Critical Review: Why are pets good for health?

Lisa Beck, Ph.D
Department of Psychology, Bryn Mawr College
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania 19010 lbeck@brynmawr.edu

The unusual combination of status and support in human-pet relationships may account for the remarkable health benefits of pet ownership.

Health effects of SOCIAL STATUS

• Low-rank animals of many species, from primates to fish, exhibit a wide range of physiological consequences: poor HPA regulation, low lymphocyte count, more "bad cholesterol," hardening of arteries, enlarged adrenal glands, parasites (Sapolsky, 2005).
• People in poorer neighborhoods have more health problems, even when factors related to environment (e.g., pollution), behavior (e.g., smoking), and access to medical care are held constant.
• Among British civil servants, significant differences in mortality have been found between every employment grade, despite similar environment and equal access to health care (Marmot, Shipky, & Rose, 1984).
• Canadian stroke victims showed 9% decrease in mortality for every $10,000 increase in income.
• Academy Award winners live 4 years longer than non-winners (Redelmeier & Singh, 2001).

Health effects of SOCIAL SUPPORT

• In wild baboons, social support mitigates the effects of low social status (Sapolsky, 2005).
• Children and rhesus monkeys deprived of social interaction during development die or exhibit severe social and physical deficits (Rowby, 1951, Harlow & Harlow, 1962).
• Skin wounds in hamsters housed with a sibling healed more quickly than those housed alone (Dentllon, Craft, Glasper, Prendergast, & DeVries, 2004).
• Oxytocin and opioids are released in response to social contact, and reduce behavioral and physiological stress responding (Taylor, 2007).
• People with more social ties have fewer infections, less arthritis pain, faster recovery (Taylor, 2007).
• Married people enjoy better health than unmarried people (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001).

The social control model:

SOCIAL STATUS

SOCIAL SUPPORT

STRESSORS

PHYSIOLOGICAL STRESS RESPONDING

HEALTH PROBLEMS

Stressors can be threats to either physical or social self-preservation.

The stress system is the most likely mediator of the link between social factors and physical health.

• SNS stimulation
• HPA activation
• Increased BP & HR
• Elevated blood glucose
• Suspension of growth, healing, reproductive & digestive processes

• Hypertension
• Atherosclerosis
• Colitis, ulcers
• Diabetes
• Osteoporosis
• Neurological damage
• Impotence or amenorrhea
• Immune suppression

Status and support influence physical health by increasing control over the social and physical environment, thereby decreasing the incidence or severity of stressors, reducing physiological stress responding, and limiting the effects of illness (Beck, 2008).

Social status and social support are primal, fundamental dimensions of social interaction.

• In personality theory (Brown, 1965)
• As sources of social conflict (Anderson & Lawler, 1995)
• In reaction time studies of social perception (Fiske et al., 2007)
• In animal behavior research (Cheney & Seyfarth, 2007)
• As social correlates of physical health (Kemeny, 2007)

In most relationships, status and support are negatively related . . .

The Pet Effect

• Watching fish in an aquarium lowers blood pressure (Katcher, Friedmann, Beck, & Lynch, 1983).
• Presence of pet reduces cardiovascular reactivity to acute stressors compared to presence of friend (Allen, 2003).
• Pet owners have lower resting HR and BP than non-owners, less reactivity, and faster return to baseline after stressful task (Allen, 2003).
• Increased mortality from cardiac disease (Friedmann, Thomas, & Eddy, 2000).
• Fewer doctor visits (Siegel, 1990).
• Therapeutic effect on high blood pressure (Allen, 2003).
• Fewer physical symptoms and doctor visits after adopting a pet (Serpell, 1990).
• People are more likely to acquire pets after a stressful or traumatic event (Serpell, 1990).
• AIDS patients with pets report lower frequency of depressive symptoms than those without pets (Siegel et al., 1999).

References


