



Impact of Animals on Human Health

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ABSTRACT

With rising cases of animal killings in news and various petitions being signed for action against the guilty, it is essential to focus on this growing topic and to realize does declining rates of animals around us have any impact on our health's. With increased number of studies supporting pet keeping to mental and physical well being, this paper reviews the evidence for these benefits.

KEYWORDS

Mental health, Physical health and Animals.

Introduction:

Everywhere around us we see NGO's for the welfare of animals, many adoption centers around us pulling our attention to adopt the innocent beings, social media is full of selfies with pets and their owners; government policies being implemented for the welfare of animals; all these and much more brings our attention to this very important being "animals" be it wild or pet and the importance of them in our lives.

With increasing rates of obesity, physical and mental ailments, rising rates of treatment and cures; we need to divert our attention towards animals, who according to various researchers have found to have alarming effect on our fitness.

Keeping pets these days has become sort of a trend and a common well accepted phenomenon. Researchers have shown that pets have a huge role to play in the health of their owners (Hart, 2006). Not only this nowadays various organizations train animals such as dogs, monkeys, horses, birds to assist owners who have visual or physical handicaps and to make them more mobile and functional.

Pets and physical health:

All of us are aware of the one advantage on our physical health of having pets, that is regular exercises, which is done by taking the dog for a walk, or taking him out to respond to the nature's call etc.; keeping this obvious advantage aside and focusing on other dimensions of physical health. We can see that researchers have shown through various studies that physically interacting with pets such as through stroking, cuddling etc., leads to reduced blood pressure (Shiloh, Sorek, & Terkel, 2003). Interestingly it has been reported that the presence of a pet dog, cat or any other animals around leads to lower levels of heart rate and blood pressure as compared to the presence of a friend, spouse or relatives, for people who were exposed to small stressors created in the laboratory, (Allen, Blascovich, & Mendes, 2002).

Research by (Headey, 1998; Siegel, 1990) found that pet owners had to make less visits to the hospital as compared to non pet owners. Another study by Anderson, Reid, & Jennings, (1992) found that not only reduced doctor visits but also pet owners had reportedly reduced cardiovascular ailments as compared to non pet owners; also reduced levels of serum triglycerides (Dembicki and Anderson, 1996). However at the same time it has been seen that all these health benefits have not been noticed for the elderly, they on the other hand have shown to have been taking high amounts of pain relief medications with pets (Parslow, Jorm, Christensen, Rodgers, & Jacomb, 2005), also higher rates of falls and fractures were reported for this age group, for those who had pets to take care for (Pluijm et al., 2006).

Pets and mental health:

Studies have shown that pets as companion not only impact our physical health, it also has effect on our mental health. Researches over a period of time on this have found that having a pet helps the owner cope better with stressful events such as divorce, loneliness, depression, anxiety and has beneficial effects for owners coping with bereavement. (Folse, Minder, Aycocock, & Santana, 1994; Garrity, Stallones, Marx, & Johnson, 1989), pets at the same time contribute in augmenting feelings of autonomy, competence, and self-esteem (Robin & ten Bensel, 1985; Triebenbacher, 1998). Pets also have found to help in reducing the feelings of loneliness and boredom and enhance mood of its owners and have specially been used for patients who are institutionalized due to deteriorated mental health conditions (Zasloff & Kidd, 1994, Headey, 1998). Another interesting research finding was reported by Salmon and Salmon (1982), who found out those mental hospitals who had kept pet animals, their patients had reported better health, alert mood and speedy recovery. Also various countries such as USA, UK and Europe have started with animal assisted therapies for mental well being of patients using dogs, horses, cats etc. (Burgon, 2003, Fine, 1999).

Research studies have shown that for patients suffering from HIV and facing isolation from their relatives had found reduced symptoms of depression, and lower self esteem, if they had pets around them (Siegel, Angulo, Detels, Wesch, & Mullen, 1999). Interestingly while owning a pet for the elderly was seen as harmful for their physical health but for their mental health the results indicate a positive picture, as has been seen by Roberts, McBride, Rosenvinge, Stevenage, & Bradshaw, (1996); elderly who were pet owners had reduced symptoms of depression and loneliness. Not only this, studies have found improvement in behavioral and psychological symptoms of dementia patients such as agitation, aggression, etc., for those who were pet owners (Filan and Llewellyn-Jones, 2006).

Though so far we have seen that owning a pet has beneficial effects on ones physical and mental well being it's time to focus on the reasons behind it.

Research by Archer (1997), found that the pet owners see their pets as family members and tend to form close emotional ties with them; they start considering them as one like them and tend to take them as their friend and share their worries and joys with them, leading to form strong bonds with them. Overtime behaviors emitted by pets such as wagging their tails while looking at their owner, getting upset while they are leaving all are interpreted as sings of love towards their owners, which provides a support security system to their owners and thus form close emotional bonds with them, they are also perceived to be non judgmental which further gives the free-

dom to the owners to be their real selves and be honest and true (Collis and McNicholas, 1998). Not only this pet owners reported closer family ties with each other, greater cohesion amongst themselves, less conflicts and stronger bonds if they had a pet at home which might also be another reason for its contribution in betterment of health (Cox, 1993).

Conclusion:

Through this paper we have explored evidences for the role of pets for the health of humans. However while most of the studies so far on this topic indicate towards the positive impact of pets on our lives, we shall not ignore the fact that we still have few studies indicating mixed findings for this and we have limited studies on this topic, hence we cannot generalize it widely. Nevertheless we can over time explore on this neglected aspect more and can start considering it as an option for treatment modality after considering all the pros and cons of having animals around us, keeping the safety issues in mind. Despite of mixed findings on this topic, it is however clear that pets have a crucial role to play in almost every aspect of human psychological, social and cultural life, and therefore we should work to use them wisely for our betterment and treat them with love and care.

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