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Pet Pick-me-up

Consider how your pet makes you feel special. Well there's some science to that, and it's all good. Abby Campbell reports on the health benefits of keeping a pooch.

At the end of a hard day, nothing beats the warm welcome of your canine or feline friend. Pets can pick you up and sometimes the science doesn't explain it all. But there is a lot of evidence to suggest what animal lovers know: that being around a pet makes you feel good.

Individuals

Melbourne retiree Josephine Simsa says the emotional benefits of having her Maltese/Shih Tzu cross, Suzy Wong, are "immeasurable". "She just exudes love and warmth. I'm a single person but definitely not alone!"

Christine Wright, a teacher from Sydney, agrees. Her Polish Lowland Sheepdog, Rogi, makes her life more enjoyable. "Rogi is always glad to see me – a real ego booster – and gives me unconditional love."

In addition to the happiness factor, Josephine says Suzy Wong encourages her to be active. "I try to take her out once a day. This automatically gets me out, so my physical exercise is taken care of."

Christine credits her dog with getting her to exercise more. "Rogi helped me lose seven kilos," she adds. "With him it's easy to meet people on walks. Most people are willing to talk to someone with a dog, especially such a cute one."

University of Western Australia research fellow, Lisa Wood, has studied this phenomenon in Australia. She says dogs increase the likelihood of their owners meeting other people within their neighbourhood. Close to half of pet owners

indicated that they had got to know other people in their suburb through their pets. Three quarters of dog owners indicated that owning a dog encouraged them to walk in their suburb more frequently.

Communities

The benefit of pets in a neighbourhood also extends to those who don't own a pet. Dog walkers act as an ice breaker for non-pet owners to make contact with their neighbours.

Dr Wood says pet ownership is positively associated with attributions of friendship, social contact, and practical exchanges of support, such as collecting a neighbour's mail or looking after a pet while they're on holidays.

"The social lubricant effect of pets appears particularly related to the role that dogs play in enticing people outside their front door and into their surrounding neighbourhood,"

Dr Wood says. "In the realm of public discourse, the potential negative consequences of pet residency within suburban neighbourhoods (such as dog bites and noise) often dominate. But these consequences are less prolific than conveyed in the media and need to be considered against the benefits of pet ownership, including the social contact animals generate for their owners."

Around the world

The health benefits of interacting with pets have been studied all over the world, with all kinds of pets.

In Italy, researchers looked at the effect of canary ownership on nursing home residents.

In this study, 48 people were given a canary, 43 were given a plant, and 53 residents were given nothing. Over three months, the people with the canaries displayed fewer depressive symptoms and a more positive perception of their quality of life.

A study from the United States indicates that people with Alzheimer's may experience less agitation if they feel attached to an animal. Study participants lived in their own homes: some owned pets, some did not. Their carers reported less verbal aggression and anxiety in the people who were exposed to companion animals. Significantly fewer mood disorders were reported in patients who were attached to their pets.

All kinds of people seem to benefit from having an animal around – not just seniors. Young families with kids walk more if they own a dog. And people going through bereavement and other loss seem to do better if supported by a pet.

However for every study that confirms the health benefits of having a pet, there is another study reporting no benefits.

Bruce Headey in the *Medical Journal of Australia* said continuing medical research is required as "the state of debate is that pets probably do confer health benefits, but we don't know precisely how".

For now, Australia's pet owners may not understand the "how" but they are happy knowing their pampered pet can certainly do them no harm.

