whatever reason, simply cannot care for an animal. Adoption of a pet is a huge decision that should not be taken lightly. There is a solution, though. It’s animal-assisted therapy. Animals can be brought in, whether to an institution such as a nursing home or a hospital, or they can be present at home or office visits. Even when patients do not get the same amount of exposure to an animal, they still see the same positive effects as those with companion animals.

Still on the fence? Another way to get the interaction with animals and help the community at the same time is to volunteer at your local animal shelter. Even if you just pop by to walk a dog every now and then, the dog and the shelter will appreciate it. Who knows, you may even find your new companion.
