A little puppy love can enrich life, boost health

Research shows seniors benefit from owning a pet

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Nancy Westphal, 65, of Rockford, Ill., loves coming home to her 55-pound dog, Charlie, who greets her enthusiastically.

"It's unconditional love she gives me," says Westphal, who is single. "She is somebody to talk to. You can have a connection with a pet."

Charlie takes naps with her and sits next to her on the sofa. "There's a calming aspect to having a dog," she says.

Plus, Westphal says she gets out for fresh air more often because Charlie needs to go out. "I have some disabilities, so I ride the scooter, and she runs beside me. It's amazing how many people will talk to you when you have a dog. It's a conversation starter."

About 68% of U.S. households have a pet, according to a recent survey from the American Pet Products Association.

Research shows there are physical and emotional benefits to owning a pet, especially for older people, says Alan Beck, 72, director of the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University's College of Veterinary Medicine and co-author of *Between Pets and People: The Importance of Animal Companionship.* He owns two rescue dogs.
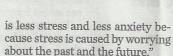
For one thing, pets provide companionship so people feel less lonely. "People feel a lot of stress when they are alone," Beck says. "Animals can be the focus of attention and keep you in the present. You have to feed them, walk them, find their toys under the bed. Even focusing on fish in a fish tank keeps your mind on the present. Any time you can keep your mind on the present, there

ALWAYS GOOD FOR A LAUGH

Pets can be downright funny. Laughing at their antics can bring joy when we need cheering up. "We find humor in animal behavior," says Alan Beck, director of Purdue's Center for the Human-Animal Bond. "We can find joy and laughter in the way the cat sleeps, the way it tries to get our attention or the way it bats around a toy. We can find a certain amount of humor in them without hurting anyone's feelings. They are our court jesters."

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is less stress and less anxiety because stress is caused by worrying about the past and the future."

Pets provide companionship, affection, entertainment and purpose, says psychologist Teri Wright of Santa Ana, Calif., who has three small dogs and two cats at home. She also has a bird and a hamster in her office to serve as conversation ice breakers with her patients. Pets accept you as you are, she says. "They don't care how much money you have, how much you have achieved or how attractive you are, but they probably do care about how much time you have because they want to spend time with you."

Beck also says pets:

▶ **Are something to touch.** "Most people get great comfort from touch," he says. If you are alone, it feels comforting to have the dog or cat on your lap or next to you, and you feel less lonely.

▶ **Require nurturing.** Some retirees may not have the opportunity to give or receive a lot of nurturing, he says. Just having a small pet or even feeding the fish

in the fish tank is a reminder of caregiving, which brings a certain amount of psychological and physical relaxation.

▶ **Encourage more exercise.** Many dogs need to be walked, so they get you out to exercise, which may help with weight management, Beck says.

▶ **May lower blood pressure.** Research shows that stroking an animal lowers blood pressure, part of the relaxation response, he says. "We're not proposing this as a management of hypertension, but the research shows there is a true physiological response to animals."

▶ **Help orient your day.** Gerontologists have shown that this is one role animals play with someone who lives alone. "You might forget to feed yourself, but you are not going to forget to feed the dog or cat who is nudging you when it's meal time."

▶ **Focus your attention.** "Our research showed that having fish tanks in nursing homes with Alzheimer's patients helped hold the patients' interest while they were eating, and as a result,

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they ate better and gained weight," Beck says. "This is important because one of the biggest problems for these patients is weight loss."

▶ **Are social facilitators.** Studies show you're more likely to engage in conversation with others if you are out walking the dog. One of the roles of dog parks is that you have social interaction while the dog plays. When animals are brought to nursing homes, it's so the volunteers interact with the patient by talking about the animal. It gives people something to talk about.

There are also downsides to owning a pet. One is the pain of losing an animal companion, Beck says. "The pets we keep have much shorter lifespans than we do, so you have to deal with that. It's one of the consequences of pet ownership."

Author Alan Beck with Lili, one of his dogs.

Many people may not be able to have a pet where they live, including in some retirement communities and nursing homes, he says. Some retirees want to travel and see kids and grandchildren, and don't want the responsibility of a pet. Plus, there's the cost of ownership, which varies, he says.

Wright says whether you want to own a pet during your retirement is a very personal decision and depends on what you're planning to do and where you live. Some people are concerned about not being able to take care of their pets in the future or they worry about their pets outliving them so they make plans for that possibility, she says.

Pet care takes work: walking, feeding and cleaning up after them, and dealing with "naughty" behavior such as chewing, she says. Still, for many, they're an essential part of the family.

Beck says if you ask people what role animals play in their lives, the most common answer is they are a member of the family. He says when he shows people photos of his grandchildren and their dogs, he says those are "my grandkids and my granddogs."