

Beat Stress... with Your Pet!

Feeling totally tense? Here's how your dog or cat can help you unwind.

By LINDSEY MURRAY

▶ NOT ONLY DO our furry friends offer companionship, they can also help us relax when we get overwhelmed. In fact, in a recent survey conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health, 87 percent of men and women said that spending time with their pet helped them feel less wiggled-out. Next time you're distraught, seek out a four-legged pal and reap these benefits.

1. They lower your stress hormones

▶ When you're petting Fido, he's not the only one getting calmed down by the head-to-tail massage. Hanging out with a dog after experiencing something stressful reduces your levels of the stress hormone

cortisol and possibly buffers the impact of the event, says Sandra Barker, PhD, director of the Center for Human-Animal Interaction at Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine. A 2012 review found that being with your dog can also lead to an increase in oxytocin, a hormone with anti-stress effects.

2. They can bring down your blood pressure

▶ "Stress does a number on our bodies and is associated with an accelerated heart rate and blood pressure state," says Lynne T. Braun, PhD, professor of nursing at Rush University in Chicago. "By promoting relaxation, exposing someone

to a pet can certainly help with this." In fact, one Australian study showed that pet owners had significantly lower blood pressure than nonowners.

3. They let you step outside your own problems

▶ If you feel your worries piling up, a pet can help you put it all into perspective. "Our pets give us an opportunity to reach outside ourselves," explains Debra F. Horwitz, DVM, a board-certified veterinary behaviorist. Her tip: Whenever you're extra stressed, take your dog for a quick 10-minute walk. Seeing your pup appreciate the little things as you stroll will help you do so, too.

→ Boost anti-stress hormones just by hanging with your pooch.



PET Rx

For some people, animals really do provide the best therapy.

▶ Does being with your dog make your out-of-control anxiety a little more manageable? With a note from a doc, you may be able to get him certified as an emotional support animal, which will allow him to accompany you out and about. But don't think this is an easy way to get around your landlord's strict no-pets rule. You need to have a mental or psychiatric disability that's treatable through animal companionship. "It's not as simple as saying, 'I have a pet and I want it to be a therapy dog,'" says Debra F. Horwitz, DVM. "It's important to see a physician to determine whether this is the best option."

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