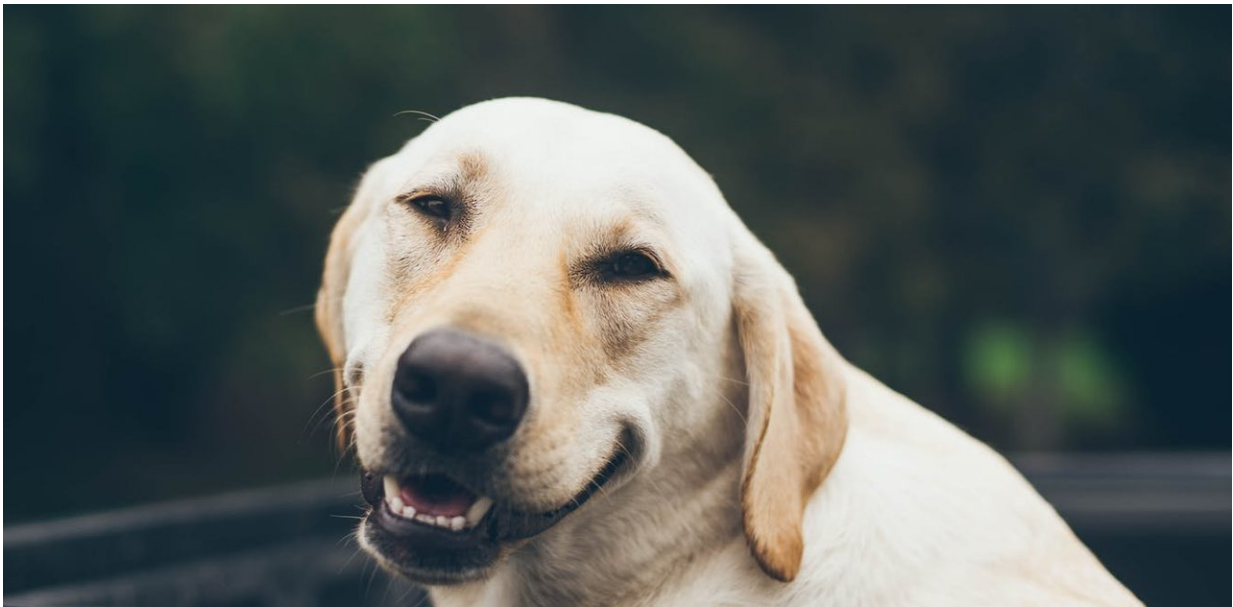


# Four ways having a pet increases your lifespan

January 18 2018, by Janette Young

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Waking up to this every morning would surely give you more will to live. Credit: Unsplash/jonathan daniels, CC BY-SA

Pet owners will often swear their beloved pooch or moggie does wonders for their wellbeing, and now we have empirical proof. A [new study](#) has found dog ownership is linked to improved heart health for humans. This is an important finding, given heart disease is the [leading cause of death](#) globally.

While the new study focuses on dogs and [heart disease](#), it raises the broader question of how [pet ownership](#) affects human longevity. Can pets create [health](#) in humans?

A study known as the "blue zone" study has focused on factors affecting [longevity](#) for over a decade. [Nine factors](#) have been identified as increasing lifespan in the communities studied, and many of these factors are increased by pets.

## 1. Natural everyday movement

Much of the focus on pets providing health has been on dog walking. But anyone who owns a pet knows there are numerous incidental physical activities associated with pet ownership – like getting up to feed their pet; ensuring the pet's food and water is available; and looking after pet "accommodation".

[Reducing prolonged sitting](#) and [increasing incidental domestic activity](#) have both been shown to be protective with regard to health risks.

Pets provide [nudges](#) to everyday movement.

## 2. Having a sense of purpose

At the very simplest level, pets can provide "[a reason to get up in the morning](#)".

This has been shown to be particularly important for groups at risk of, or experiencing, poorer health – including [the aged](#), people with [long-term mental illness](#) and [chronic diseases](#) (including [youth](#)).

Our (as-yet-unpublished) research interviewing older people about the

impact of their pets on health has found pets could be protective against suicide. Pets are seen as reliant on their owners functionally ("need me to feed them or they will die") and emotionally ("he would pine for me terribly").

Feeling unneeded and of no use has been identified as a key [risk factor](#) in suicide.

### **3. Regular destressing activities**

Interaction with pets can reduce stress. There is evidence petting an animal may [reduce heart rates](#), and [co-sleeping with pets](#) may improve some people's quality of sleep.

### **4. Belonging and commitment**

It's in the area of relationships (three of the nine "blue zone" factors) that pets may have their most powerful role in longevity.

Pets can act as a [social catalyst](#), promoting social connections, conversations, and even leading to the development of networks of practical support (a form of commitment).

The connectivity of pets can even [include non-pet owners](#), as people feel safer in pet-owning neighbourhoods. Hence, pets can enable a sense of communal belonging identified as increasing longevity.

The role pets play in mental health (as compared to physical health) may be where the strongest connection to individual longevity lies. There is an established [link between heart disease and mental unwellness](#).

Improving mental wellbeing (often through social enhancements) may be

key in extending life expectancy, especially for population groups vulnerable to poor social connectedness. These groups often have [lower life expectancy](#).

People with [long-term mental](#) illness, [autism](#), and the [homeless](#) report their pets as providing nonjudgmental, simpler relationships than those with humans.

[Older people](#) report pets reducing loneliness and social isolation. Pets may improve vulnerable people's interaction with others either [directly](#) (improving social skills), or their social catalyst role can [override social prejudice](#).

## **Why we need to take pets and health seriously**

In acknowledging people's connection to their pets, we save lives. In [disasters](#), people die staying with, returning to, and trying to save pets. Disaster management planning is increasingly responding to and harnessing this reality, preventing deaths.

It's also being recognised [women](#) stay with violent partners for fear of what will happen to pets. Pet-friendly escape options [can save lives](#).

Public policies that support [pet owners](#), especially in [vulnerable groups](#), have health-promoting outcomes.

It's important to remember animals are not "things" – they are living, breathing others. Simplistic understandings ("one pat of a pet per day") risk endangering animals (overlooking their needs; abuse), and some humans (phobias, allergies).

But for the millions of people who choose to have pets, often seeing them as family, increasing longevity is not the point. They add richness,

creating lives worth living (longer) for.

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