



# the Power of Pets

In wondrous ways, animals help us feel better

By Donna Jackel

**W**hen Barbara Dahlen is so down she can't get out of bed, her 14-year-old Himalayan cat, Elmo, literally gets in her face.

"He will walk up, in a very pushy way you can't ignore," says Dahlen, 54. "He'll stick his face right into my face like, 'Here I am—don't forget about me. I need you.' It pulls me out of my depressed thinking."

What's most amazing about Elmo's behavior is that the feline is usually aloof. He only gets physical when his owner becomes immobilized by the depression she has experienced for more than 30 years.

Dahlen also shares her apartment in Grand Rapids, North Dakota, with Phoebe, a joyful Yorkshire terrier. The little dog jumps on her lap to be petted, then licks her face, hands and arms. Since bringing Phoebe home two years ago, Dahlen has reduced her psychotherapy appointments from weekly to monthly. She credits "the emotional support—the love and affection" Phoebe gives her.

"It cuts down on some of the loneliness," Dahlen explains.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the company of a pet can help people who are living with depression. Maybe it's because cats, dogs

and other companion creatures offer unlimited affection and nonjudgmental companionship. They lift our spirits and lower our stress. They counteract symptoms such as isolation, rumination and lethargy.

"All people report feeling less lonely in the presence of animals—even birds," says Alan Beck, director of the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. "Animals are good for everyone, but particularly for anxious and depressed people."

For one thing, pets keep us anchored in the present and distract us from negative or anxious thoughts, says Beck.

"If you can focus on the present in positive ways, it makes you less anxious," he says. "Much anxiety and depression comes from the thoughts of past or future that you are worried about."

For another thing, caring for another creature bolsters self-esteem and provides purpose and a sense of being needed. Bonnie Rosenthal, 36, of Randolph, New Jersey, has recurring anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. No matter how bad she



**I**n fact, "building self-empowerment" is one of four ways pets assist in recovery from serious mental illness, according to a 2009 study published in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. Jennifer P. Wisdom, PhD, an

what factors affect the recovery process. For pet owners, the researchers concluded, companion animals not only boost self-esteem, but also provide empathy, initiate social encounters and serve as substitute or additional family members.

Scientists are still trying to figure out why animals affect us so powerfully. It may be that communing with a pet exercises our emotional muscles, so to speak.

"Our relationship with animals brings intrinsic rewards, separate from those we have with people," says Leslie Irvine, PhD, associate professor of sociology at the University of Colorado at Boulder and author of *If You Tame Me: Understanding Our Connection With Animals* (Temple University Press, 2004). "They stretch our emotional capacities. We can't tell animals we love them, so we have to communicate through touch, eye contact, and other nonverbal [means]."

“Companion animals not only boost self-esteem, but also provide empathy, initiate social encounters and serve as substitute or additional family members.”

may be feeling, she pulls through for her little cockatiel, Patches, who has chronic liver disease.

"Even if I don't feel well, I have to get up to feed him and give him his meds twice a day," she reports.

associate professor of clinical psychology at Columbia University Medical Center and a research scientist at the New York State Psychiatric Institute, and her colleagues surveyed 177 individuals with mental illness to determine

## Information For Patients About Cymbalta

Please read this information carefully before you start taking Cymbalta (sim-BALL-tah), and each time your prescription is refilled, in case anything has changed or new information has become available. This information is not meant to take the place of discussions with your healthcare provider. Talk with your healthcare provider or pharmacist if there is something you do not understand or if you want to learn more about Cymbalta. Always follow your healthcare provider's instructions for taking Cymbalta.

**Warning:** In clinical studies, antidepressants increased the risk of suicidal thinking and behavior in children, adolescents, and young adults with depression and other psychiatric disorders. Anyone considering the use of Cymbalta or any other antidepressant must balance this risk with the clinical need. Short-term studies did not show an increase in the risk of suicidal thinking or behavior with antidepressants in adults older than 24; there was a reduction in risk with antidepressants in adults 65 and older. Suicide is a known risk of depression and some other psychiatric disorders. All patients starting antidepressant therapy should be monitored appropriately and observed closely. Families and caregivers should discuss with the healthcare provider right away any observations of worsening depression symptoms, suicidal thinking and behavior, or unusual changes in behavior. Cymbalta is not approved for use in patients under age 18.

### What is Cymbalta?

Cymbalta is a prescription medicine that is approved to treat multiple conditions. Cymbalta is approved for the treatment of major depressive disorder (MDD), also called depression; generalized anxiety disorder (GAD); and for the management of fibromyalgia (FM) and diabetic peripheral neuropathic pain (DPNP), also called diabetic nerve pain.

### Who should NOT take Cymbalta?

You should not take Cymbalta if:

- You are taking a type of antidepressant known as a Monoamine Oxidase Inhibitor (MAOI), such as Nardil® (phenelzine sulfate), Parnate® (tranylcypromine sulfate), or Emsam® (selegiline transdermal system). Using an MAOI with many prescription medicines, including Cymbalta, can cause serious or even life-threatening reactions. You must wait at least 14 days after you have stopped taking an MAOI before you take Cymbalta. You need to wait at least 5 days after you stop taking Cymbalta before you take an MAOI.
- You have uncontrolled narrow-angle glaucoma (increased eye pressure)
- You are taking an antipsychotic medicine known as Mellaril® (thioridazine)

### What should I talk to my healthcare provider about?

Patients on antidepressants and their families or caregivers should watch for new or worsening depression symptoms, unusual

changes in behavior, and thoughts of suicide, as well as for anxiety, agitation, panic attacks, difficulty sleeping, irritability, hostility, aggressiveness, impulsivity, restlessness, or extreme hyperactivity. Call your healthcare provider right away if you have thoughts of suicide or if any of these symptoms are severe or occur suddenly. Be especially observant within the first few months of treatment or whenever there is a change in dose.

Talk with your healthcare provider:

- About any medical conditions you may have, including kidney or liver problems, glaucoma, diabetes, seizures, or if you have bipolar disorder. Cymbalta may worsen a type of glaucoma or the control of blood sugar in some patients with diabetes
- If you have itching, right upper belly pain, dark urine, yellow skin/eyes, or unexplained flu-like symptoms while taking Cymbalta, which may be signs of liver problems. Severe liver problems, sometimes fatal, have been reported
- About your alcohol use
- If you are taking or plan to take any prescription or nonprescription medicines, as Cymbalta may interact with some of these products
- If you take medications known as triptans, commonly prescribed for migraines. A potentially life-threatening condition may occur when triptans are used with Cymbalta. Symptoms may include high fever, confusion, and stiff muscles
- If you take NSAID pain relievers, aspirin, or blood thinners, as these medications may increase risk of bleeding when used with Cymbalta
- Before stopping Cymbalta or changing your dose. Stopping Cymbalta may result in symptoms including dizziness, nausea, or headache (not a complete list). Your healthcare provider may wish to decrease the dose slowly
- If you are pregnant, plan to become pregnant, or are breast-feeding
- If you experience dizziness or fainting upon standing while taking Cymbalta. This is likely to occur in the first week or when increasing the dose, but may occur at any time during treatment, or when used in combination with certain other drugs
- About your blood pressure. Cymbalta can increase your blood pressure. Your healthcare provider should check your blood pressure prior to and while taking Cymbalta
- If you experience headache, weakness, confusion, problems concentrating, memory problems, or feel unsteady while taking Cymbalta, which may be signs of low sodium levels
- If you develop problems with urine flow while taking Cymbalta

### What should I avoid while taking Cymbalta?

- Cymbalta may cause sleepiness and dizziness. Until you know how Cymbalta affects you, you should not drive a car or operate hazardous machinery.

### What are the most common side effects of Cymbalta?

- In clinical studies for approved indications (depression, generalized anxiety disorder, diabetic nerve pain, and fibromyalgia), the most common side effect was nausea.
- Other common side effects included dry mouth, constipation, sleepiness, increased sweating, decreased appetite, dizziness, and weakness.

**This is not a complete list of side effects.** See Boxed Warning, "Who should NOT take Cymbalta?" and "What should I talk to my healthcare provider about?" See full prescribing information at [www.cymbalta.com](http://www.cymbalta.com). Talk to your healthcare provider if you have questions or develop any side effects. **You are encouraged to report negative side effects of prescription drugs to the FDA. Visit [www.fda.gov/medwatch](http://www.fda.gov/medwatch), or call 1-800-FDA-1088.**

### What should I do if I think I have taken an overdose of Cymbalta?

If you have taken more Cymbalta than has been prescribed for you, contact your healthcare provider, a hospital emergency department, or the nearest poison control center immediately.

### How should I take Cymbalta?

- Take Cymbalta exactly as directed by your healthcare provider.
- Cymbalta should be taken by mouth. Do not open, break, or chew the capsule; it must be swallowed whole.
- Cymbalta can be taken with or without food.
- If you miss a dose, take it as soon as you remember. However, if it is time for your next dose, skip the missed dose and take only your regularly scheduled dose. Do not take more than the daily amount of Cymbalta that has been prescribed for you.
- Remember to refill your prescription before you run out of Cymbalta.
- Talk with your healthcare provider before stopping Cymbalta or changing your dose.

### General advice about Cymbalta

- Store Cymbalta at room temperature and out of the reach of children.
- Medicines are sometimes prescribed for purposes other than the ones listed. This medication has been prescribed for your particular condition. Do not use it for another condition or give this drug to anyone else.
- If you have any questions or concerns, want to report any problems with the use of Cymbalta, or want more information, contact your healthcare provider or pharmacist. Additional information can be found at [www.cymbalta.com](http://www.cymbalta.com).

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Many pet owners speak of the unconditional love their pets shower so generously upon them—the cat purring by your computer, the dog that enthusiastically bounds to meet you at the door even if you're returning from a five-minute errand.

"They are not going to say your hair isn't pretty enough, or your clothes aren't nice enough," notes Barbara Dahlen.

For people who tend to self-isolate, have social anxiety, or are simply shy, having a pooch along can be an ice breaker. In a 2000 study conducted by researchers at the University of Warwick in Coventry, England, 65 strangers stopped to speak with a man or woman out walking a dog, while only three people stopped to talk to that same person walking alone.

"If you are out walking your dog, you are considered more approachable," explains Irvine, who lives with two cats and a dog.

She sees a similar effect even through images decorating her clothes: "Whenever I wear cat socks or T-shirts or earrings, it always starts up conversations."

Dahlen says she now knows many of her neighbors thanks to Phoebe the flirt—including some who assumed she'd just moved in.

**"Pets keep us anchored in the present and distract us from negative or anxious thoughts."**

"When Phoebe meets a neighbor, her little tail starts wagging. She starts acting like they are her favorite person in the world," Dahlen explains. "If it weren't for her, I wouldn't know anyone in the building."

**H**aving to walk the dog also guarantees that you'll get out for daily exercise, no matter what your mood. Studies show that dog owners do walk more frequently. The benefits of regular exercise are well-documented, including cardiovascular fitness, mental alertness, weight control and improved sleep quality. And walking at a brisk pace will release endorphins, which can leave you feeling happier and more relaxed, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Apart from the exercise factor, there is growing evidence that people who live with animals have lower blood pressure and heart rates and decreased levels of cortisol—known as the "stress hormone."

"Just petting a dog, or even looking at fish, gives you a relaxation response," explains Alan Beck.

Bonnie Rosenthal says Patches, her cockatiel, somehow knows when she's upset and will fly across the room, sit alongside her and begin chirping.

"He'll cock his head down so I can rub his head," Rosenthal says, "which calms both of us."

Stroking and touching an animal has "a calming effect," agrees Irvine, adding, "We don't know exactly how this works."

Cheryl Krause-Parello's research supports the theory that being around

animals combats stress and reduces anxiety by lowering our cortisol.

"When you're anxious, your cortisol level kicks in," explains Krause-Parello, RN, an associate professor and director of the Center for Nursing Research at Kean University in Union, New Jersey—and the owner of two dachshunds.

In one recent study, she compared pet owners with individuals who did not own pets. Each group spent 20 minutes with Autumn, a trained therapy dog. The pet owners had lower levels of cortisol overall, but members of the other group experienced a significant drop in cortisol levels after their visit with Autumn.

**J**oseph Lancia, an assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Rochester Medical Center, has his own theory for why being around animals helps us feel better. When we bond with another creature, he says, "it connects us to nature in a deeper sense, which so many people find healing. The more we move away from nature, the more we feel distressed."

Lancia raises Arabian horses and practices equine-assisted therapy at his farm in Hilton, New York. There's no riding involved; instead, Lancia assigns patients an exercise, such as getting a horse to jump over an obstacle or stand still on a tarp, then observes the interaction to gain insights that will be useful in his therapy sessions.

"Is the person focusing on the task, or on how the horse is feeling, or is there some balance between the two?" he says. "Just stepping into a pasture with a 1,200-pound animal is a metaphor for overcoming the fears in your life."

The literature on animal-assisted therapy dates back to 1962, with

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researchers concluding that having a dog, cat, rabbit or horse present during counseling helps engage the client, reduce anxiety and create a sense of safety that is vital to the emotional work of therapy. The practice has gained wide acceptance; for example, the counseling center at Utah State University has been using dogs in individual and group therapy sessions since 1997.

Maggie, a mixed-breed dog owned by Jason E. Mihalko, PhD, seems to make the Boston psychologist's clients feel welcome, safe and understood.

"She goes out and wags her tail,"

he says. "Then, she'll poke them in the back of the knee with her cold nose and herd them into the office. It's a nice way to say hello to someone."

During therapy sessions, Maggie provides comic relief by licking clients, bringing them toys or stealing choice items from a purse.

"I had someone tell me, 'I picked you because I wanted to have a dog to pet when I'm scared.' Sometimes I wonder if people come to see me or Maggie," he jokes.

More importantly, the dog somehow detects when a client is becoming upset—before either human realizes it.



"When clients are having difficulty speaking about a traumatic experience or emotion, Maggie will come over, place her paws on the person's shoulder and nuzzle them," says Mihalko. The psychologist has learned to take that as his cue to ask, "Are you feeling sad about something and don't know how to say it?"

"Without fail, clients have started to cry and disclose something important," says Mihalko. "Maggie has the ability to be connected in ways I don't understand."

Michael Koo of Toronto sometimes brings his lovebird, Baby, along to his part-time job providing peer support at a residence for people with mental health issues.

"Baby is great at breaking the ice," says Koo, who has major depression, generalized anxiety disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder. "They all come out to hold and pet her."

On his own account, having Baby means he no longer comes home to an empty apartment.

"I [used to] feel very isolated—in my own little world. She makes

“Just petting a dog, or even looking at fish, gives you a relaxation response.”

**N**umerous small-scale studies suggest that even brief visits with a pet improve psychological well-being for residents of nursing homes, hospitals and jails.

The residents at Levindale Hebrew Geriatric Center and Hospital in Baltimore include fish, cats and birds. Several dogs drop by during the week to spend time with the human residents—including a soulful-eyed dachshund named Brutus. "If we have a patient who is very anxious and won't cooperate with therapy, we take Brutus as an incentive," says his owner, Beverly Carbonilla, a registered nurse. "When someone is upset, he can sit on their lap and their blood pressure comes down."

me feel less alone," says Koo, adding that his depression has eased since Baby moved in a few months ago. "As soon as I come home, she gets excited, moving from side to side. She flies to my finger or shoulder."

The little bird sits on Koo's shoulder when he watches his favorite TV programs. When he's at the computer, she's there pecking at the keys. And she makes him laugh by hanging upside down on her perch or sitting on his big toe as he lies in bed.

"She'll dive inside my shirt sometimes," he says. "I think she thinks she's a person." **e**

*Donna Jackel is a health writer based in Upstate New York. Her work has been featured in Gannett newspapers and bp Magazine, Cat Fancy, Bark and Rochester magazines.*

## Borrow the benefits

If owning a pet just isn't your thing, or if severe depression makes it difficult for you to care for another creature, there are other ways to reap the mental-health benefits of being around animals. Alan Beck, director of the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University, has these suggestions:

**Visit a zoo.** Farms that open their barns to visitors and even petting zoos can also be an entrée into the animal world.

**Put up a birdfeeder** in your backyard or outside your apartment window. You could also get out to a park to enjoy birds, chipmunks and other critters in their natural setting.

**Set up a home aquarium.** It may take a little work to get the pH levels balanced, but an established fish tank is fairly easy to maintain.

### Some other ideas:

**Walk a friend's dog.** You could also offer to pet-sit for dogs, cats, fish and so forth when friends and family members go on vacation, but be sure you're ready to take on the responsibility.

**Volunteer at an animal shelter.** This is a win-win-win. The shelter gets extra hands to groom, play with or clean up after their charges; you get the feel-good effects of being around animals, and the abandoned pets benefit from your attention.

*Includes reporting by Stephanie Stephens.*