

## **Dogs have a magic effect: How Newfies can improve our mental health**



What is it about animals? As the bad news about the coronavirus continued “send me dogs and cats” has become a regular cry on social media, an easy-to-grasp shorthand for “I feel terrible, cheer me up”. The response is always the same: a torrent of pictures of animals doing daft things – but somehow it has a magical, calming effect.

The therapeutic value of our relationship with our pets, particularly dogs, is increasingly recognised by researchers.

Marion Janner, a mental health campaigner and all-round animal lover, says that dogs teach us a whole range of lessons. “Dogs love us unconditionally. They’re the ultimate in equal opportunities – entirely indifferent to race, gender, star sign, CV, clothes size or ability to throw cool moves on the dance floor. The simplicity and depth of this love is a continuous joy, along with the health benefits of daily walks and the social delights of chats with other dog walkers. They teach kids to be responsible, altruistic and compassionate and, valuably but sadly, how to cope when someone you love dies.”

One gentleman describes when his health suddenly took a downward turn. “I’d been working incredibly hard, long hours, too many days. One day I started crying and just couldn’t stop. I couldn’t put sentences together properly”.

It took a long time to put himself back together: But the key factor in his recovery, he says was a small rescue dog. “Taking her out for walks, getting out into fresh air, just putting one foot in front of the other, that lifts your spirits. And then there’s nothing like having a dog curled up beside you, even when you feel absolutely miserable. She’ll check my face anxiously, as if she knows something is wrong. And that makes me smile – and that somehow makes you feel better. There is just something magic about dogs. Honestly, she got me through.”

But why? What is responsible for these therapeutic effects? One key aspect appears to be social recognition – the process of identifying another being as someone important and significant to you. The bond that forms between owner and pet is, it seems, similar to the bond that a mother forms with her baby.

We understand that healthy social bonds can play a key role in mental health; without them, we become lonely, depressed and physically unwell. And pets, it seems, can fulfil that role. Academic and psychologist June McNicholas points out that pets can be a lifeline for socially isolated people.

“Pet care and self-care are linked. When you take a dog out for a walk, people talk to you and that may be the only social contact an isolated person has the whole day. When pet owners leave the house to buy pet food, they’re more likely to buy food for themselves and when they feed their pet, they’ll sit down to eat too. People with disabilities often find that able-bodied people are socially awkward with them; if they have a dog it breaks down barriers and allows a more comfortable and natural interaction.”

In addition to helping to alleviate stress, anxiety, depression and loneliness, there are all the benefits that come from having to exercise a dog. Daily walks outdoors boost physical and emotional wellbeing. Chucking sticks, picking up balls – even scooping up dog poo – can provide an all-round workout.

Having a companion can also prevent depression from worsening, especially therapy and service dogs who are constantly in tune to your needs. Caring for an animal gives you purpose, makes you feel wanted and helps take focus away from your depression.

Dogs can be a lot of work but research shows that responsibility helps your mental health. Some psychologists say that you build self-esteem by taking ownership and applying skills to a specific task. Taking care of a dog offers reassurance that you can care for another creature *and* for yourself.

Ann Robinson

**Thank you to Kim Ryan for bravely sharing her feelings and struggles during lockdown.**

“I’m hoping I can include my two year old newf Bear in your magazine.

I got my boy two years ago, and just as I brought him home my adopted mum passed away. She really wanted to meet Bear but never got the chance.

I have mental health struggles and ever since getting my boy he has helped me so much. He knows when I get low or when I’m anxious as he’ll put his head on my lap and snuggle in.

Since lockdown I have really struggled to cope but this amazing Bear has brought me through each day. We walk, we talk, and he’s such an amazing boy. I just wanted to share this with you and let others know it’s ok not to be ok.

It’s ok to have bad days”.

