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Study finds the love of a dog or cat helps women cope with HIV/AIDS

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A spoonful of medicine goes down a lot easier if there is a dog or cat around. Having pets is helpful for women living with HIV/AIDS and managing their chronic illness, according to a new study from the Frances Payne Bolton School of Nursing at Case Western Reserve University.

"We think this finding about pets can apply to women managing other chronic illnesses," said Allison R. Webel, instructor of nursing and lead author of the article, "The Relationship Between Social Roles and Self-Management Behavior in Women Living with HIV/AIDS," which appears in the online journal *Women's* Health Issues.

Webel set out to better understand how women manage their HIV/AIDS and stay on track to take their medications, follow doctors' orders and live healthy lifestyles. She conducted 12 focus groups with 48 women to find out what they did to stay healthy. The women had an average age of 42, about 90 percent had children, and more than half were single.

During the focus groups, six predominant social roles emerged that helped and hindered these women in managing their illness: pet owner, mother/grandmother, faith believer, advocate, stigmatized patient, and employee. All roles had a positive impact except stigmatized patient, which prevented women from revealing their illness and seeking out appropriate supports.

"Much information is available about the impact of work and family

roles, but little is known about other social roles that women assume," Webel said.

Being a pet owner was an important surprise, added Webel, who collaborated with co-author Patricia Higgins, a professor of nursing at Case Western Reserve University.

"Pets—primarily dogs—gave these women a sense of support and pleasure," Webel said.

When discussing the effect their pets have on their lives, the women weighed in. "She's going to be right there when I'm hurting," a cat owner said. Another said: "Dogs know when you're in a bad mood…she knows that I'm sick, and everywhere I go, she goes. She wants to protect me."

The human and animal bond in healing and therapy is being recognized, Webel said, as more animals are visiting nursing homes to connect to people with dementia or hospitals to visit children with long hospital stays.

Being a pet owner is just one social aspect of these women's lives. "We found the social context in which this self-management happens is important," Webel said.

Another strong role to emerge was advocate. Participants wanted to give back and help stop others from engaging in activities that might make them sick, the researchers report.

While roles as mothers and workers are well documented, "less-defined social roles also have a positive impact on self-management of their chronic illness," Webel said.

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Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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