

Many people appreciate the simultaneous challenges and priceless rewards that come with pet ownership. Pets serve as companions, provide their humans with a sense of purpose and responsibility, and are relentless sources of love and affection. But pets serve a greater purpose for older adults than just providing a means of comfort. Siegel (1990) found that pet owners, on average, reported fewer doctor visits over the course of a year than non-pet owners. Additionally, older adult pet owners tended to report lower stress levels and elevated levels of life satisfaction.

**Life satisfaction.** Pets present new opportunities for purpose and joy in the lives of their companions. As people age, they often experience a decrease in activities that may have previously occupied their time or provided a sense of purpose. Caring for a pet can bring the individual gratification and a sense of fulfillment, allowing for boosts of morale or optimism. In addition to presenting with fewer psychological complaints, older adults with a higher sense of life satisfaction tend to report fewer physical health ailments.

**Social connections.** Pets can provide individuals with an opportunity to increase their social networks. The attachment to a pet provides a sense of companionship to those who are physically or socially isolated, and this ultimately provides the individual with a revitalized sense of interaction and connection. Dogs in particular allow for the development of new social connections when their human companions take them out for walks or to play the park. When aging adults' social circles shrink, due to retirement or loss, pursuing new interactions can help to decrease stress and increase happiness.

**Boosted vitality.** People have the potential to overcome many of the physical challenges associated with aging through engaging in playfulness, laughter, and exercise, all of which accompany active pet companionship. These activities can help boost immune systems and

increase a person's energy. The simple act of feeding the pet everyday can significantly increase a feeling of having a purposeful connection to the world.

In his study, Siegel found that older adult pet owners, when compared to non-pet owners, reported higher social interactions, fewer negative emotions, and fewer physical ailments. Pet owners additionally reported higher levels of physical activity and decreased depressive symptoms. All the work, costs, and disappointments of owning a pet are counteracted by the positive effects on physical and mental health.

A pet becomes an important member of the human companion's family. It provides comfort, love, and companionship. Fear of the potential for terminal illness may prevent some older adults from pursuing pet ownership; however, Safe Place for Pets is a no-kill shelter in Manitou Springs that provides new homes for pets of terminally ill patients. They are committed to finding loving homes for animals of terminally ill adults who may have concern for who will love their pet when they have passed.

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