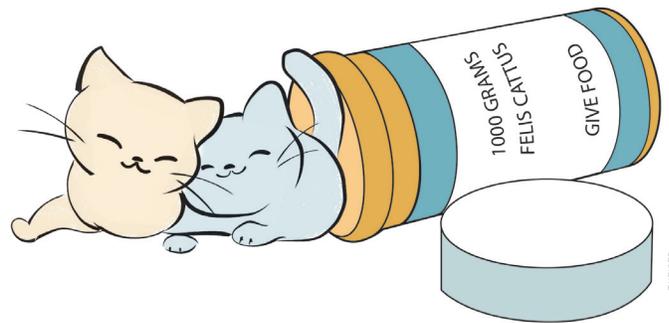


“Take Two Kittens and Call Me In the Morning”

Can Cats Help Humans Be Healthier?

Lucy Drury and Iris Zinck



True Story...

Setting: Stereotypical post-World War II Baby Boomers suburban household. Cast: Mom, Dad, three girls and a boy, born between 1949 and 1961. However, no pets, despite Dad being a bona fide dog and cat lover. Mom had often declared that it was her or a pet. While the kids at times considered the potential advantages of such a trade, Dad never challenged it. He was devoted to Mom, so the household stayed furry pet-free, though fish, birds and an occasional turtle were allowed. Dad and the kids lavished attention on neighbors' and friends' four-footed friends, but Mom stayed firm. The occasional stray dog found its way into the backyard and was allowed to stay there while the owner's number on the dog's tag was called. Mom didn't hate or abuse animals—she just didn't want them in her house.

She had her reasons—the family knew them and reluctantly respected them. She had been severely bitten on the leg by a dog while riding a bike as a kid, and when pregnant with her first child, she was chased down the street by a neighbor's retired police dog. He didn't get her, but it shook her up badly. She was now deathly afraid of dogs and just didn't like cats.

As the kids grew up and left the nest, each one quickly acquired what had been denied to them as children. Dogs, cats or both became treasured members of all four households. Mom tolerated the furry creatures, as long as the big Lab at the oldest daughter's house or the son's Golden Retriever stayed out of her lap. Dad was in heaven when he visited the kids' houses and showered his furry grandchildren with attention.

However, all was not idyllic. Dad had developed some severe anxiety issues, mostly brought on by a high-stress job, which became even worse after a close friend died unexpectedly in his late 40's. Dad self-medicated with a cocktail or two every night along with prescription tranquilizers. The stress took a toll on him physically, and at the age of 60, he began to develop symptoms of Parkinson's Disease. The disease progressed quickly, and at the age of 67, Dad passed away from complications.

When the children got together after that, comments were often made that Dad would have lived a lot longer if Mom would have let him have a dog, particularly after the kids had all left the house and things had gotten so bad at work. Caring for the dog and receiving unconditional love back would have helped release and relieve some of his stress. All the kids freely acknowledged how much emotional support their pets provided them when they needed it—not just dogs but cats as well. “I even offered them one of Brandy's puppies,” the oldest daughter remarked. “I would have had it trained as a support dog. But it was no-go.”

But Is It a True Story?

The historical aspect of the story is 100% true; it applies to the lead author's family. But would a pet really have helped this man cope with his stress and live a healthier life?

The public seems to think so. Ask any cat or dog breeder about demand right now during the pandemic. Most breeders will tell you demand has skyrocketed. Shelters have run low on adoptable pets. But are people bringing pets into their homes now because they always wanted them and currently have more time to spend with them, or are they filling a much deeper need? Are the pets providing the personal love and companionship that being quarantined has denied people who need it in order to thrive?

Researchers seem to think so, too. Many studies have been published from the late 90's to the present on the psychological and physiological benefits of companion animals, particularly cats and/or dogs. (Unfortunately, the studies came too late to help the kids get Dad a dog as he died in 1988).

Psychological Benefits

In 1993, Australian researchers, Straede and Gates, studied 92 cat owners and 70 non-pet subjects to determine whether there was a relationship between psychological health and pet ownership. They found that the cat owners had significantly better scores for psychological health than the control group, though they scored about the same in areas such as depression, anxiety, sleep disturbance, nurturance, social desirability or life events⁹. The researchers also found that pet owners had a more favorable attitude towards pets. (No surprise there.) The conclusion often drawn from this study is that while pets won't necessarily calm you down after a bad day at work, they certainly seem to help their owners cope better with the daily ups and downs of life.

Physiological Benefits

Numerous studies have been done on the moderating effects of pet ownership with regard to a variety of medical conditions. They include depression after an AIDS diagnosis⁷, survival after a heart attack⁴ or helping to lower blood pressure², particularly when stressful situations are causing it to rise. In one fascinating study, published in 2002¹, researchers looked at the beneficial effects of human company (spouses or friends) vs animal companionship. The test subjects were exposed to stressful situations such as performing mental math calculations, with the supportive companion in the same room. These researchers observed in controlled conditions what cat fanciers have known all along: not only are pet owners

happier and smarter than non-pet owners, but pets can have more of a positive impact on your well-being than your spouse or human friends! The researchers found that the pet owner group not only performed better on the tasks, they had lower baseline heart-rates and blood pressure readings than the non-pet owner group. It was clearly demonstrated that the pet owners experienced less stress, as measured by their heart rates and blood pressure readings. Heart rate and blood pressure readings also returned to their baseline values more quickly when pets were in the room, as opposed to the subjects' spouses or human friends.

Substitute For Social Network?

Perhaps the next stop for researchers will be to study what's behind the sudden rise in pet adoptions and the motivating factors behind it. Both rescue adoptions and breeder sales have benefited from the COVID-19 pandemic. What, one may ask, is driving this sudden spike? While too soon for any scientific analysis, given that at the time of writing we are still in the midst of a pandemic, one obvious reason would be that people who always wanted a pet but led lives too busy to adequately "break-in" a new cat or dog now find themselves working from home and much better able to do so. But is there something much deeper driving people to bring home new furry companions?

The results of a study performed over 20 years ago would suggest that there is indeed another driving force behind the increased sales and adoptions. People are turning to pets as a substitute for their lost social connections during the pandemic. Researchers, noting the increase in households who had cats at the end of the 20th century, wondered if this had more to do with attachment theory or social support theory. Attachment theory basically states that humans have a basic, intrinsic need to bond with others. It is theorized that this need developed as humans discovered there was security in numbers³. Social support theory, on the other hand, focuses on the importance of social relationships in contributing to a person's overall health and sense of well-being.⁸

Using a series of questionnaires, the researchers concluded that both attachment and social support are at work in human-feline relationships. For some people, their cat did serve as a substitute for people in their social network, but in most cases, the cats appeared to be an additional source of emotional support, particularly where the owner is strongly attached emotionally to their animal. The current rise in adoptions would seem to support this idea, as the majority of the human population has experienced a dramatic decrease in their social network. Yet, if there was ever a time that people needed emotional support, it is now. Perhaps the next study in this area will be to determine if cat owners had a lower infection rate of COVID-19 or experienced less severe cases!

What Lies Ahead?

Breeders and shelter staff currently worry that as vaccines become available and people are more able to reconnect with their friends and families, pets acquired during the pandemic could be at risk of being discarded. So, it's more important than ever to stress that the kitten you're discussing with a prospective buyer is intended to become part of his/her life—not just a coping device to combat

COVID-induced stress. Even with demand for kittens far outstripping the available supply, it's essential to screen our kitten clients carefully and investigate why, exactly, do they want a kitten right now? How do they expect their lives to change as conditions become more "normal" and what will be the potential impact on the kitten?

In the meantime, though, these studies certainly explain the strong bonds that develop between people in the cat fancy, and the reason why so many of us consider CFA part of our extended family. Whether or not we know about these studies, there's no disputing the fact that our cats make a positive contribution to our physical and mental health...and so do the other people who understand their value!

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