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Suicide Prevention at Lake Tahoe: Pets and happiness go paw in hand



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TAHOE-TRUCKEE, Calif. — A pet can bring a lot of excitement and affection to your life. But were you aware of the powerful mental and physical health benefits that accompany pet ownership?

Not only do animals encourage us to be active, but they can also reduce stress and depression, ease loneliness and bring unconditional love to our lives.

Pets give their owners the feeling of being needed, and loved, which can help put personal problems into perspective. Our four-legged friends also provide constant companionship, giving their owner an outlet for stress and emotion.

One of our basic human needs is touch, and petting a dog or cat provides sensory relief by lowering levels of stress and increasing feelings of calmness. Dogs in particular can bring great joy to one's life. They are full of unconditional love and affection and are greatly aware of our emotions as people.

Dogs tend to encourage exercise for their owners which can ease symptoms of depression. Plus, all of that exercise takes you out in the world where a dog is a great conversation starter. Meeting new people can be another benefit to pet ownership.

In addition to the health benefits of pet ownership for adults, there are many benefits of pet ownership for families. Children who grow up with a family pet often learn compassion and responsibility from having a dog or cat. For example:

The ever-present pet can ease separation anxiety when parents aren't home, or a babysitter is around.

The unconditional love of a pet allows a child to develop a healthy self-image.

Children who display behavioral issues in a group setting also learn to behave appropriately with pets just as they will need to learn to behave with their peers.

Children that develop an emotional bond with a pet can develop healthy relationships with other kids.

Children have a playmate to spark imagination and encourage curiosity.

This isn't meant to encourage everyone to run out and adopt a puppy or cat; there are many ways to gain the benefits described. If pet ownership isn't an option, volunteering at the Humane Society of Truckee Tahoe or another local shelter is one way to obtain the benefits.

Offer to walk your neighbor's dog — this simple act of kindness would not only benefit you but could garner appreciation and joy from your neighbor or friend as well.

Many pet owners will credit their animals for their happiness. Perhaps this is accurate; whatever the case, the importance of touch and both giving and receiving love have a profound effect on our overall mental wellbeing.

In trying to achieve the optimal level of happiness and mental health, this is one suggestion on how to remain engaged and active in our lives.

Sarah McClarie is the facilitator for the Tahoe Truckee Youth Suicide Prevention Coalition. And , Outreach Facilitator for the Tahoe Truckee Suicide Prevention Task Force. Contact her at smcclarie@ttusd.org or by calling 530-582-2560.

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