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HEADLINE: Pets are good for physical, mental well-being

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There's good news in today's column. In the trade publication *Veterinary Economics* (August 2002 Issue), there was a lot of attention on the beneficial aspects of pet ownership on the pet owners themselves. Some of the conclusions drawn by **PAWSitive InterAction**, a nonprofit organization that conducted the study, are as follows:

-Seniors who own dogs go to the doctor less often than those who don't. In a study of 100 Medicare patients, even the most highly stressed dog owners had a 21 percent lower level of physician contacts than non-owners.

-Along those same lines, medication costs dropped from an average of \$3.80 per patient per day to \$1.18 per patient per day when nursing homes allowed for pets and plants to be introduced into patient's environments. Nursing homes in New York, Missouri and Texas were all used in that study.

-Pet owners had lower blood pressure, lower triglyceride and lower cholesterol levels than non-owners.

-One element of the study cited that heart attack sufferers who own a dog have an eight times better chance of surviving one year as opposed to non-owners.

-Pets provide internal chemical therapeutics for people. Tests show that within minutes of petting a dog, the humans and dogs alike experience massive release of such beneficial hormones as prolactin, oxytocin and phenylethylamine.

-There is evidence that pets help combat allergies in children. One study found that living with two or more cats and dogs as toddlers made children less susceptible to other allergy-inducing substances by the time they turned 7.

-Children exposed to educational programs on the humane treatment of animals display enhanced empathy for humans

compared with children not exposed to such programs.

-Couples who own pets have closer relationships, are more satisfied in marriage, and better cope with stress than couples without pets. These couples also tended to have more frequent contact with each other and other people as well.

Most of these results are not surprising to most of us who are pet owners; one basic premise we accept is that pets decrease our feelings of loneliness and isolation. For those wishing to link our emotional health to physical health, it stands to reason that pet owners enjoy better physical health because they exercise more with their pets. It has even been shown that our coping mechanisms are enhanced by the support of a pet. People with AIDS who own pets experience less depression and reduced personal stress, therefore helping their quality of life.

This may seem a bit trite as an arbitrary

example, but consider the movie "Castaway," when Tom Hanks was isolated from civilization and had to use multiple coping mechanisms to survive both physically and emotionally. Can we ever forget the volleyball he named Wilson, who he talked to daily, ironically to help preserve his own sanity? I noted that

when "Wilson" became irretrievable and for all intents and purpose lost from the main character's life, depression ensued. His hope for staying alive and being rescued hinged upon this makeshift "companion-pet" that he had improvised as a face on a volleyball.

Can the importance of a living, breathing companion be viewed as anything less in importance?

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