Are Pets the Perfect Prescription for Mental Health Disorders?

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Increasingly, U.S. doctors are prescribing animals as a way to help people living with mental illness.

Several recent studies have shown that four-legged friends can help their owners better function in their day-to-day lives. Now, recent findings published in the journal BMC Psychiatry suggest that pets should be considered "a main source of support" in the management of long-term psychological disorders, the American Council on Science and Health reports.

For the study, researchers at the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom interviewed 54 individuals, older than 18, who were under the care of community mental health services and living with illnesses such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Scientists asked participants to rate the importance of those in their personal networks, including family members, pets, friends and health care providers to help them manage their illness.

Researchers found that 60 percent of respondents identified their animals as the most important support for their mental well-being, and 20 percent cited their pets as being second in importance. Surveys showed that pets significantly helped people living with mental illness to manage stigma associated with their diagnoses and provided unconditional, nonjudgmental support, which many patients said they didn't get from their other social relationships.

The respondents also considered pets to be particularly useful during times of crisis. For instance, when people heard voices or experienced other unpleasant symptoms of their mental illness, an animal could calm and distract them. Additionally, some individuals took pride in their ability to care for their pets, which helped them feel less isolated and more able to fulfill daily responsibilities.

"Pets should be considered a main rather than a marginal source of support in the management of long-term mental health problems, and this has implications for the planning and delivery of mental health services," wrote study authors.

As a way to incorporate pets into people's individual mental health care plans, researchers suggested the wider use of animal-assist therapy teams in hospitals, long-term care facilities and other care communities.

Click here to learn more about how exactly animal companions can help treat psychological disorders.

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