



ROLE OF HOUSEHOLD PETS ON VARIOUS ASPECTS OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR & LIFE

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ABSTRACT

The relationship of human beings and animals dates back to the Stone Age. From the times unknown we have seen or heard of the special relation a human being shares with the animals, tamed or wild. The fossil evidences from various cultures across the globe have proved the same. The trend of having animals at home has changed dramatically with the shift from rural to industrialized and urban lifestyle. Despite that, the role and impact of animals in human life and on human behavior does not change. Animals had always proven to be the best of companions in distress, loneliness, and to the sick or handicapped. A healthy body and mind is a cure to all disease and stress, and animals play a very important role in providing the same. This paper aims at studying the importance of pets and their role in the households.

Key words: Companion Animal, Pets, Human Behavior, Stress.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The number and kind of animals being tamed has reduced drastically in India. Considering the days of pre-industrialization, almost every household in India had animals like cow, goat, sheep, dog or birds which were also the key to survival, but that is not the scenario now. With the pace at which our community has become modern and urbanized, the importance of animals at home has diminished. The human interaction with nature, the flora and fauna, both, have taken a back seat in this new industrialized world. These factors have immensely affected the pet ownership.

Pets play a very crucial and significant role in human life. They help brighten up our day, spread smile, bring enthusiasm, encourage good health, reduce stress, initiates a positive

behavior - specially in kids, and also have therapeutic effects in case of many illnesses. Various studies have been conducted around the world by people from varied fields; be it zoologists, behavioral scientists, criminologists, cardiologists or veterinarians (Peng, Chi & Luo, 2018).

The studies and researches have been found to be quite intensive in countries like USA, UK and Australia. Whereas in India, efforts have been constrained in this area; though there are a few organizations and NGOs working for the rights of animals, the study still needs to be promoted in this facet of human life.

In India, cows, goats and sheep constituted the major ownership in the era gone by. The basic reason was that they were their key to survival, as they provided the dependents with food, clothing supplement, protection, and also ploughed their farms. Though this relationship is more of a business-like but even then the sentiments are involved due to the regular interaction. Such scenario is still prevalent in the rural parts of the country, but it is quite different in the urbanized society.

2. PROMINENT RESEARCHES

Beck and Meyers (1996) in their paper 'Health Enhancement and Companion Animal Ownership' have discussed the companion-animals' population in USA and European countries. The analysis brought in light how majority of the households love to keep a pet. The paper also discusses the physiological and psychological effects along with the therapeutic treatment benefits achieved due to the company of pets. The benefits are availed by the mentally sick or handicapped people who have difficulty socializing with others.

'The benefits of companion animals for human mental and physical health' by O'Haire (2009) discusses the changing trend of having pets at home besides the theories given earlier in context of the human health benefits from having companion animals. It discusses the various benefits and people's perception of those who have pets at home.

Bokkers (2006) in his chapter 'Effects of interactions between humans and domesticated animals' has discussed role of farm animals and domesticated animals, as both of the categories cater to a different set of needs and role in the human life. In terms of workplace context, it is the farm animals that have the highest degree of contact or interaction with the humans. Bokkers emphasized on continuous and regular interaction of animals with an individual which develops a relationship between the two. The chapter also discusses the topic in context of health-care and residential role of animals.

Researches by veterinary organizations have indicated that patients, who are pet owners, after being discharged from a coronary care unit, were more alive as compared to the non-pet-owners. People who owned a pet had one-third the mortality rate of those who did not own a pet according to another survey. One of the key reasons behind a coronary heart disease is stress, and thus we can see that the effect of pet ownership can do wonders.

In 1994 in Australia, researchers conducted the National People and Pets Survey, which was the first national study conducted to investigate the relationship between pet ownership and human health. The result analysis indicated that dog and cat owners had better mental and physical health than non-owners.

Some researches, dating back to 80's, have shown evidences that fishes have a very therapeutic effect on people having high blood pressure, insomnia or Alzheimer. It helps lower blood pressure, calm and relaxes the mind. Fishes have the advantage of least time and monetary involvement as compared to the other pet animals, and can also be found easily.

3. STATISTICS ON PET OWNERSHIP

The statistics compiled by the American Pet Products Association's 2011-2012 National Pet Owners Survey show that approximately 78.2 million dogs are owned in the United States in almost 60% of the households which had atleast one dog. The average ownership amongst the owners was almost two dogs (1.69) whereas approximately 86.4 million cats were owned in the United States with the average ownership amongst the owners was again two cats (2.2).

Pet Food Manufacturer's Association (PFMA) conducts a survey every year and the results for 2019-2020 reflected that 12 million households i.e. 41% of households in UK have pets. The total pets owned in UK in 2020 were 20.65 million (excluding fish). The ownership statistics of the various animals owned are given below (in approximated Millions) –

Table 1 Pet ownership statistics in UK (2019-20)

2019 - 2020 Rolling Total	Pet population (m)
Dogs	9
Cats	7.5
Rabbits	0.6
Indoor Birds	0.5
Guinea Pigs	0.4
Domestic Fowl	0.4
Hamsters	0.2
Tortoises and Turtles	0.3
Snakes	0.2
Lizards	0.2
Horses and Ponies	0.15
Gerbils	0.1
Rats	0.1
Ferrets	0.1
Frogs and Toads	0.1
People keep insects	0.1
Newts/Salamanders	0.1
Pigeons	0.1
Mice	0.5

Source: <https://www.pfma.org.uk/pet-population-2020>

Australian society also saw changes in the ownership trends, though the value attached to them remained pretty much the same. It was found during the National People and Pets Survey, that the animals are part of 63% of the Australian families accounting to 12 million people. Also, it was observed that it was mainly the married females who owned pets. 53% of the people who currently do not own a pet, would like to do so in future.

Various organizations in India work for the welfare of the animals. Care is taken to provide proper medication to the ill, home to the homeless and justice to the underprivileged. People For Animals (PFA), founded in 1994, is one of the strongest movement initiated in the country to stand for the rights of the animals. The Animal Welfare Board of India under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India located in Chennai works to provide important information to public through an extensive database. In Defense of Animals (IDA) established in 1996 is a non-profit organization defending the rights of all non-human living creatures.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

For the purpose of this paper, a survey had been conducted, through convenience sampling, amongst the pet owners who were requested to fill a questionnaire to assist the study. The responses were obtained from 100 pet owners comprising of 57 males and 43 females.

The analysis is descriptive and helps in making judgment related to the current scenario of ownership, and rapport of the people with their pets in the society. The total numbers of animals owned by them were 412: having 119 dogs, 8 cats, 102 birds, 162 fishes and 21 other animals which consisted of rabbit, mouse and turtle. This shows quite a high average of pet ownership due to the count of easy pet animals like birds and fishes, whereas, the average would be 1.19 per household in case of dogs only.

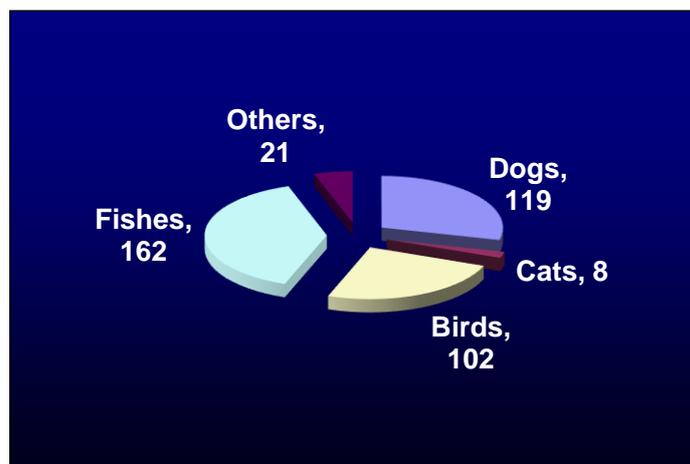


Figure 1 Number of Pets Owned

5. MULTIFACETED BENEFITS OF HAVING ANIMALS AT HOME

There are various options available when it comes to keeping a pet. They are not confined to just dogs and cats; though the geographical climate of the country affects the choices also. It depends on various factors like time available with the family members, financial resources, requisite space and other resources available with the owner. Besides dogs, cats, birds and fishes, other animals at home can be rabbits, guinea pigs, tortoise and even some animals or reptiles like horses, lizards or white rats, although found quite rarely.

Each and every animal has its own benefits-

- Dogs are the most loyal and loving companion animals which are like the best friend to a human being.
- Cats are easy to have around. Not much of a care is required as compared to a dog and is very jovial to be around and will happily sit in your lap to play along.
- Fishes are one such species which can have a calming effect over any individual just by being there in their tank. Why do we find aquariums in the hospital or doctor's reception area? Their color, actions and movements actually have a very anxiolytic and relaxing effect if a person sits and just watch them playing in the water (Sharpe).
- Birds are beautiful creatures of the nature and they can make a person sing along, thus uplifting ones mood with their singing and playful nature.
- Though it is not so easy to maintain a Horse, but still, interested and affluent people are found to own a horse or two. It can also be a symbol of royalty. Riding or grooming horses is a very relaxing activity. The horses have been used for the cure of various ailments also.

- Other animals like guinea pigs, tortoise or mice are more often the pets of kids who own them out of their love and passion. They are their relaxants and friends.

In the current competitive and ever dynamic environment, there is no time for involvement with the nature; the flora and fauna. The big bungalows and courtyards at home have given way to multistoried buildings, flats and compact houses. The always-increasing work pressure does not leave enough time to get involved in the physical activities like exercise, yoga or any other outdoor sports. The change of lifestyle has led to the augmentation of medical cases of blood pressure, diabetes, heart problems, obesity, etc. An even greater concern is that it is not prevalent in the 40+ age groups but also in the kids and teenagers. Thus, it becomes important for the society to have concern and understanding towards the importance of having these animals around us.

During the survey it was found that 79 respondents went for a walk with their pets; which also reflects how much time and effort an individual puts in for their pets. Of this, 42 were males and 37 females. The remaining who did not go for a walk was due to the ownership of animals where strolls were not possible, like in the case of fishes, birds or cats. Of the dog owners, there were 8 such respondents who did not go out due to lack of time and left this work to their other family members or servants.

If not going out, they indulged in playing with their pets. 95 people confirmed that they play regularly with their pets. The modes of play ranged from ball games, catch, pampering, cuddling and even a game of non-verbal gestures like with fishes.

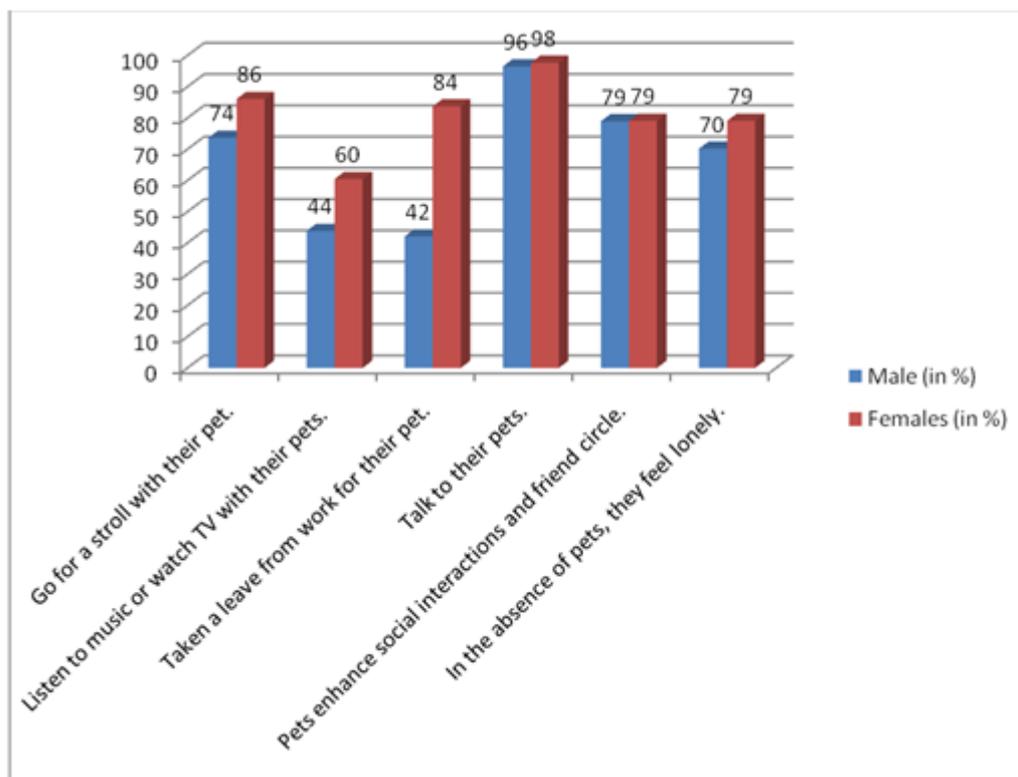


Figure 2 Comparison of Pet Engagement in case of Male and Female respondents

Also, there is a sense of security with the pets around. This is found not just for kids but also in case of female members of the family, especially when one of the male members of the family is out for work. In troubled neighborhoods also they prove to be the ones on guard. One can be assured that their family is protected. Thus, providing a sense of security they help release the tension and keep the stress away.

The respondents who felt a sense of security with their pets around was quite high: 82 percent. We can also credit the feeling of non-security due to the ownership of pets like fishes only, birds only, unlike the dog owners, as such pets are more of play pets.

Pets are not complicated like human beings and have a steady behavior towards their owners. They are easy and generous with their feelings and emotions. All what they need is some attention, bit of care and time and they are all yours. Their simple actions like sitting in your lap, wagging their tails, jumping around you or just accompanying you everywhere brings smile and laughter in the house and has a real calming effect.

Almost half of the respondents consented sharing their time with their pets in listening to music or watching television with them. 25 were males and 26 females summing up to 51 percent of the respondents.

People who feel isolated or lonely can often get into depression. Staying alone or away from the loved ones can get very taxing and stressful. Thus, having a companion animal solves such problem and helps an individual stay active, playful, engaged in various chores and gives them an outlet for their care and affection. They also give an opportunity to move out and interact with people (in case of pets like dog). It is easy for people having similar pets to meet and socialize. Socializing enhances positivity, a good social network aids in keeping stress away. In case of kids, such interaction makes them socially competent, develops non-verbal communication skills and very importantly helps them overcome shyness. A human tendency is also to perceive people in the company of animals more positively and having favorable attributes than those without animals present beside them.

During the survey it was found that 79 respondents confirm that their social interaction and social circle is positively effected and enhanced due to their pets. Of these 45 were male respondents and 34 female respondents. This correlation is also impacted to a level due to higher number of male owners going out for a walk with their pets as compared to their female counterparts.

Many people also believe in having a sense of satisfaction by owning a pet; it completes their family and is like a family member to them. They believe it enhances their self-worth and brings positive energy in the house affecting their disposition. Cooksey Hannah (2008), in her study 'Are Family Pets A Factor In Women Staying In Abusive Relationships?' observed that women got so attached to their pets and shared such a bond that they continued to stay in the precarious environment for the sake of their pet animals, or due to the reason that they provided strength and comfort to them in times of distress. Even if some women left the house they made sure that the animals were transferred to comfortable surroundings or kept in safe custody to protect them from abusive behavior which could come from the person she herself is running from.

When asked about the role of pets in their life, merely 6 respondents said that animals were only owned for fun. The remaining 94 respondents said that their pets add value to their life and completes the family. The consideration of their pet as one of the family members shows a very high value and worth of the pet in a human being's life. It is an indicator of acceptance and importance of animals in an individual and his family's life. It is even found that 35 pet owners have the photograph of their pets in their bedroom or living area.

During the times of sickness of the pet animals, 60 respondents have agreed to have taken leave from their work or job, only to take them to the doctor or tend them during the rough times. It is an interesting observation to have found only 24 males but 36 females taking an off from their work. This observation can be attributed to the sensitive and caring nature of the females in comparison to their male counterparts.

Companion animals have been known to alleviate anxiety. They work as relaxant in case of hypertension patients. In case of youngsters, pets help in relaxing the hyperactive kids. Various human characteristics like caring, grooming, nurturing and upbringing are imbibed into kids who are brought up in homes having pets (Beck. A. M. & Meyers. N. M., 1996). They become more responsible, sensitive and alert towards other living creatures’ needs and desires. It inculcates patience and endurance in an individual, and also reduces anger in the kids who are aggressive; all such characteristics help in molding a good behavior.

The pets ensure a good companionship across all ages. 40 pet owners had aged or retired people living along, and 37 of them confirmed that the pets keep them engaged while ensuring a good and lively air around. This represents a good 92.5% of the people agreeing to the statement that they are a good companion to the aged people.

On parallel grounds, talking about kids; 36 of the respondents had kids at home. 28 of them agreed that the kids were more caring, i.e. 77.7%, 15 agreed to the kids being less aggressive, i.e. 41.6%, and 29 agreed to the kids being more active and playful, i.e. 80.5%, this makes it a considerable portion of the respective population consenting to a positive upbringing in the kids. This shows a great impact of the pet’s presence on the human life; be it older people or kids.

61 of the respondents granted the change in behavior when the pets are around them as compared to times when they are not around. The outlook of a person is calm, relaxed and sensitive towards the people and events around.

Various past researches have suggested that owning pets has direct physiological effects. Pets help in decreasing blood pressure, lowering heart rate and decreasing muscular tension. An individual owning a pet is like to be involved more in regular exercise or physical activity. Going for a morning or evening stroll or playing catch with the pets like dogs and cats assist in maintaining a good and healthy lifestyle (Beck. A. M. & Meyers. N. M., 1996). Don’t we have doctors recommending daily walks to their patients suffering from diabetes, blood pressure or hypertension?

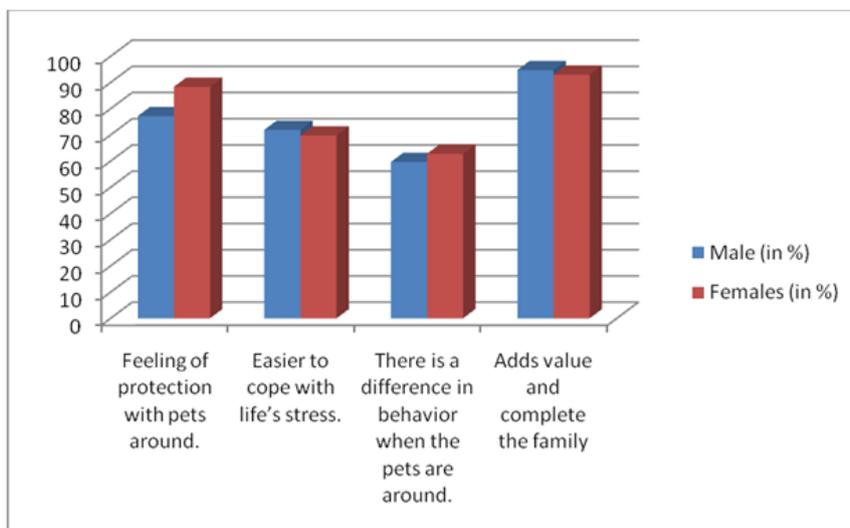


Figure 3 Comparison of Pet Engagement in case of Male and Female respondents

In the current scenario, lives have become so busy that human beings have been found to devote less and less time to some physical exercise for their fitness. Even the survey reported 58 respondents not indulging into any kind of physical activity in the absence of their pets. This also reflects a high percentage of people dependent on their pets for any kind of physical exercise. Of the population surveyed only 79 went for a walk and of these 58 (i.e. approximately

73%) depend on their pets for the same. Thus, for guarantying a regular fitness regime, having pets is in fact a good excuse to be healthy. 77 respondents said that they felt inactive and lousy during the absence of their pets, which is again an indicator for an individual's physical agility.

Blood pressure tends to decrease and even normalize due the involvement of stress relieving activities. Hypertension also decreases while simply watching fishes move in an aquarium. As mentioned, some of the doctors tend to keep aquariums to help the patients relax and get in a pleasant frame of mind while they wait on them, and some paste posters of smiling babies or happy pets around to have the similar effect. For the respondents having fishes, non-verbal gestures were the medium of play and this made them feel happy, made them smile and forget the worries of the day.

A research also claims to provide evidence that pet ownership improves survival rate amongst the heart patients. During the PAWSitive InterAction Summit in 2002, Dr. Alan Beck showed through a study that percentage of people surviving for one year after a heart attack was higher in those having a pet as compared to those without one. The survival rate was 94% with those with a pet as compared to 72% of those without any pet. Thus, they help reduce stress and improve mental health, making their owners more likely to survive.

Even the questioned respondents which agreed that they felt depressed in the absence of their pets was as high as 74. Of these 40 were male and 34 female respondents. Also, 71 respondents agreed that having pets around makes it easier for them to cope up with the stressful facets of their life, alleviating the anxiety, bother and tension (Bokkers, 2006).

Various animal assisted activities (AAA) and animal assisted therapies (AAT) are used to cure or improve the condition of patients suffering of depression, anxiety, psychotic disorders, cerebral palsy, epilepsy and quite a few others. For such activities, generally, dogs, dolphins and horses are used. They're used in the curing process of the emotionally disturbed children also. It is very comforting for a child as they relate quite easily to the animals and find solace in their company. They do not fear speaking out, or fear rejection amongst them; animals accept them without any prejudices. Such activities help the physically challenged too.

6. ADDITIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES ASSOCIATED WITH A COMPANION ANIMAL

Apart from all the recompenses an animal ownership has, there comes certain amount of responsibility also. The degree of responsibility varies in case of every kind of pet and their breed. The choice of a correct animal is very important, because a bad choice can actually lead to increase in the stress level rather than doing the contrary. The amount of time available with the individual to spend with the pet, motive of having a pet, the size of house and space available, kind of lifestyle, family members' willingness and acceptance for the pet, financial and other resources required to take proper care are some of the factor which need consideration before taking in a companion animal.

7. ROLE OF PETS IN RELIEVING HUMAN BEINGS FROM THEIR DAILY STRESS

Numerous day-to-day activities in our life, which are due to the companion animals, help in bringing in the positive energy, an uplifting mood, a healthy lifestyle and a stress-free life. Be it a morning walk in the fresh air or evening walk to rejuvenate from the work stress (Mills, Reiss & Dombeck, 2008); be it playing catch in and around the house or socializing with people while during such walks; cuddling and fondling with these furry animals or just spend time grooming and petting them, all such actions and involvement lead to the release of happy feelings and emotions.

The bond between a human being and an animal can be very strong especially during the time of solitude or distress. This is more often witnessed in case of kids and females. Children love to share their stories and tales with them, tell them their problems and also expect them to understand. They perceive a moral support and develop a certain responsibility towards them (Moser).

It was found that 97 respondents indulged into various kinds of talk with their pets like pampering, cooing, talks of daily life and mundane stuff. Amongst them a noticeable number of 28 respondents mentioned talking about their problems to them. It can be understood that even if the pet is unable to answer or advise back, it atleast is a patient listener to the individual and understands the mood of his owner. An individual is able to vent out his frustration, dissatisfaction and displeasure, and relax his mind and body by simply speaking about the problems. Even the psychologists suggest the expression of feelings, and sharing them with someone to avoid mental tension and its adverse effect (Bao, & Schreer, 2016).

The best part of having pets around was their feel and affection for 62 respondents; their playfulness for 60 respondents; the joy and happiness spread around by them for 67 respondents; and credit was given to their ability to reduce their stress levels by 43 respondents.

As mentioned earlier, during a study conducted in certain areas of Great Britain, animals were a major reason for women to stay in an abusive relationship also. They felt a duty towards them and also felt easier in their presence to bear the harsh relationship in a family. The attachment they develop for their pet also strengthens them to bear the grunt (Cooksey, 2008).

Organizations involved in the animals assisted therapy or activities utilize animals like dolphins, horses, dogs and other animals for their therapeutic qualities in such activities. They help in reducing anxiety, depression and lower blood pressure. CISM International (Critical Incident Stress Management), Texas is an organization which has various animals to help people cure of their illness. They have a group of horses, dogs, goats, cats, chickens and also a miniature horse which assist in various activities. Some organizations make the animals visit the hospitals also to assist in the therapy of the disabled people (Edney & Robinson, 1998). They are a great way to comfort such people.

8. WRAPPING UP THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND

The human-animal bond has no boundaries and sometimes even work better than a human being's bond with one another. A doctor once quoted that he was surprised to find one of his patients insisting on going home only for seeing and spending time with Max, his Labrador pet.

Animals are the first ones to greet you at the door when you are back home from work. A individual feels best with those with whom he can share his love and affection, and that not just applies to family, and friends but also for animal companionship too. The benefits are reflected in numerous facets, be it physical health, emotional support, social life or behavior molding.

This paper asks for further in-depth research and study which can throw light on the relationship shared and positive outcome generated by the human-animal interactions. An exhaustive experiment integrating the physical and psychological implications of such relationship can prove to be rewarding in general for a human being's welfare and specifically in the field of biology, veterinary science, medicine, psychology and sociology. Such study would demand a large population to be surveyed and studied to help establish quantifiable results.

We find animals being used by selected doctors or therapists for treatments. Whereas it would advantageous to advocate their involvement with kids and people in schools, colleges, offices, hospitals, old-age homes, rehabilitation centers, etc where people can get to spend some very productive and stress relieving time with these wonderful creatures. For any person the

animals can be an amazing companion, develop empathy, care and responsibility. They have proved to be relaxants and promote calm and positive behavior. People with such attributes confirm to be assets for any organization they work with. Therefore, an organization can always recommend its employees to have pets not just for personal benefits but also for the benefit of the organizational environment.

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