

Pets provide benefits for older adults

Splendido

This pet-loving nation has always had a place in our hearts for furry family members, and for older adults the benefits of owning a pet, on top of companionship, are even greater.

According to the Wall Street Journal, older Americans are spending more on pets and hobbies than they did 20 years ago, emerging as one of the fastest-growing spending categories for 65- to 75-year olds. And as costs are climbing, so too are the advantages of pet ownership. The benefits are countless, both physically and mentally, and for older adults especially, they can have enormous beneficial impact.

Humans are hard-wired for connection, and studies have shown that simply petting, or even just looking at, a dog can increase oxytocin levels, a hormone that lowers blood pressure, helps reduce fear and anxiety, and improves alertness. For those with Alzheimer's, the presence of a pet produces fewer anxious outbursts. Especially when major life events hit, such as illness or the death of a loved one, pets offer therapeutic affection and a shared bond that nurture the individual.

Petting a dog or cat also strengthens sensations such as touch, which diminish with age. Something as simple as touching a pet exercises util-

ity and sustains psychological well-being by stimulating the senses each day. Studies have shown that people also exhibit improved alertness when caring for a pet. Pets help prevent or reduce absent-mindedness by providing a sense of time and helping to maintain a rhythm to the day.

"Pets are an important part of our day," said Marlene Dancil, marketing assistant at Splendido, a continuing care retirement community in Oro Valley, where approximately 20 residents own pets. "There are dogs of all shapes and sizes - from the tiniest Chihuahua, Daisy Lupita; to Smiling Sam, "Sammy" a 100-pound Samoyed." Dancil, a pet owner herself, keeps a ceramic jar of dog treats on her desk for the frequent daily visits she gets from resident pets and their people.

At this pet-friendly community, these companions increase joy and fellowship and Dancil loves the frequent visits from residents and their dogs passing by on their daily walks.

Necessary dog walks ensure regular physical activity in daily schedules. Walks open doors for people to connect with a larger pet-loving community. On a walk, pet owners have a chance to start meaningful conversations that build on their dogs' affinity, and share in the unique experiences of being an animal lover. Not to mention, bending over to feed or



Pets can help keep you healthy and engaged. The simple daily activities and interactions typical between pets and their owners can help older adults maintain a healthy lifestyle both physically and mentally. *Courtesy photo*

stretching to pet a dog or cat often increases a range of motion and activities.

Studies say that pet ownership can lead to better heart health because petting a dog actually lowers heart rate and blood pressure. In fact, research has shown that pet owners often have slightly lower cholesterol and are more likely to survive a heart

attack. One study even suggests that dog owners get better sleep at night and are sick less often.

Pets depend on their owners, who, in turn know that they are loved and appreciated for what they do. This unconditional love can help stave off depression and improve physical health as well.

"Having pets here is good

for everyone," said Dancil, saying that many of the residents who may not currently have pets themselves, were pet owners in the past and truly enjoy the opportunity to have a connection with the animals.

"I see the residents interacting with each other's dogs, and it improves everyone's sense of community," Dancil

continued.

Whether dog, cat, or other pet, all are dependent on their owners for care and attention. In exchange, we reap great benefits for having a best friend always at our side, a sense of responsibility for its care, and often a more positive outlook on life.