



ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

ALLEVIATING ANXIETY, STRESS AND DEPRESSION WITH THE PET EFFECT

Looking for relief from anxiety, depression or stress? If you live in one of the 80 million U.S. households with a pet, you may be able to find help right at home in the form of a wet nose or a wagging tail. You can call it the pet effect.

Any pet owner will tell you that living with a pet comes with many benefits, including constant companionship, love and affection. It's also no surprise that 98% of pet owners consider their pet to be a member of the family. Not only are people happier in the presence of animals, they're also healthier. In a survey of pet owners, 74% of pet owners reported mental health improvements from pet ownership, and 75% of pet owners reported a friend's or family member's mental health has improved from pet ownership.

The field of human-animal bond research is dedicated to studying the health benefits of pets and human-animal interaction. Positive human-animal interaction is related to the changes in physiological variables both in humans and animals, including a reduction of subjective psychological stress (fear, anxiety) and an increase of oxytocin levels in the brain. Science demonstrates that these biological responses have measurable clinical effects.

Specifically, pets and therapy animals can help alleviate stress, anxiety, depression, and feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Interactions with animals can help people manage their long-term mental health conditions. A 2016 study explored the role of pets in the social networks of people managing a long-term mental health problem and found that pets provide a sense of security and routine that provided emotional and social support. Studies have also shown that pets are facilitators of getting to know people, friendship formation and social support networks.

The Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) is working hard to increase our knowledge of the health benefits of pets. Over the past four years, HABRI has funded approximately \$2 million in research projects all aimed at exploring the health benefits of human-animal interaction in three broad categories; child health and development, healthy aging, and mental health and wellness. HABRI Central, HABRI's online database, houses, classifies and archives research and information on the science of the human-animal bond, and is home to more than 28,000 resources.

As the field of research grows, HABRI continues to raise awareness of the health benefits of pet ownership and animal-assisted intervention. HABRI is proud to be partnering with ADAA and other important organizations to share information and resources on this topic. Major institutions in human medicine including Johns Hopkins Medicine, Harvard Medical School, UCLA Health and the Mayo Clinic are increasingly recognizing the benefits of pets to human health. This acknowledgement shows that efforts to build and share scientific research on the human-animal bond are also making a difference for our health.

While getting a pet, seeking pet therapy, or finding ways to spend more time with your companion animal are great ways to support mental health, this information is not a substitute for professional medical advice or treatment for specific medical conditions. HABRI wants people to be healthy by including pets in their lives, safely and responsibly.

I encourage all of you to learn more about HABRI and the pet effect. Together, we can all experience the healing power of the human-animal bond.

Steven Feldman
Executive Director of the Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI)

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