



# e-quilibrium

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## Pets

My family's 10-year-old Labrador retriever was euthanized recently as he was deteriorating from advanced cancer. We certainly feel a sense of loss as Coby was an ever-present member of our family. There were some instances when his behavior was exasperatingly similar to that of Marley, the Labrador who inspired the book and motion picture, Marley and Me. But much more pervasive was the enjoyment we had during his life with us. The experience of having a pet die is very common, as nearly two-thirds of households in the United States have domesticated pets.

There are many reasons why people have pets. Perhaps the most common motive is that people enjoy the companionship that a dog or cat can bring. In some cases, getting a pet is a spur of the moment emotional decision: "Isn't that puppy cute." Pets can bring challenges and significant costs, financial and otherwise, but most pet owners say the benefits outweigh the costs.

Does having a pet benefit health and well-being? There are published studies reporting that pet owners make fewer doctors visits, have lower blood pressure, and get more regular exercise. Other data indicate that among persons with coronary artery disease, pet ownership is associated with lower mortality rates. The most common theory as to why having a pet may benefit physical health is stress reduction. With apology to the cat in my home, the health benefits of having a companion pet appear to be stronger with dogs than cats.

Regarding mental health, having a companion animal has been reported to be associated with less depression and anxiety. Socially, pets can function as a “social lubricant” in that they may serve as an “ice breaker” for interaction between people.

There are critics of the human-companion animal research that argue that the methodology in many of the studies is poor. It is also important to note that some investigations have not found such health benefits. There can be injuries (e.g., falls, attacks) associated with companion pets, and allergies may be exacerbated by indoor pets (although there is also some evidence that having pets in the home can actually reduce the development of allergies).

As a person who has had a dog in my home for most of my life, it is difficult to be unbiased about this topic. Surely at the time when one loses a pet, the resulting void does not enhance well-being. But I have been through this experience before and knowing the joys of having a dog, I look forward to the time when I will have another canine companion.

Paul J. Hershberger, Ph.D.

... is a clinical health psychologist. He is Professor of Family Medicine and Director of Behavioral Science for the Family Medicine Residency Program, Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine. His clinical practice includes psychotherapy, consultation, and coaching.

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To contact Dr. Hershberger:

e-mail: [paul.hershberger@wright.edu](mailto:paul.hershberger@wright.edu)  
phone: (937) 734-2021