On social media, we may come across videos and pictures of pets that are so cute that they can relieve our stresses and bring smiles to our faces. But, do you know that pets can benefit humans much more than just relieve our stress?

A review of studies on the pet-human health connection shows that pet ownership and interaction with pets are linked to a variety of favorable physical outcomes [1]. For example, an analysis of 618 samples in the United States (US) discovers that adolescents owning a dog(s) are more likely to obtain higher physical activity levels [2]. Another study in Australia suggests that adolescents engaging in dog walking and pet play are more likely to meet national physical activity recommendations than those who do not [3]. The American Heart Association even concludes that pet ownership, particularly dog ownership, is associated with decreased cardiovascular disease risk [4].

Besides physical outcomes, there is evidence supporting the positive effects of pet ownership on mental health, especially among disadvantaged populations. Rhoades, Winetrobe, & Rice [5] find that homeless people owning pets in Los Angeles have fewer symptoms of depression and loneliness than non-pet-owning peers. Meanwhile, US military veterans with HIV/AIDS think dogs help improve their well-being through physical activity, companionship, responsibility, and stress reduction [6]. For normal populations, owning pets can create opportunities for the owners to form new social connections, from which they can receive social support (e.g., emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental support) [7]. Moreover, people with greater pet attachment during childhood also report higher empathy toward animals [8].
However, owning a pet does not always bring good outcomes. A recent study of 263 Australians discovers that owning a pet can be a burden during the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in poorer quality of life. This result may be attributable to the concern of meeting the pets’ social and behavioral needs during lockdown conditions. The study also indicates no association between pet ownership and loneliness [9]. In another scenario, pet ownership negatively affects homeless people’s opportunities to utilize housing and job-finding services [5].

Animal-human interactions (specifically pet ownership) have positive and negative sides depending on the context and people’s mindsets [10,11]. Owning a pet is like exposing oneself to information related to animals [12]. If people perceive the benefits of such information (e.g., dog walking and pet play), they are more likely to acknowledge and receive the benefits brought by pets. Otherwise, they will likely feel uncomfortable and perceive being with a pet as costly (e.g., dirtiness, noise). Notably, studies about the effects of pet ownership are mostly conducted in Western countries, where people generally have good impressions of pets. In some Asian cultures, pets are often stigmatized as unsanitary,
so the positive effects of pets found in Western countries might not apply to other cultures.

References


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