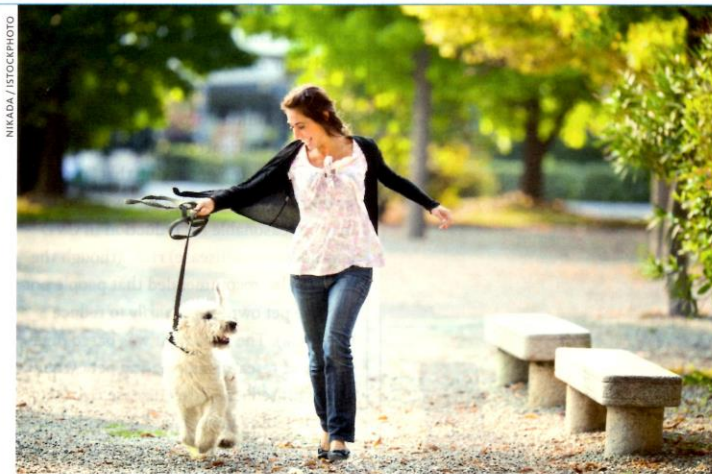


HEALTH & FITNESS



Health's Best Friends

By Andrea Thomas

Before embarking on her morning commute, San Diego pet owner Rachel Lucas prepares with a smoothie and a few moments with Elvira, her affectionately described “fat black cat.” ■ “I usually have five or 10 minutes to sit on the couch before I go to work. She always comes over, climbs into my lap, and sits and purrs,” Lucas says. “She’s a calming influence for sure. When I leave home, I feel very prepared to face the day.”

After work, Lucas focuses attention on another mood-enhancing creature. She opens her door to 80 pounds of enthusiastic welcome from her black Labrador retriever mix, Kirin Ichiban, who is ready to exercise (owner and dog also walk in the morning, but the evening jaunt is more of a workout).

“As such a big dog, her excitement is extra big,” Lucas says. “Knowing you’re going to have that kind of unadulterated, pure excitement and joy that something on this planet feels and shows so clearly when you walk in the room is really special.”

The dog’s positive effects on Lucas’ well-being go beyond improving her mood: It seems that Kirin Ichiban is also an inspiring exercise partner. Since joining an owner-and-dog exercise program called Leash Your Fitness in January 2012, Lucas

has lost 25 pounds and has maintained her new weight for more than a year, she says. Also during this time, after consulting with her doctor, Lucas has been able to stop taking medication for hypertension and depression. “If I have a tough day, working out and being with Kirin is the best antidepressant of all,” Lucas says.

Rachel Lucas is far from the only person finding physical and mental health benefits of this variety. As it turns out, there is even a word for the phenomenon: *zooeiyia* (zoo-ey-ah). This word, which was coined in 2011 by the One Health initiative (an organization that promotes collaborations among scientists, clinicians, government officials and others from various fields), combines Greek roots for “animal” (*zoion*) and “health” (*hygeia*). *Zooeiyia* describes

human health benefits gained from interacting with animals. In the view of the movement’s proponents, pets can be furry, feathered or even finned health assistants—thanks to the well-being their company can offer to multitasking, often worry-prone humans.

Introducing animals into therapeutic settings dates back to at least the 18th century. According to a National Institutes of Health summary report titled “The Health Benefits of Pets,” England’s York Retreat, a psychiatric treatment center, first used animals with patients in 1792 in an attempt to incorporate gentler therapies than the strong drugs and physical restraints of that time. These days, dogs and some other species are specially selected and trained as service animals to assist people with health conditions or disabilities. Health-care facilities also schedule therapy-pet visits to comfort and cheer patients. But beyond these more direct roles that animals play in supporting human well-being—in therapeutic settings and assistance scenarios—there are many everyday types of positive, healthy interactions between people and animals.

Working relationships between people and animals are thought to predate human settlement. During the hunter-gatherer era, humans seem to have kept companion animals and used them for assistance or security. And today, people still keep pets for protection, yet many more people choose to keep them for companionship, says Paula Scott-Ginn, spokesperson for the Bellevue, Washington, organization Pet Partners. “One of the basic human needs is love, and pets impart unconditional love to their owners, regardless of social status, appearance or behavior.”

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association’s U.S. Pet Ownership & Demographics Sourcebook (2012 edition), 63 percent of owners considered their pets part of the family at the end of 2011. The AMVA also reported that most Americans have the opportunity to connect with a creature, with 56 percent of house-

holds keeping at least one pet. Another poll, conducted by the Associated Press and Petside.com, found that two-thirds of pet guardians said they at least partly understood their animals' vocalizations.

The health benefits of positive interactions with animals are varied. This year, the American Heart Association published a scientific statement saying that "pet ownership, particularly dog ownership, may be reasonable for reduction in CVD (cardiovascular disease) risk" (though the writers also recommended that people not become pet owners *primarily* to reduce CVD risk). The statement was based on a review of research associating pet ownership with reduced heart disease risk factors, including lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol and lower obesity rates.

Studies have shown that pet owners—again, particularly dog owners—are more physically active on average than people without companion animals. One study reported in the *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* in 2012 compared dog owners who walked their dogs with people who did not own dogs or owned dogs but did not walk them. On average, dog-walkers weighed less, reported more minutes of daily physical activity, and had lower rates of diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and depression.

Owners of other animals reap health benefits, too. In a study conducted at Miami University of Ohio, pet owners scored generally higher on measures of self-esteem and conscientiousness than nonowners. And according to another study, even watching fish swimming in an aquarium may lower a person's blood pressure.

Animal interactions may help people feel better at work, too. Although it's certainly not appropriate to have dogs in all workplaces, there are some indications that they may make certain offices healthier. And reduced stress might show up as improved morale, higher productivity and reduced health-care costs for employees. A study in the *International Journal of Workplace Health Management* found that employees who brought their dogs to work reported stress decreasing over a workday,

while employees who left a dog at home or didn't own a dog reported stress increases. Employees who worked with a dog rated their workplace as more satisfying and cooperative.

"Being at ease around animals promotes health and well-being," says Penny Lloyd, a Seattle-area veterinarian and nature guide who specializes in teaching people health-enhancing connection skills with animals. "Anytime we find a way to reduce stress, tension, anxiety or irritation, we allow our bodies a chance to return to a normal, healthy state."

Companion animals also encourage interaction with other people. You need only visit a dog park or pet-adoption fair to experience the social power of a cute beagle mix or a playful kitten. Animals' funny antics make it easy to start conversations.

Dawn Celapino of San Diego, the personal trainer who founded the Leash Your Fitness exercise classes and active social events for dog owners, says that pooches help newcomers quickly fit in. "If you're going to a class you've never been to before, it can be a little intimidating. But we all have that common bond with our dogs, and that breaks the ice right away."

For Rachel Lucas, puppy love is the perfect distraction during Leash Your Fitness workouts. "You might be in the middle of holding a plank [position] and thinking, 'This is so hard,' when a dog comes and licks you in the face and makes you laugh. It keeps you away from a painful place."

If you want to boost your fitness—along with your dog's—but don't have access to one of the growing number of canine-friendly classes, you can try starting with a daily 20-minute walk so you and Fido gradually adjust to being more active. Celapino suggests that when you feel ready, add hills or stair-climbs and mix in short sprints at top speed from, say, a fire hydrant to a telephone pole. If you aren't a runner, but your dog is leash-trained, he can dash alongside as you bicycle. Or, during a game of fetch, you can use your dog's retrieving time to do jumping jacks, squats, crunches and push-ups.

And cat people don't get a pass to emulate the notoriously lazy cartoon feline

Garfield. You probably can't train your cat to walk on a leash, but it can provide diversions if you exercise at home. Experiment with holding a laser pointer or attaching a dangling cat toy to your clothing while you exercise to a video or move to your favorite dance music. If your cat is in a playful mood, it might be enticed to leap around, too, keeping you laughing as you sweat.

If you aren't a pet owner, you might still find ways to benefit from time with animals. And if you are entrepreneurially minded and good with animals despite not owning one, you could start a business as a pet sitter or dog runner. To increase your interaction, Paula Scott-Ginn suggests visiting dog parks, pet fairs and friends who have pets, or volunteering to walk dogs or socialize with cats at an animal shelter. Consider offering a short-term foster home for a shelter pet in transition.

Of course, adopting an animal is another option. Adopting is first and foremost a promise to give your time, love and attention to all of your pet's needs. Pet guardianship might not be right, of course, if you or anyone in your household has allergies or isn't comfortable around animals. When deciding whether to adopt, think carefully about how an animal will fit into your home and lifestyle. The cable television network Animal Planet has a useful Pet Picker quiz on its website, and you can find titles about caring for specific pets on bookstore shelves or in library stacks. Before you bring a new best friend home, have its basic supplies, extra time to bond and a budget for its future needs, including veterinary care.

It may be far-fetched to envision a doctor scribbling "zooevia" or doodling a picture of a cat or bird on a prescription pad and handing it to a patient. However, if you already have a pet, are committed to adopting one or can spend time with someone else's, maximizing the amount and way you spend time with a companion animal might mean healthier and happier lives for both of you. ▲

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