

Pet Owners Are Less Stressed When Cat, Dog Present

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By Charnicia E. Huggins

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Pets may not only provide good company for their owners, they may also help lower stress, according to new study findings.

"Pets can actually provide cardiovascular benefits to their owners," lead study author Dr. Karen Allen of the State University of New York at Buffalo told Reuters Health.

This finding is based on a study involving 240 married couples, half of whom owned a cat or dog. The researchers investigated the effect of the participants' spouses, their pets, and close friends--for non-pet owners--on their responses to stress. Stressful situations included being evaluated while performing mental arithmetic or immersing a hand in ice water for 2 minutes. All of the participants had normal blood pressures.

When at rest, pet owners had much lower heart rates and blood pressure levels than did their non-pet-owning peers, Allen and her colleagues report in the September/October issue of the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*.

Heart rates and blood pressure levels were at their highest when pet owners and non-pet-owners, respectively, performed mental arithmetic in their spouse's presence, study findings indicate. When the pet owner performed the same task in the presence of both his or her spouse and their dog or cat, however, his or her heart rate and blood pressure would climb much less sharply.

In fact, pet owners were most calm when their pets were present, whereas those who did not own a pet were most calm when they worked alone, the report indicates.

Pet owners also exhibited the smallest change in heart rate and blood pressure when they immersed their hand in ice water.

These "findings make us think about social support in a new way, and suggests that such support can indeed cross species," Allen said.

The reason why pets had such a positive effect on their owners' stress reactions may be because owners tend to view pets as totally accepting and supportive, Allen suggested.

"In contrast, no matter how much another person appears to be cheering us on in a supportive way, we do not always perceive that person--especially a spouse--as totally non-judgmental and accepting," Allen explained.

Still, it is not known whether the pets caused the low stress response or if the response was due to some other shared characteristic among pet owners, Allen added.

In any case, "pets are not for everyone," the researcher stressed. "However, we do encourage people who like animals and have time for them to consider the potential advantage of the healthy pleasure of their company," she said.

The Waltham Center for Pet Nutrition in England and the US Food and Drug Administration ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) provided funding for the study.

SOURCE: Psychosomatic Medicine 2002;64.

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