

# Pets make us happy.

They provide unconditional love and are wonderful companions.



Pets are good for people in many ways. It is not uncommon to pick up a magazine or newspaper and read yet another article describing the benefits that family pets have on long-term care residents, hospital patients and sick children.

Wouldn't it be great if every care setting could have a few pets, such as dogs, cats, canaries, budgies, fish, reptiles, turtles, chickens or rabbits. However, if this is not possible then a visiting dog or cat for 'Pet Therapy' can also cheer and comfort residents with remarkable success. Dogs greet everyone with the same enthusiasm regardless of who they are or whether they communicate effectively, and most people enjoy touching the soft fur of a cat.

## **The benefits of pet interaction and companionship may include:**

- + **Mental stimulation** through the interaction, entertainment and enjoyment provided by pets
- + **Shifting of focus** – often residents in long-term facilities concentrate too much on themselves because of chronic pain, depression and poor self-esteem: animals can provide a new focus of conversation
- + **Acceptance** – animals accept people unconditionally and this can be really heart-warming and soothing for residents
- + **Increased self-esteem and alertness through a sense of responsibility** – residents often suffer from their perceived loss of freedom and responsibility; animals can add purpose and inspiration to their lives
- + **Entertainment** – pets inspire humour and good times
- + **Rapport** – pets are emotionally safe and non-threatening: they don't discriminate or impose demands. They live for the moment and interacting with them often helps residents concentrate on the present and stop dwelling on the past or worrying about the future
- + **Development of empathy** – animals are easier to 'read' than humans and interaction with pets can help develop an individual's sense of empathy as they respond to the animal's needs
- + **Reminiscing** – caring for pets encourages adherence to a daily schedule and will often evoke wonderful memories of the past
- + **Improvement in physical activity** – caring for a pet dog may encourage physical activity such as playing with a ball and going for a walk or feeding the chickens.
- + **Socialisation.** – most people love animals and will enjoy sharing time together in the company of animals, talking and laughing together
- + **Physiological benefits** – having a pet may enhance your immune system as well as give you spiritual fulfilment. An animal's love is unconditional. The ideal pet is the one that is calm and gentle. It may be just a weekly or fortnightly visit to your facility. Remember that there may some people who are afraid of dogs or cats – for these people a pet bird or an aquarium may be better. If you know someone who has a calm and friendly dog ask them to pay your facility a visit. It may not work for everybody but it is worth a try



## Does your pet need to be a therapy pet to help you feel better?

No! Anyone with a pet knows that just being with them can make us happier. But a growing body of research shows that they can make us healthier, too.

Using pets to help us heal is nothing new. It dates back to Florence Nightingale, who recognized that animals provided social support for mentally ill patients.

Most people remember her as the founder of modern nursing. However, many do not know that her first patient was actually a dog, and she incorporated her love of animals into her practice. She called it "animal companion therapy." Today, hundreds of years later, dogs are arguably still a man's best friend.

### **Benefits of Pet Therapy:** *First 5 Minutes*

The repetitive motion of petting an animal can bring us a sense of calm.

In the first minutes of petting an animal, our bodies release oxytocin, the "feel good hormone." Over time, oxytocin has a powerful effect on our ability to heal and grow new cells. Studies show that just an extra boost of oxytocin can prepare us for quicker mental and physical healing.



### **Benefits of Pet Therapy:** *After 10 Minutes*

Let's face it: animals are hilarious. After 10 minutes, chances are they have made you smile or laugh at least a few times. Laughing and smiling releases hormones in our bodies that let us know there is no emergency, and we should relax.

Whether it's putting one leg in front of another on a run or stroking a cat's back for several minutes, repetitive motion is soothing. If you've ever instinctively rocked a baby back to sleep, you know that repetitive motion can calm.

After just 10 minutes of petting an animal, you start to feel the calming effects repetitive motion offers.

### **Benefits of Pet Therapy:** *After 15 Minutes*

After 15 minutes with an animal, people experience lower blood pressure and less depression.

Additionally, pets can be powerful motivators to get us outside and exercising. One study even showed that elderly people are more likely to take daily walks if their walking companion is a dog, rather than a human. So if you are spending 15 minutes with an animal, chances are you're also reaping the benefits of moving more and standing instead of sitting.

