

How Pets Help Manage Depression

Avigayil Brown has been an animal lover her whole life. "I grew up having a lot of pets: dogs, cats, bunnies, fish, birds, and a horse," says Brown, who's 24 and lives in Brooklyn, NY.

She has dealt with depression since she was 12, but it wasn't until she faced a very tough round of symptoms that she began to understand how pets helped her feel well.

When Brown moved into her own apartment, she was depressed and had trouble sleeping. After she adopted two rescue kittens, she started sleeping better -- and feeling better, too.

"When I was lying in my bed, my cats would come and snuggle with me. If I got out of bed just to go to the bathroom, my cats followed me. It was very calming," she says.

Brown isn't alone. In a recent survey by the Human-Animal Bond Research Institute, 74% of pet owners said having a pet improved their mental health.

Studies back this up and show that activities with animals help with symptoms of depression.

What Pets Can Offer if You're Depressed

Comfort, companionship, and love. If depression makes you feel lonely, pets can break the cycle.

"A pet can remind you that you're not alone," says Desiree Wiercyski, a life coach in Fort Wayne, IN. "Pets offer unconditional love, which can be extraordinarily soothing when feeling isolated."

Wiercyski, who also lives with depression, says her dog helps her shake off feelings of worthlessness. "My pup has been right beside me offering comfort and love, reminding me that things aren't so bad."

Brown believes there's something special about the love and attention her pets give her. "Animals are very connected in ways that people aren't," she says.

Clinical psychologist Perpetua Neo, PhD, agrees. "Animals pick up on when their owners are distressed," she says. When they sense you're not feeling well, they offer comfort.

A regular schedule. Knowing you have to feed, walk, or care for your pet may give you a sense of purpose and routine.

"Even when I don't feel like getting out of bed or leaving the house, I know they're depending on me," says 29-year-old Courtney Sparkman, who lives in Tulsa, OK, and has two miniature poodles. "It helps me make it through the day."

Living With Major Depression: Key Symptoms to Know

A sense of calm. Pets have a relaxing effect. Petting or stroking an animal can improve your mood. "Touch helps increase oxytocin levels and reduces cortisol, the infamous stress-related hormone," Wiercyski says. Even the sound of a cat purring can be soothing.

Studies with therapy dogs suggest even brief interactions ease anxiety and fear, says Sandra Barker, a professor of psychiatry and director of the Center for Human-Animal Interaction at Virginia Commonwealth University. In a recent survey, people with severe depression felt more relaxed, less lonely, and had less pain after short visits with a therapy dog.

Physical activity. Pet owners tend to get more exercise than people without pets. If you have a dog, for example, you're more likely to go out for walks. Exercise is good for managing depression.

Wiercyski says depression often keeps her indoors. But knowing her dog needs to go out gets her out the door. "Even just those couple minutes outside raises my mood and makes me feel like I'm capable of something productive," she says.

Social time. Depression might make you want to avoid other people, but pets can open up your world.

Studies suggest pets help you get to know people, spark friendships, and build your support network.

"Dogs and babies are the things that connect strangers together. When you walk your dog, you might feel inclined to speak to complete strangers," Neo says. That's a good thing. "Social connection is an antidote to depression."

What to Do With Your Pet

Try these tips to get the most benefits to your mental health from owning a pet.

Pick the right pet. Before you choose one, decide how much time, energy, and money you have for it.

Dogs are good companions, Neo says, but they're relatively high-maintenance. If you have limited time or physical problems, an older or more independent animal may be a better fit.

Cats are typically lower-maintenance. A small animal like a hamster takes up little space and can still be cheerful.

Interact often. Play with your animal. Pet and massage them. The more you do, the better you may feel. "The act of giving can be very mindful and very therapeutic," Neo says.

Boost Your Mood With These Daily Habits for Depression

Get up and go. Be active with your pet. Take your dog for walks. Bring your pet along to meet up with others. "The simple act of doing more can alleviate depressive symptoms," Neo says.

If you don't have a pet, get involved with other people's animals. Offer to dog-sit for a friend. Play with a neighbor's cat. This helps keep up your contact with other people too, which is an added benefit.

A pet won't make your symptoms vanish, but it may give you a healthy boost