

Working Solutions

Pet Power: How Pets Help People

Many of us enjoy the companionship of pets. In fact, according to a 2002 survey by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 62 percent of American households include pets. These animals don't ask for much—just a short list of basics such as food, shelter, veterinary care, and, of course, our companionship. Pets offer far more in return, teaching us about love, improving our emotional and physical health, and providing us with unconditional affection and friendship.



Do Pets Make Good Teachers?

Companion animals are natural teachers. They help people of all ages learn about responsibility, loyalty, empathy, sharing, and unconditional love—qualities particularly essential to a child's healthy development. Through helping to care for a pet, children also learn to care for their fellow human beings. There is an established link between how people treat animals and how they treat each other. Kindness to animals is a lesson that benefits people, too.

Can Pets Be Therapists?

Given the right animal, people, and circumstances, pets can indeed serve as “therapists.” In animal-assisted therapy programs, a companion animal may visit with hospital or nursing home patients. For the program to be safe and effective, the animal must be carefully screened and the pet's caregiver must be trained to guide the animal-human interactions. When a specific therapy is desired, a credentialed professional should monitor the program. Even in less formal animal-assisted activities, where the animal is introduced to an individual or group with no specific therapeutic goal, patients and staff often experience improved morale and communication.

How Do Pets Serve as Helpers?

Specially trained assistance dogs provide people who have physical and mental disabilities with the profound gift of independence. Assistance dogs are not

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classified as pets under the law, and they are allowed in public places where pets are prohibited. These dogs serve as the hands, ears, or eyes of their human partners and assist them by performing everyday tasks that would otherwise be difficult or impossible. Dogs may also detect changes in behavior, body language, or odor that precede seizures in their human partners, alerting them so that they may seek a safe environment.

Can Pets Also Be Healers?

Pets are good for our emotional and physical health. Caring for a companion animal can provide a sense of purpose and fulfillment and lessen feelings of loneliness and isolation in all age groups. It's well known that relaxed, happy people do not become ill as often as those who suffer from stress and depression.

Animal companionship also helps lower a person's blood pressure and cholesterol levels. And studies show that having a dog increases survival rates in groups of patients who have suffered cardiac arrest. Dog walking, pet grooming, and even petting provide increased physical activity that strengthens the heart, improves blood circulation, and slows the loss of bone tissue. Put simply, pets aren't just good friends, they are good medicine.

Can Pets Benefit the Elderly?

Because many Americans are living longer lives these days, sometimes elderly people find themselves living alone because they have outlived loved ones, or because they live far from any family. There is a way, however, for the elderly to find new meaning in their lives, and to redefine what it means to be "young at heart"—by adopting a companion animal from a local shelter.

We already know that the many physical benefits pets confer onto people work for all ages, whether you're eight or eighty. If you're older, a pet can offer you a sense of well being, a sense of encouragement, and even a reason for living. Being responsible for another life can add new meaning to your own life, and having to care for

and provide a loving home to a companion animal can also help you remain active and healthy. You may want to consider adopting an older animal, however, rather than a puppy or kitten or a rambunctious "teenage" pet. Older pets are more likely to be calm, already housetrained, and less susceptible to unpredictable behavior. Older animals are often more easily physically managed by elderly persons than stronger, excitable, younger animals; yet older pets still confer the same medical and emotional benefits on their owners as younger animals do. Animal shelter staff can help potential adopters find the most suitable animal for their lifestyle, ensuring a great match between pet and person.

Choosing the Right Pet

If you are interested in cats, they make wonderful pets and most will easily adjust to a variety of lifestyles and living spaces. Every cat is a true individual, though, so it's important to choose a four-footed friend who's right for you. One of the biggest challenges in choosing a dog is that the wide variety of breeds and mixes may overwhelm you! Man's best friends come in all shapes, sizes, and, of course personalities. For other pets, it's important to do your research and understand the level of commitment the pet's care may require.

Here are a few tips for choosing the right pet:

- **Examine Yourself** – Identify the pet that matches best with your lifestyle and the type of housing you inhabit. A big dog in a small apartment might not be the best match.
- **Do Your Research** – Although all pets have their own personalities, similar characteristics can be observed across different breeds and varieties. Learn all you can before making your selection.
- **Adopt a Pet for Life** – Remember that you're making a commitment to love and care for your new pet for his or her lifetime—which could mean 10, 15, or even 20 years. Choose your new pet carefully and be a responsible pet owner.

Call AWP at 800-343-3822, go to www.hsus.org, or visit your local animal shelter for more information.

■ **Source:** Humane Society of the United States. www.hsus.org • Articles edited for this publication.

Increasing Your Influence

Employees with influence get their ideas heard and, more importantly, have ideas accepted. You don't have to be charismatic in order to be influential. You simply need to apply principles of influence:

- 1) **Strive** to be an authority by staying well-informed about your area of expertise.
- 2) **Plan** well-thought-out, logical arguments for your ideas that consider the needs and wants of others so you win their hearts and minds.
- 3) **Develop** a genuine interest in others' values, and grow a network of mutually productive relationships.
- 4) **Practice** looking, sounding, and acting confident so you are seen as an authority.
- 5) **Observe** influential people in your organization, noting their social interactions.
- 6) **Be open** to feedback, negotiate with others, and practice self-discipline in managing your emotions in response to disappointments. ■

Help for Long-Distance Caregivers

The National Institute on Aging has issued a new resource to help long-distance caregivers.

So Far Away: Twenty Questions for Long-Distance Caregivers is a booklet providing resources and ideas designed

to make long-distance caregiving more convenient and fulfilling. For example, question number three covers "What can I really do from far away?" and provides a list of examples

and ideas common to long-distance caregivers. *So Far Away* can be viewed online, or you may order a printed copy at www.nia.nih.gov. ■



Should You Make a Five-Year Plan?

Imagine a large business organization

making decisions daily with no idea what will be decided tomorrow. No plan. No direction. To avoid this certain route to business failure, an organization develops

a strategic plan covering three years or more. It's not easy, and there is no certainty of the end result, but the ship can't be steered without it.

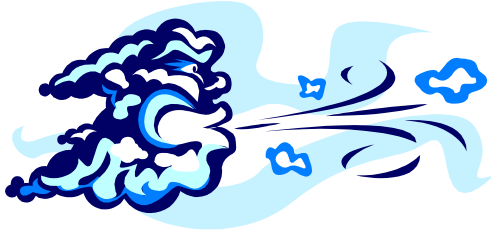
You are making decisions every day, but do you have a plan in mind so you end up where you want to go? A plan will help you feel less restless, more productive, and more in control of your life. The younger you start, the better.

Start by putting your imagination to work. Decide upon several long-term personal and professional goals. Divide your five-year plan into one-year blocks with achievable sub-goals for each year—your deliverables. Create incremental steps within each year. Put the plan where you can see it often, and keep acting and checking. Make adjustments, stay flexible, and be adaptable as you go—even big businesses do that. (Some companies plan for more than one national disaster per year in their strategic plans.)

The key is to stay proactive, not reactive, in your decision making. The goal is to avoid arriving someday at the imaginary crossroads of your life wondering, "Where do I go from here?" Don't fear that the plan for your life will interfere with your enjoyment of it. On the contrary, having a plan will allow you to keep your mind off the end result and enjoy the whole ride. ■



Don't Blow Off the Blues



If **chronic stress** causes you to hit the snooze button more often, has you feeling apathy for activities you used to enjoy, or has you calling in sick when you just feel down, don't take these feelings lightly if they persist. A research study last month from Harvard Medical School discovered that long-term exposure to the stress hormone cortisol contributes to the development of anxiety associated with depression, even if there has never been a history of depression in the past. If you suspect you are going through a low point or are experiencing higher than usual anxiety, talk to your EAP or health care provider. Early diagnosis and treatment of minor depression can prevent it from erupting into something unmanageable. ■

Making "No" Mean "No"

Attempts to stop offensive behavior can be undermined if you are more concerned about hurt feelings or what others might think of your being firm. It's crucial to avoid sending double messages. Apologizing, smiling, or not clearly saying "no" can undermine your goal of having offensive behavior stop. If something concerns or offends you enough to make an offending person stop (e.g., sexual harassment), try the head

shake and both hands up to indicate "stop" and say, "Stop. Please." Tell the person you do not feel comfortable with a specific behavior, certain words, or particular actions. Policies and rules that prohibit offensive or hostile behavior work, but they depend on clear and assertive communication, and employee willingness to act on them. ■

Guarding Your Teen Online

The Internet is a great learning tool for teenagers. However, it can also expose them to predators eager to exploit their vulnerability. As a parent, it is important to monitor your teen's online activities. While some teens may feel this is an invasion of their privacy, parents need to be vigilant, just as they do when they allow their teens to stay out late at night with friends. You should know whom your teen talks to and when. Monitor all of your teen's online activity, such as use of chat rooms, blogs, bulletin boards, instant messaging, and e-mail. Predators often meet unsuspecting teens in chat rooms prior to communicating with them via other means. If you find that your teen is receiving inappropriate communications from a potential predator, contact your local law enforcement agency for assistance. ■



Your EAP is designed to help you deal with life stresses and a variety of personal challenges. For confidential services offered at no cost to all employees and their families, please call:



Toll Free (800) 343-3822
TDD (800) 448-1823
Teen Line (800) 334-8336 (TEEN)
E-mail: eap@alliancewp.com
Web: www.alliancewp.com

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