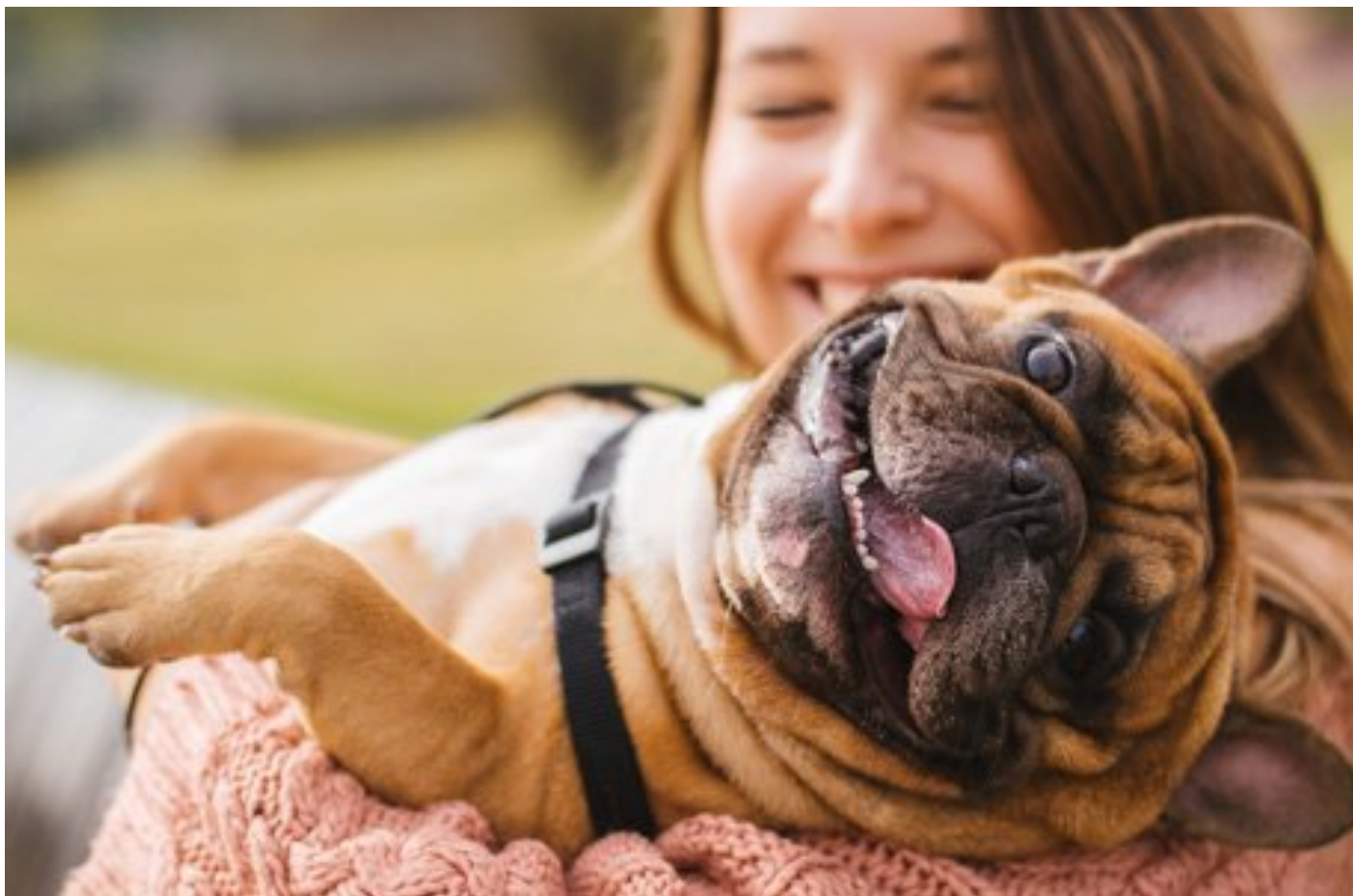




Enrichment 4 U

The Mood-Boosting Power of Pets

Pets come with some powerful mental health benefits. Here's how caring for a dog or cat can help you cope with depression, anxiety, and stress.



The health benefits of pets

Most pet owners are clear about the immediate joys that come with sharing their lives with companion animals. However, many of us remain unaware of the physical and mental health benefits that can also accompany the pleasure of snuggling up to a furry friend. It's only recently that studies have begun to scientifically explore the benefits of the human-animal bond.

Pets have evolved to become acutely attuned to humans and our behavior and emotions. Dogs, for example, are able to understand many of the words we use, but they're even better at interpreting our tone of voice, body language, and gestures. And like any good human friend, a loyal dog will look into your eyes to gauge your emotional state and try to understand what you're thinking and feeling (and to work out when the next walk or treat might be coming, of course).

Pets, especially dogs and cats, can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, ease loneliness, encourage exercise and playfulness, and even improve your cardiovascular health. Caring for an animal can help children grow up more secure and active. Pets also provide valuable companionship for older adults. Perhaps most importantly, though, a pet can add real joy and unconditional love to your life.

Studies have found that:

- Pet owners are less likely to suffer from depression than those without pets.
- People with pets have lower blood pressure in stressful situations than those without pets. 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 or cat can elevate levels of serotonin and dopamine, which calm and relax.
- Pet owners have lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels (indicators of heart disease) than those without pets.
 - Heart attack patients with pets survive longer than those without.
- Pet owners over age 65 make 30 percent fewer visits to their doctors than those without pets.
- While people with pets often experience the greatest health benefits, a pet doesn't necessarily have to be a dog or a cat. Even watching fish in an aquarium can help reduce muscle tension and lower pulse rate.

One of the reasons for these therapeutic effects is that pets fulfill the basic human need for touch. Even hardened criminals in prison show long-term changes in their behavior after interacting with pets, many of them experiencing mutual affection for the first time. Stroking, hugging, or otherwise touching a loving animal can rapidly

calm and soothe you when you're stressed or anxious. The companionship of a pet can also ease loneliness, and most dogs are a great stimulus for healthy exercise, which can substantially boost your mood and ease depression.

How pets can help you make healthy lifestyle changes

Adopting healthy lifestyle changes plays an important role in easing symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, bipolar disorder, and PTSD. Caring for a pet can help you make healthy lifestyle changes by:

Increasing exercise. Taking a dog for a walk, hike or run are fun and rewarding ways to fit healthy daily exercise into your schedule. Studies have shown that dog owners are far more likely to meet their daily exercise requirements—and exercising every day is great for the animal as well. It will deepen the connection between you, eradicate most behavior problems in dogs, and keep your pet fit and healthy.

Providing companionship. Companionship can help prevent illness and even add years to your life, while isolation and loneliness can trigger symptoms of depression. Caring for a live animal can help make you feel needed and wanted, and take the focus away from your problems, especially if you live alone. Most dog and cat owners talk to their pets, some even use them to work through their troubles. And nothing beats loneliness like coming home to a wagging tail or purring cat.

Helping you meet new people. Pets can be a great social lubricant for their owners, helping you start and maintain new friendships. Dog owners frequently stop and talk to each other on walks, hikes, or in a dog park. Dog owners also meet new people in pet stores, clubs, and training classes.

Reducing anxiety. The companionship of an animal can offer comfort, help ease anxiety, and build self-confidence for people anxious about going out into the world. Because pets live in the moment—they don't worry about what happened yesterday or what might happen tomorrow—they can help you become more mindful and appreciate the joy of the present.

Adding structure and routine to your day. Many pets, especially dogs, require a regular feeding and exercise schedule. Having a consistent routine keeps an animal balanced and calm—and it can work for you, too. No matter your mood—depressed, anxious, or stressed—one plaintive look from your pet and you'll have to get out of bed to feed, exercise, and care for them.

Providing sensory stress relief. Touch and movement are two healthy ways to quickly manage stress. Stroking a dog, cat, or other animal can lower blood pressure and help you quickly feel calmer and less stressed.

