Dear Alice,

Do you have any information regarding the use of pets for stress management?

**Answer**

Dear Reader,

"Pet therapy" is widely used in nursing homes, prisons, hospitals, and schools to reduce loneliness, anger, depression, and stress. Research in this area has shown that cardiac patient survival rates were higher for those who owned pets, and that elderly people with pets made fewer visits to the doctor's office. Significant decreases in resting heart rate and blood pressure, as well as mood changes, have also been observed when research subjects played with their pets. Similar physiological changes were seen among the animals, too. Amazing, right?

Science aside, pets ? especially for dog-owning city dwellers ? usually mean a brisk walk or two... or three... or four times a day, and that's always good for a little human stress management via fresh air and exercise. Socially, pets can be a great conversation-starter: "Oh, what a cute doggie... and not a bad master either." Of course, fish, turtles, birds, hamsters, ferrets, and other domesticated animals are capable of enhancing the relaxation response and relationship development just like their dog and cat cousins.

If you're contemplating pet ownership with the goal of stress reduction, make sure that owning and caring for Fido or Whiskers won't cause you more stress in the long-run. You might first ask yourself: are you allowed to have a pet where you live; will you or someone you trust be able to properly walk and feed your new best friend; are there children around who might be frightened (or vice-versa) by the presence of a four-legged furball; and, is your house or apartment big enough to meet both human and creature comfort criteria? Plus, if you live here in New York City, don't forget that you have to scoop Spot's poop, too. Always weigh the pet's best interests against your reasons for wanting a companion. If you're not sure you want to commit to pet ownership, but would value some animaly companionship, you may consider being a foster parent to homeless pup or volunteer at a local animal shelter. You could also pay some extra visits to your pet-owning friends.

You could contact animal care organizations such as your local ASPCA [2], Bide-a-Wee [3], or Waggytail Rescue [4] if you are interested in pet adoption. These agencies help to control stray and unwanted animal population, and many provide important physical check-ups and
vaccinations.

Alice!
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