

Rambling On With Kathleen

Pet Therapy

Over the past year, many of you have been asking me about pet therapies. Having been raised on a farm, I certainly am aware of all of the benefits of having animals in our world such as the physical (keeping in shape) benefits of horseback riding or cleaning a barn, and of course eating that wonderful meat which is part of our American diets. But how do animals or pets also help us with our mental and emotional well being, and do they actually prevent or decrease symptoms of medical illnesses?

First of all, when we think of pets, we usually think of dogs. However, after researching this topic I am aware that the type of pet doesn't matter, nor does it affect the benefit or outcome of *pet therapy*. Some people experience benefits from owning a variety of pets including pigs, birds, horses or fish.

Pets are used for a number of reasons. For example the seeing eye dog for the blind person, a therapy dog for a person in a wheel chair that needs assistance, or for a child with autism or person that may wander. Families or businesses may own a guard dog for protection.

However, in addition to these noted and obvious uses of pets and pet therapies, research indicates many other benefits such as stress reduction, mood enhancing, and symptom management. For example, watching fish in an aquarium or stroking a cat or dog, or brushing a horse may lower blood pressure and or decrease muscle tension, thus decreasing stress and the effects of stress on our bodies.

Nursing homes are frequented by our pet therapists and furry friends and reports indicate that mood is improved as well as social interactions increased for the residents. So, if pets are able to decrease our stress and improve our mood, it may also affect symptoms of illnesses like diabetes where stress management is so important because increases in stress could cause increases in blood sugar levels.

Pets also help us physically in other ways. They force us to exercise. Dogs need to go for walks. Cats need us to clean their litter boxes, which requires bending over, walking and carrying items. Horses need grooming and barns need cleaning.

Some researchers are actually conducting studies to prove these points. According to the internet site *holistic online*, a study was done at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. People in the study had their blood pressure taken prior to being introduced to the dog. The blood pressure was measured again, and it dropped when they were petting the animal. Other studies claim that people that owned dogs after a heart attack had a higher survival rate compared to those that did not. Yet another study done in Australia, according to the same source, claims pet owners were less likely to get heart disease even though they ate more meat and fast food than others without pets. They got more exercise and had lower blood pressure and cholesterol.

Research continues and some indicates that pet owners have fewer health problems overall. Aggression is also being addressed and some individuals are claiming that pets are responsible for decreasing aggression and increasing calmness in some people.

Even prisons are getting in on the pet therapy and some programs allow inmates to train dogs and are claiming this helps the inmates to get along with each other and to have a purpose as well.

Dogs and animals don't notice or care about our flaws and our past history. They don't *see* our disabilities, illnesses, age or our crimes. They treat and love all of us the same, in a nonjudgmental manner. Therein may lie the key to the success of pet therapy and why it is so successful for such a wide range of people. Perhaps we can learn from the animals in order to have a more healthy society!

Benefits of pets or pet therapy:

- Companionship
- Feeling needed
- Increases Attention
- Reduces stress
- Lowers Blood Pressure (Except my dog that always runs away from me!)
- Unconditional love
- Increased physical activity
- Decreased loneliness
- Decreased aggression
- Increased physical activity
- Improved mood
- Symptom management (combined with other therapies and treatment)

We also have a number of pet therapists in our area including Young's Funny Farm in Berwick that seems to be very creative in use of their wonderful pets to help others. Check out their site at www.youngsfunnyfarm.org . Many others can be located on the internet including but not limited to: Ambridge Lab Retrievers and Pursel's Pawsitively Purrfect!

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