

Introduction to SAINT

by Diane Novak

Recently, medical science has acknowledged what animal lovers around the globe have known all along. Animals not only make us feel good, they are good 'for us' too.

"A study at Cambridge University found that owning a pet can improve ones health in as little as one month! Pet owners reported fewer minor health problems like headaches, colds and hay fever. In another study involving Medicare patients, seniors who owned dogs actually visited their doctors less than those patients who did not have canine companionship".¹

And it gets better! Research done at the State University of New York, Buffalo, looked at the effects of pet ownership on 48 stockbrokers who were already taking medication for hypertension. "It found that the 24 stockbrokers who were given a pet had a significant reduction in high blood pressure accompanying stress than did those without pets".²

Alan Entin, Ph.D., of the American Psychological Association says the study concluded that "Hypertension can be controlled with a pet *without drug therapy*. We have demonstrated that dogs can indeed have a significant health effect on people who live alone and have borderline hypertension."³

Besides the medical benefits that living with a pet affords us, there are great social rewards as well. When my husband's Uncle Gordon lost his wife, he went into a deep depression. His doctor said "Gordon, you need companionship. Go to the pound and get yourself a dog". So Gordon followed his doctor's orders and his whole life turned around. Today Uncle Gordy's day revolves around his dog, Larry and the new friends he has made at the dog park.

Living with a pet is the best way to shift the focus from 'me' to 'we'. When there is feeding, walking, litter box or cage cleaning to do there is less time to think, worry and obsess about oneself.

Pioneers of the Eden Alternative, a progressive approach to nursing home living believe that the elderly battle *Three Plagues of the Human Condition*. These are loneliness, helplessness, and boredom. It is believed these three "account for the bulk of suffering in a human community".⁴

Adopting a pet will take the senior a quantum leap from the three plagues. Loneliness, boredom and helplessness will be replaced by companionship, feelings of self worth and empowerment.

Animals have a way of gently nudging us into action. And our reward for this response is the gift of unconditional love doled out in large furry doses each and every day.