

“Pets can reduce stress, they can reduce depression and loneliness, and they can be beneficial in terms of getting people to exercise.”

ERIKA FRIEDMANN

Impact

Ahead of the Pack

BY LIBBY ZAY

People have long asserted that animal companionship has health benefits – even Florence Nightingale wrote about how pets are valuable for recovery – but there has not always been evidence to support the claim.

OUR RESEARCHER

Erika Friedmann, PhD, associate dean of research

Widely regarded as a pioneer in the relatively young field of anthrozoology, the scholarly investigation of human-animal interaction, Erika Friedmann, PhD, associate dean of research, was the first to publish a study on the cardiovascular health benefits of pet ownership in a peer-reviewed journal. Friedmann is also a founding member and third-time president of the International Society for Anthrozoology and was awarded the International Association of Human Animal Interaction Organizations' Johannes Odendaal Human-Animal Interaction Distinguished Researcher Award in 2016.

Her research began in 1975, when Friedmann was a PhD student at the University of Pennsylvania. She was interested in whether people with heart disease lived longer

depending on their social environments, including pet ownership. After doing extensive interviews with and follow-up on people in a coronary care unit at the University of Maryland Medical Center, she found that people with pets – which go beyond just cats and dogs – were more likely to be alive one year after a heart attack than those without pets.

That initial study inspired decades of further investigations on the impact of the ownership of and interaction with companion animals on human health and function across the lifespan. She confirmed that pet ownership is related to survival in patients with heart disease through two additional studies and has also researched other benefits of pet ownership, such as lowering blood pressure, decreasing stress responses, and increasing social interaction. Overall, Friedmann's

findings have provided rich data demonstrating how pet ownership can improve mental, social, and physiological health status with respect to cognitive functioning, depression, stress responses, anxiety, cardiovascular health, healthy aging, and more.

“Pets can reduce stress, they can reduce depression and loneliness, and they can be beneficial in terms of getting people to exercise,” Friedmann explains.

Last December, Friedmann and Barbara Resnick, PhD '96, RN, CRNP, FAAN, FAANP, professor and Sonya Ziporkin Gershowitz Chair in Gerontology, were awarded a three-year, \$340,000 grant from WALTHAM and Mars Petcare to examine the role of pet ownership in maintaining both physical and mental function in healthy older adults. As part of the project, the researchers designed a pet ownership questionnaire for participants in the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging (BLSA), the longest-running scientific study of human aging in the world; it began in 1958. They will look at extensive data collected by the BLSA along with the pet ownership information collected through the questionnaire to determine if there are any links to changes in healthy aging over time.

“Our idea is to look at trajectories of changes and compare pet owners with non-pet owners,” Friedmann says. “We ask them about the kinds of animals, their attachment to the animals, the amount of contact they have with their animals, and their pet ownership history. And then we can use the BLSA data to look at how it's related to changes in health; for example, changes in depression or cognitive functioning over time.”

In the future, Friedmann hopes to connect the dots and understand exactly who will benefit from animal companionship and in what ways.

“There is research to show that people are more willing to walk if they're walking a dog rather than walking by themselves,” she explains. “For people who live alone and don't have much opportunity for contact with others, walking a dog might be a way to meet others and have a conversation. People who are anxious and afraid to leave their home might gain confidence from having an animal accompany them. Children with autism who can't be in public places because they are bothered by the noise may be able to face the world better with a dog by their side.”

Though she's found proof over the years of the benefits of pet ownership, Friedmann notes that it isn't for everyone. However, that doesn't mean there aren't other ways to take advantage of the positive health outcomes that come from pet companionship. “Go volunteer at an animal shelter or take your neighbor's dog for a walk,” she says. “Those are good ways to get the benefits without owning a pet.” ♦

INSIDE THE RESEARCH

In some studies, Friedmann has employed a sophisticated robotic dog called an AIBO as a variable, allowing her to compare differences between subjects' social interactions with another person, a dog, or a robotic dog. She found that interaction with real pets reaps the most positive health rewards.

