Dear Alice,

Do you have any information regarding the use of pets for stress management?

Answer

Some people swear that fluffy felines, slithery snakes, and all sorts of animals help them manage stress. Indeed, studies show that engaging with animals does decrease cortisol, a stress hormone, and enhance happy hormones (such as oxytocin, serotonin, dopamine, and endorphins, among others) thereby creating a sense of well-being and serenity. While these effects have been written about for decades, research is actually still developing, which makes it challenging to claim that pets definitively reduce stress. With that said, many do experience positive effects from “pet therapy.” More on this concept and its potential benefits to come!

While the use of pets for stress management is often called “pet therapy,” this term actually encompasses animal-assisted activities (AAAs), animal-assisted therapy (AAT), and emotional support animals (ESAs). Whereas AAAs involve the more general use of animals as a means for comfort and enjoyment, AAT involves the recurring use of animals to help people recover from or better cope with health problems. AAT has been shown to significantly reduce pain, anxiety, depression, and fatigue among people with a range of health issues (such as veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and those receiving treatment for cancer). Further, ESAs live at home with their human partner and are often recommended by a mental health professional. They’re also not technically considered “pets,” but rather animals meant to provide support to people who have a diagnosed emotional or mental condition. While the therapeutic benefits of ESAs are still unknown, it’s thought that consistent proximity to and interaction with ESAs enhance feelings of happiness, security, and self-worth, and also reduce loneliness, isolation, and other symptoms of mental illnesses. Keep in mind that ESAs aren’t considered service animals as service animals go through a special training to perform tasks that assist people with disabilities and are considered essential to their human companions. As such, certain types of ESAs may be banned or have limitations by some organizations (for example, by certain airlines) due to perceived abuse of their policies.
While research on “pet therapy” focuses predominantly on dogs, a variety of animals can be therapeutic and produce positive effects. Regardless of type, most animals require some maintenance — e.g., walking, feeding, cleaning, and scooping — which some find help with stress management because it requires a consistent routine or reason to get fresh air. For others, though, having a pet may increase stress, whether it’s because they have a fear of animals or they aren’t prepared to take on the additional responsibility. Before getting a pet of your own, you might consider the following: Are you allowed to have a pet where you live? Will you or someone you trust be able to properly walk or feed your pet? Is your house or apartment big enough to meet both human and creature comfort criteria? Answering these questions will help you weigh the pet's best interest and your reasons for wanting a companion.

If you’re considering adopting a pet, your local animal care organization or animal shelter may be able to offer you more information. These agencies help stray and unwanted animal populations, and many provide physical check-ups and vaccinations. If you’re not sure you’re ready to commit to pet ownership but are looking for animal companionship, you may consider fostering an animal, volunteering at an animal shelter, or paying visits to pet-owning friends or family. If, in the end, you’re looking for other ways to manage stress, you may consult with a mental health professional for some additional options.

Sincerely,

Alice!

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