

Pets and Mental Health – What are the Benefits?

Caring for a pet can help our mental health in many ways, including:

- Increasing your physical activity. Dog owners are likely to take their pets for a walk or run every day. This can be a fun way to fit [exercise](#) into your routine providing companionship.
- Pets can give you a sense of security and someone to share the day with. Caring for them can help you feel wanted and needed. This can be especially valuable for [older people](#) or those who live alone reducing [anxiety](#).
- The companionship of a pet can help to ease your anxiety boosting self-confidence.
- Pets can be great listeners, offer unconditional love and won't criticise you. This can help your self-confidence, especially if you feel isolated or misunderstood.
- Helping you meet new people. Dog owners often stop and chat with each other on walks. But other pets can be a way to meet people too: in pet shops, training classes or online groups, for example.
- Adding structure to your day. Feeding, exercising and caring for a pet can help you keep to a daily routine, which can help you feel more grounded and focused. It can give your day purpose and a sense of achievement.

Pets may also help with specific conditions. For example, people with [ADHD](#) may benefit from the structure and routine that a pet needs. Managing their pet's responsibilities and keeping track of time – to feed or walk them on time, for example – may help them in other areas of their lives. Some people with ADHD are hyperactive – especially children - and playing with a pet can be a great way to release excess energy, whether that's walking a dog, running around with a kitten or handling a friendly Guinea Pig.

[Autistic people](#) can benefit from having a pet. Pets provide the kind of unconditional relationship that can help someone build social skills and confidence. They can provide a sense of calm and reassurance if their owner feels overwhelmed. Autistic children with sensory issues can involve their pets in sensory integration activities to help them get used to how something feels against their skin or how it smells or sounds.

Is having a pet right for me?

Having a pet is a serious commitment and not something to do on a whim. You'll need to have the time, money and energy for a pet, as well as a calm home environment with routine and consistency. Fostering a pet or helping a friend with theirs can help you see whether having your own is right for you.

When you're ready to think about getting a pet, consider:

- how much outdoor space do you have
- how active you are
- how much time do you have to spend with your pet
- how much money do you have for vet's bills, insurance, food, toys, etc.? Some charities offer low-cost vet care, but they are limited to certain areas and have financial criteria
Animal charity PDSA has other key things to think about too.

What if I can't have a pet?

If you can't afford a pet, live somewhere you're not allowed one, or you're worried about having times where you're too unwell to care for a pet, there are other options.

The simplest option may be spending time with friends' pets, whether that's walking their dogs, stroking their cats or cuddling their guinea pigs. They might be glad to have someone to pet sit for them while they're on holiday. You can also consider signing up as a house sitter: you look after someone's home, garden and pets in return for free accommodation.

If you miss having a dog in your life, you could sign up with [BorrowMyDoggy](#). They connect dog owners to local people who would love to walk or play with a dog. [The Cinnamon Trust](#) also needs volunteer dog walkers to help out older people or those with a health condition or disability that means they can't walk their dog as easily anymore. They also need people to foster pets while their owners are in hospital.

Contact a rescue centre near you to see what volunteering opportunities they may have. They may need volunteers to exercise, care for and socialise their pets. You could consider fostering an animal if you can have a pet on a short-term basis but can't commit to one long-term. Some shy or scared animals need the peace and quiet of a home while waiting to be adopted.

Cats Protection and Dogs Trust both need people to provide temporary foster care for pets belonging to people fleeing domestic violence who may not be able to take their pets into a refuge with them.

If you would like to learn more about **'Pets and Mental Health – What are the Benefits'** then please join our webinar on **Monday 20th February at 12pm** using the details below –

<https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/6487453284234879324>

If you are unable to join the webinar live, a recording of the session can be accessed using the same link above after the webinar has taken place.

If you wish to contact the Care first telephone counselling and information line then please don't hesitate to call the Freephone number provided by your organisation and you can speak to a professional in confidence.