



Photo posed by models

Can a dog mend a broken heart?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recently reported on a new global public health emergency – loneliness. Can dogs provide the cure?

However, as many dog owners may agree, the main reason for owning a dog is the sheer joy."

As part of a study of blood pressure response to mental stress, 48 hypertensive patients with high-stress occupations agreed to acquire a pet if chosen to do. Physiological responses to mental stress were assessed before pet adoption and six months later, with pets present for those who had adopted them.

Compared with non-pet owners, those who adopted a pet had similar physiological responses to mental stress at baseline but significantly diminished increases in systolic and diastolic blood pressure, heart rate and plasma renin activity when exposed to mental stress at six months.

People with dogs have lower blood pressure in stressful situations than those without. One study even found that when people with borderline hypertension adopted dogs from a shelter, their blood pressure declined significantly within five months. Playing with a dog can elevate levels of serotonin and dopamine, which calm and relax, and dog owners have lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels (indicators of heart disease) than those without dogs.

Pet ownership, particularly dog ownership, is probably associated with decreased cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk and some causal role in reducing CVD risk.

According to a survey by the Blue Cross charity, 58 per cent of respondents who suffer with a mental health problem stated that love and loyalty was the most beneficial aspect for their mental health of owning a dog – the most popular reason cited. Fifty per cent said company was the most important aspect, while 55 per cent agreed that 'they are my best friend'. Just by being around, dogs can alleviate stress, anxiety, depression and loneliness.

Should society be encouraging policies that support pet-friendly environments and helping to remove unnecessary barriers to pet ownership? ☐

What a difference a dog makes...

Bodie Best is 18 years old and lives with autism and other complex mental health issues. He is supported by two assistance dogs, Curly and Rex:

"I do walks and swimming and training with them," says Bodie. "They keep me safe and are trained to mitigate my disabilities. They have saved my life. Curly and Rex both do little excited dances when they see me, and Rex makes me smile when he's swimming."

Mark, from High Wycombe, tells us about his family's three-year-old Cockapoo, Rosco:

"He is always there. He gives us as much love and attention as we give him. He snuggles when we feel sad and knows when we are getting stressed and sits with us all day if needed. Just stroking his back, head and belly gives us some much-needed mental release, as we feel instantly happier in his presence. He is always happy to see us as we are him. Walking him gives us purpose and meaning for exercise. He is a good dog – a great dog – and we love him."

Linda Hurdwell from Ascot:

"Bessie brought me back to life 14 years ago when I lost both my husband and my mum. Bessie qualified as a therapy dog and we visited residential homes and two schools. She was loved at these places."

Sonya from Uxbridge:

"I have one dog, Phoenix, a wheaten Scottish Terrier. Her irrepressible love of life and non-judgemental love has the power to lift the most melancholy mood. What would I do without, my friend, fellow traveller, my funny little flatmate in a fur suit?"