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The Bond Effect

The Science Behind Why Pets Matter to Human Health and Well-Being





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Executive Summary

The human–animal bond (HAB) is one of the most powerful and scientifically validated relationships in our lives. Decades of interdisciplinary research—spanning psychology, physiology, medicine, and social science—confirm that interactions with companion animals can measurably enhance human health, happiness, and resilience. From lowering stress and blood pressure to improving mood, immune response, and social connection, the evidence consistently points to the same truth: animals make us better.

“*Animals make us better.*”



Engaging with companion animals—particularly dogs—has been shown to influence human physiology in ways that support relaxation, trust, and emotional connection. Research demonstrates that interactions such as mutual gaze or gentle petting can increase oxytocin, a hormone linked to bonding and calm, while reducing stress-related markers including cortisol (Nagasawa et al., 2015; Petersson et al., 2017). These effects mirror patterns seen in supportive human relationships, suggesting that our connections with animals complement—not replace—other important interpersonal bonds. Emotional benefits are especially well documented in dog–human interaction studies, where increased positive affect and reduced distress have been observed during moments of contact (Matijczak et al., 2024). More broadly, individuals living with companion animals often describe a sense of comfort, routine, and emotional safety that contributes to daily well-being (Brooks et al., 2018).

“*Positive interactions with animals can influence our stress and bonding chemistry.*”

Beyond emotional support, the human–animal bond is associated with several indicators of physical health. Findings from the Kardiovize 2030 Project show that dog owners tend to have more favorable cardiovascular-health profiles, including healthier lipid levels, improved glucose regulation, and greater physical activity—patterns attributed in part to lifestyle behaviors such as regular dog walking (Maugeri et al., 2019). These associations echo earlier work from the American Heart Association noting that dog ownership is linked to reduced cardiovascular-disease risk factors, though causation cannot be assumed (Levine et al., 2013).

For many pet parents, shared routines like walks, play, and daily care naturally promote movement and structure, supporting better fitness and metabolic health over time (Martins et al., 2023). Emerging research also suggests that early-life exposure to household pets may influence immune development in ways that could reduce allergic sensitization, though findings vary across studies and populations.

Evidence Snapshot

"Positive interactions with dogs can increase oxytocin and reduce cortisol."

— **Nagasawa et al., 2015**



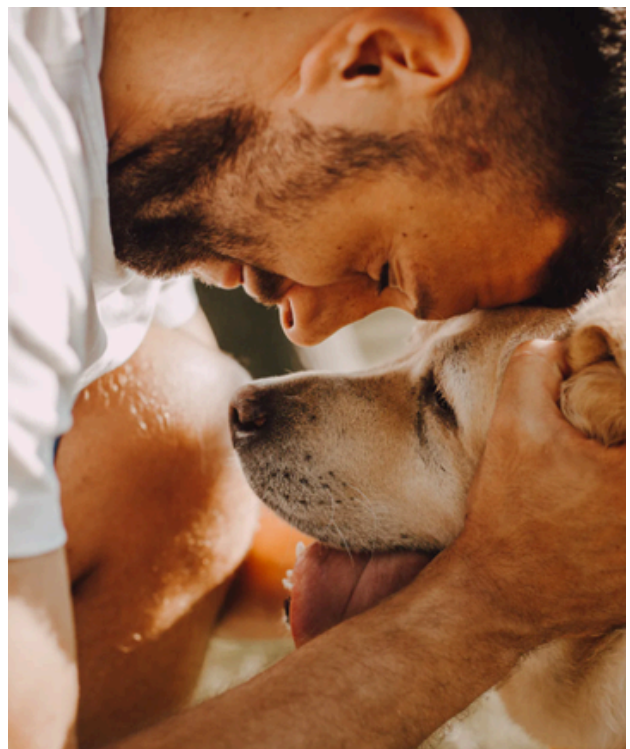
One bond. Many pathways to well-being.

The benefits of the human–animal bond extend into social and relational dimensions of well-being. Interaction with pets can help facilitate social contact, strengthen neighborhood ties, and promote a sense of belonging within communities (Wood et al., 2015). Families often report that animals contribute to empathy, responsibility, and emotional growth in children, with developmental studies highlighting promising associations between positive child–pet relationships and social confidence (Purewal et al., 2024). In settings such as elder care, companion animals and therapy animals have been associated with reductions in loneliness and agitation, as well as enhanced engagement and positive mood (Friedmann et al., 2015).

For individuals navigating disability or trauma, service animals and emotional support animals can offer practical assistance and relational grounding that supports daily functioning and recovery (Rodriguez et al., 2019). While these patterns are not universal and outcomes can differ across individuals and species, the emerging evidence underscores a consistent theme: human–animal relationships play a meaningful role in supporting health, resilience, connection, and quality of life.

Evidence Snapshot

*"Many pet parents report lower stress and emotional comfort during interactions with their animals." — **Brooks et al, 2018***



Introduction

The human–animal bond (HAB) is more than companionship—it is a dynamic, mutually influential relationship between people and animals that can support well-being for both. The American Veterinary Medical Association describes the HAB as a connection “influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both,” underscoring its reciprocity and depth. Over the past four decades, this relationship has evolved from anecdotal observation to a subject of systematic scientific inquiry, becoming a recognized dimension of human wellness across multiple fields.

“*The HAB isn’t a trend — it’s a biologically rooted relationship.*”

Early HAB research in the late 20th century focused on measurable physiological responses during positive human–animal interactions, including reductions in stress markers such as heart rate, blood pressure, and cortisol (Allen et al., 2002). Since then, the field has broadened to incorporate behavioral, neurological, developmental, and social-science perspectives.

Much of the strongest physiological evidence comes from dog–human interaction studies, while broader relational and psychosocial patterns have been explored across diverse populations, including children, older adults, veterans, individuals with chronic illness, and community pet owners. Across these groups, companion animals are often associated with improved emotional regulation, increased physical activity, and enhanced social engagement.



The science of the HAB is generally organized into three overlapping domains: physical health, mental and emotional well-being, and social and developmental connection. Each domain represents a different pathway through which animals may influence human life—physiologically, psychologically, and relationally. In the sections that follow, we explore each of these areas, drawing from a growing body of interdisciplinary evidence that affirms what many pet parents already feel intuitively: the relationships we share with our animals add depth, steadiness, and joy to daily life.

“*Forty years of research show the bond can meaningfully support well-being.*”



Today, the HAB is understood not only for its therapeutic potential but also for its capacity to enrich everyday life. Companion animals can help structure daily routines, encourage movement, and provide a steady source of comfort and connection. For many people, animals serve as stabilizing partners during periods of stress or uncertainty, supporting resilience and offering a sense of emotional presence (Brooks et al., 2018; O’Haire, 2013). These experiences, while varying across individuals and species, reflect a broader pattern: human–animal relationships can play a meaningful role in supporting well-being across the lifespan.

“*Forty years of research show the bond can meaningfully support well-being.*”

Physical Health Benefits



Physical health is one of the most frequently studied dimensions of the human–animal bond, with much of the strongest evidence emerging from research on dog–human interaction.

“*A familiar dog’s presence can support the body’s relaxation response.*”

While findings vary across individuals and contexts, a growing body of work suggests that companion animals—particularly dogs—may influence human physiology and support healthier daily routines.

Reducing Stress and Supporting Heart Health

Interactions with familiar animals can activate the body’s relaxation response. Studies show that gentle petting or positive engagement with dogs is associated with reductions in cortisol, a hormone linked to stress, and increases in oxytocin, which supports feelings of calm and connection (Nagasawa et al., 2015; Petersson et al., 2017).

✓ Quick Facts

“Petting a familiar dog has been associated with reduced cortisol.”

In controlled settings, individuals often exhibit modest decreases in heart rate and blood pressure when interacting with their pets compared to resting quietly alone (Allen et al., 2002). Although these physiological changes are typically small, they may contribute to an overall pattern of emotional and physiological regulation for many pet owners.

“*A wagging tail does more for your heart than you think.*”

Longer-term associations between pet ownership and cardiovascular health have also been observed. Findings from the Kardiovize 2030 Project indicate that dog owners tend to have more favorable cardiovascular-health profiles—including healthier lipid levels, improved glucose regulation, and higher physical activity—than non-owners, differences that may reflect lifestyle factors such as regular dog walking (Maugeri et al., 2019). The American Heart Association has noted similar associations, while emphasizing that the evidence does not establish causation (Levine et al., 2013). Together, these patterns point to promising, though not universal, links between dog ownership and cardiovascular well-being.

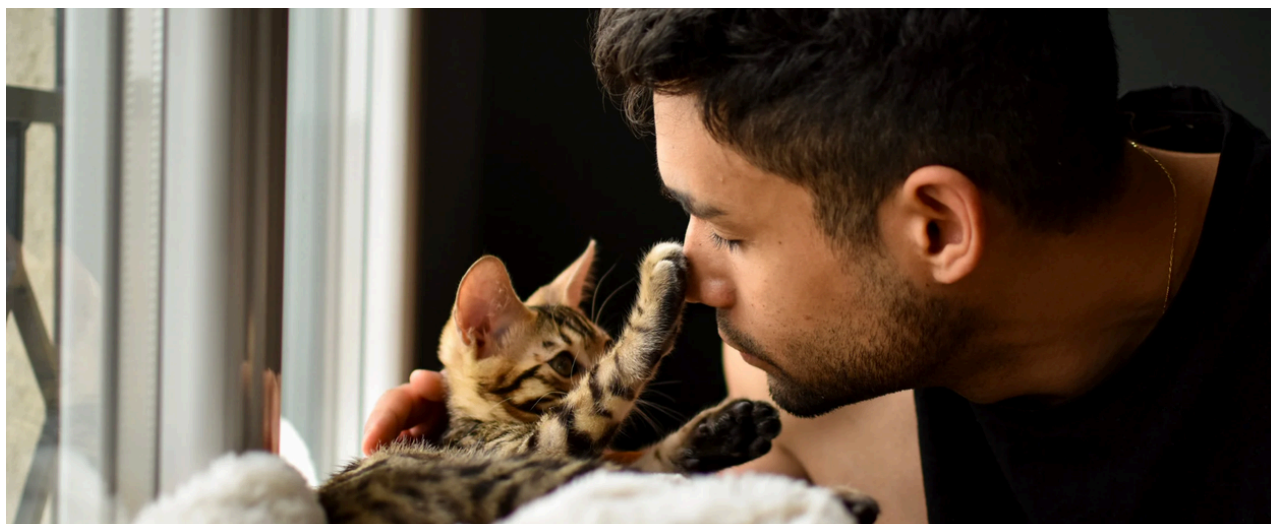


✓ Quick Facts

Dog owners are more likely to meet daily exercise guidelines.

Encouraging Movement and Physical Activity

One of the most consistent findings in HAB research is that dogs often promote physical movement. Dog owners are more likely to meet recommended daily activity levels through walking and outdoor play, and even short, routine walks contribute to overall fitness and cardiovascular health (Martins et al., 2023). Beyond exercise, daily care routines—feeding, grooming, and structured interactions—support a sense of purpose and encourage health promoting habits that can enhance physical well-being over time.



Emerging Research on Immunity and Early-Life Exposure

Evidence exploring the relationship between animal exposure and immune development is growing but mixed. Some studies suggest that early-life exposure to household pets may shape microbial environments in ways that influence immune function and potentially reduce certain allergic sensitivities. However, findings differ across studies, species, and environmental conditions, and more research is needed before drawing definitive conclusions.

“Through routine and connection, pets can support healthier daily living.”

Other exploratory work has examined whether interactions with animals may influence short-term immune markers such as immunoglobulin A (IgA), though results remain preliminary (McNicholas & Collis, 2006).

Study Spotlight

“Dog owners had healthier heart profiles and greater physical activity.”
— **Kardiovize 2030 Study**

Overall Patterns Across the Lifespan

Although effects vary and are influenced by many factors—including the type of pet, caregiving responsibilities, environmental context, and individual health—many pet parents report that their animals contribute to healthier daily rhythms and support a sense of vitality. Whether through regular walks, moments of affection, or the grounding structure of shared routines, companion animals can play a meaningful role in supporting physical well-being for many individuals.



Mental and Emotional Well-Being

The emotional comfort that animals provide is one of the most recognized aspects of the human–animal bond. For many people, pets are steady companions who bring routine, presence, and a sense of connection to everyday life. While experiences differ across individuals, a growing body of research—especially studies focused on dog–human interaction—supports the idea that time spent with animals can contribute to emotional regulation, reduced stress, and feelings of comfort.

“*Pets are emotional anchors in a chaotic world.*”

Calming the Mind and Supporting Emotional Regulation

Interactions with familiar animals can influence physiological markers associated with stress and emotional calm. In studies involving dogs, gentle petting or shared gaze has been linked to reductions in cortisol and increases in oxytocin, a hormone associated with bonding and positive affect (Matijczak et al., 2024; Nagasawa et al., 2015).

These shifts are generally small but may help explain why many people experience moments of ease or grounding in the presence of their pets.

Beyond these immediate effects, routines associated with caregiving—feeding, walking, grooming, observing—can create structure and predictability that support emotional steadiness. Survey-based studies have found associations between pet companionship and lower reported loneliness, as well as greater feelings of security and social support (Brooks et al., 2018). While these findings vary and are influenced by individual circumstances, they highlight how relationships with animals may complement other forms of emotional coping.

Supporting Mental Health and Recovery

Animals also play a role in therapeutic and clinical settings. Research on animal-assisted interventions—including equine-assisted activities, therapy-dog programs, and service animal partnerships—suggests potential benefits for individuals experiencing trauma, anxiety, depression, or social withdrawal (O’Haire, 2013). These programs do not replace traditional treatment, but for some participants, animals can provide a relational bridge that helps foster trust, motivation, or emotional comfort during therapeutic work.

“**Positive interactions with dogs can increase oxytocin, a hormone linked to bonding.**



Outside of formal therapy, many people describe their pets as sources of companionship during periods of stress, loss, or transition.

Study Spotlight

“One study found that interacting with a familiar dog was associated with reduced psychological distress.”— **Matijczak et al., 2024**

These personal experiences are supported by qualitative research showing that animals can offer nonjudgmental presence and help people feel less alone during difficult moments (Brooks et al., 2018). While outcomes are not universal, this sense of emotional reciprocity is a common theme across many accounts of the human–animal connection.

“*A soft nudge. A shared routine. A quiet moment. Emotional equilibrium lives in the small things.*”



Building Emotional Resilience and Everyday Joy

Companion animals often contribute to moments of joy, playfulness, or quiet companionship that can support emotional resilience over time. For children and adolescents, caring for a pet can encourage empathy, responsibility, and self-regulation— skills that support healthy emotional development (Purewal et al., 2024). Among older adults, animals may help maintain routine, purpose, and engagement, which can positively influence mood and overall well-being (Friedmann et al., 2015). Though experiences vary widely, these patterns highlight the meaningful role that animals can play in supporting emotional connection and resilience at different life stages.

“*Animals don’t judge our feelings — they sit with them.*”



Social and Developmental Connection

Human–animal relationships extend beyond private companionship—they can also shape how people connect with others and engage in their communities.

“*Pets turn strangers into neighbors and moments into friendships.*”

While experiences vary, research suggests that pets may support social interaction, developmental skills, and relational well-being across different stages of life. These effects are not universal, but they highlight important ways the human–animal bond can complement social and developmental health.

✓ Quick Facts

“Dog owners often report greater neighborhood social contact.”

Building Social Bridges and Community Belonging

Pets—especially dogs—often serve as social catalysts. Encounters at dog parks, during neighborhood walks, or within online pet communities can create opportunities for interaction among people who might not otherwise meet. Research has shown associations between pet ownership and increased neighborhood social contact, friendship formation, and perceptions of social support (Wood et al., 2015). These connections are typically informal, but for some individuals they help foster a sense of belonging and community trust.

“Every walk, every wag
— a small act of
community building.”

Some studies also suggest that pet-friendly environments—such as walkable neighborhoods, housing communities, or shared outdoor spaces—may support civic engagement and social cohesion (Jackson et al., 2020). While these findings depend on broader environmental and social factors, they point to the role animals can play in creating moments of connection that extend beyond the individual.

✓ Quick Facts

Pets can provide emotional comfort during stressful experiences.



✓ Quick Facts

“Some children develop empathy and self-regulation through caring for pets.”

Supporting Development in Children and Adolescents

For children and adolescents, relationships with pets can offer opportunities to practice empathy, responsibility, and emotional awareness—skills linked to positive developmental outcomes. Research indicates that nurturing and caring for animals may support prosocial behaviors and help children develop perspective-taking and self-regulation (Purewal et al., 2024). Longitudinal studies have also identified associations between strong child–pet attachments and greater social confidence and peer connection (BMC Pediatrics, 2022). These patterns do not apply to all children, but they reflect meaningful trends observed in developmental research.

Pets may also provide emotional safety during challenging transitions such as family changes, school stress, or illness. For some children, talking to or spending quiet time with an animal can serve as a supportive outlet that complements human relationships rather than replacing them.

“For many people, the bond supports connection within families and communities.”



Enhancing Quality of Life Across Adulthood and Aging

The potential benefits of the human–animal bond extend into adulthood and older age. For many adults, animals offer companionship that can help buffer daily stress or create moments of routine and stability.

Among older adults, pets may contribute to a sense of continuity, purpose, and engagement, particularly for individuals living alone or experiencing limited mobility. In elder care and dementia–support settings, therapy animals have been associated with reductions in agitation, increased social interaction, and improved affective engagement (Friedmann et al., 2015). These outcomes vary widely, but they illustrate how animal companionship can play a supportive role across different phases of life.

A Lifespan Perspective

Although the impact of the human–animal bond is shaped by many factors—including caregiving responsibilities, environmental context, individual preferences, and species specific behaviors—research across disciplines highlights its potential to support social connection and developmental well-being. From early opportunities to learn empathy and responsibility to meaningful companionship in older adulthood, animals can help many people feel more connected, supported, and engaged.

Study Spotlight

“Pet ownership increases neighborhood social interaction and friendship formation.” —
Wood et al., 2015



Conclusion and Future Directions

The science of the Human-Animal Bond continues to deepen our understanding of how profoundly animals shape human life. Across every dimension—physical, emotional, social, and developmental—companion animals contribute to health, happiness, and resilience. The evidence is no longer anecdotal or isolated; it is broad, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary, spanning neuroscience, cardiology, psychology, and sociology. Together, these findings affirm that our relationships with animals are not a luxury of modern life but a fundamental part of what it means to thrive as humans.

“*The HAB is increasingly recognized as relevant to public well-being.*”

“*Emerging research suggests that connection—across species—can support well-being.*”

As research evolves, the field is expanding beyond individual well-being to explore the bi-directional nature of the bond—the ways humans, too, influence animal health and welfare. Studies now emphasize that mutual care, respect, and emotional attunement enhance the well-being of both species. In this sense, the human–animal bond represents one of the most accessible and compassionate models for understanding connection, empathy, and shared flourishing.

“As the science evolves, one thing remains constant: caring changes both of us.”

Future directions in HAB research are increasingly focused on prevention, inclusion, and social equity. Public health experts are examining how pet ownership and animal-assisted interventions can reduce loneliness, improve community cohesion, and support vulnerable populations. Educators are exploring the developmental impact of classroom pets and therapy animals.

Clinicians are refining how service animals and emotional support companions can be ethically integrated into treatment and rehabilitation. At the same time, policymakers and urban planners are recognizing the economic and civic benefits of pet-inclusive communities, from housing to workplace wellness initiatives (Jackson et al., 2020).

The future of the human–animal bond is not only in laboratories or clinics—it’s in the homes, hearts, and daily lives of people who choose to care. At myFurevers, we honor that care. We celebrate the science. And together, we ensure that the stories of our beloved companions live forever.



“For many people, pets are companions in resilience, well-being, and joy.”





Acknowledgments

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About myFurever

At myFurever, our mission is to celebrate the bond between people and their pets by creating a private, intentional space that supports connection, meaning, joy, and whole-person health.

We stand at the intersection of science, storytelling, and everyday life—translating decades of research into small, powerful moments that pet parents can feel. By capturing play, comfort, ritual, and companionship, our community brings The Bond Effect to life, showing how a wag, a purr, or a nudge can support emotional and physical well-being. Through journaling, sharing, remembrance, and giving back, our users transform evidence into lived experience, creating a tapestry of gratitude, resilience, and joy. At myFurevers, we honor both the measurable and immeasurable dimensions of love between people and their animals—because these moments are not just memories; they are the stories that shape our lives.

