

# Is Pet Ownership Right for You to Promote Your Mental Health?

## Objective

To identify whether pet ownership is right for you in supporting your mental health.

## What to Know

You might be unaware of the physical and mental health benefits that accompany the pleasures of pet ownership. Studies have explored the benefits of the human-animal bond. Pets can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, ease loneliness, encourage exercise and playfulness, and even improve cardiovascular health. Caring for an animal can help children grow up more secure and active, and pets provide companionship for older adults. Pets can add joy and unconditional love to your life. Research studies show that pet owners:

- are less likely to suffer from depression than those without pets.
- have lower blood pressure in stressful situations.
- have elevated levels of serotonin and dopamine.
- have decreased levels of cortisol.
- have lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels.
- that have had heart attacks survive longer than those without pets.
- make fewer medical visits than those without pets.

Pets fulfill the basic human need for touch. Stroking, hugging, or just touching a loving animal quickly calms and soothes you when you are stressed or anxious. The social interaction between people and their pets increases levels of the hormone oxytocin (the same hormone that bonds mothers to babies).

Though there are clearly many benefits to pet ownership, there are a number of issues to consider prior to adopting a pet. This worksheet will help you identify whether pet ownership is right for you in supporting your emotional, mental, and physical health.

## What to Do

Answer the following questions.

What are the benefits of pet ownership for you?

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Have you ever owned a pet? Was it a positive experience? Why or why not?

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**How do you know if a pet is right for you?** While pets may bring a wide range of health benefits, having a pet may not work for you for these reasons. Pets:

- involve new responsibilities.
- are a major commitment (perhaps 10-20 years – and even up to 30 years if you adopt a bird!).
- require time and money to keep them happy and healthy (food, veterinary care, licenses, grooming costs, toys, bedding, boarding fees, and other maintenance expenses).
- need daily exercise to stay calm and well-balanced (dogs).
- may limit your social activity (dogs can only be left alone for a limited time).
- can be destructive (accidents, illness, chewing, scratching).
- require responsible ownership (leash laws, training to decrease aggressive behaviors, and so on).
- may carry health risks for some people (allergies, infectious disease).

Considering your personal situation, what are some challenges or obstacles to pet ownership? Explain.

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So, after considering obstacles, challenges, and the benefits of pet ownership, how can you find the perfect pet? It is important to select the type of pet that best suits your needs and lifestyle. Here are some suggestions.

**Talk to members of your household about the qualities you want in a pet.** Be sure to discuss traits you want to avoid. What did you and the other household members determine?

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If you live alone, who will care for your pet if you travel, are hospitalized, or you can no longer care for your pet?

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**Lifestyle considerations that influence your choice in a pet.** Consider the following issues.

- Amount of outdoor activity—Do you live in a city? Work remotely? Are you willing to walk a dog outdoors multiple times each day?
- Rent or own your home—you may have to get your landlord’s permission if you rent. Are there additional pet fees?
- Activity level—If you are active, an energetic dog might be right for you. Dogs can increase your physical activity, leading to weight loss and overall improved health.
- Young children and older adults. If you have children or elderly family members living in your home, consider the size and energy level of the pet.
- Other animals in your household—consider how other pets will adjust.
- Home environment—if a neat, tidy home (free of fur, muddy footprints, or “accidents”) is important, a dog or long-haired cat may not be the best choice. You may want to choose a pet such as fish, birds, hamsters, or reptiles.
- Landscaping concerns—dogs may dig holes in your lawn, and dog urine can leave yellow patches.
- Time commitment—consider you will be making a lifelong commitment. You may consider adopting an older dog or cat from a shelter or rescue group.

Be honest with yourself about your lifestyle and the pet that would be the best fit. If you have doubts, get a fish or a small, caged animal.

What are some of your lifestyle considerations? Be specific.

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Will you get a pet? \_\_\_\_\_ Type of pet you are considering: \_\_\_\_\_

Where will you get your pet? Shelter? Breeder? Pet store?

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If you do not have the time, money, or ability to own a pet, there are still ways you can experience the benefits of time spent with animals. Brief periods of time spent with a dog or cat can benefit both you and the animals. Consider the following activities:

- ask to walk a neighbor’s dog
- start a pet sitting business
- volunteer at an animal shelter
- assist at pet adoption events
- explore pet “rental” programs
- temporarily foster an animal

If you decided against getting a pet, what can you do to spend more time with animals?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_  
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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