

# TOP 5 MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS OF HAVING A PET

from the Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) and Mental Health America (MHA)

## 1 Pets Alleviate Stress

Owning a pet is linked to significantly lower heart rate and blood pressure in response to stress. In one study of cardiovascular reactivity to stress, those with pets had significantly lower resting baseline heart rates and blood pressure and faster recovery of these parameters to baseline after cessation of stress.<sup>1</sup>



## 2

## Pets Improve Mood & Fight Depression

According to a [HABRI Survey of family physicians](#), 87% said their patients' mood or outlook had improved as a result of pet ownership. Another study found that pets, by serving as a distraction from typical symptoms and encouraging activity, helped people cope with depression and other long-term mental health issues.<sup>2</sup> Research has also demonstrated that pet owners laugh more – one study found that those with dogs or cats laughed more in their daily lives than people without pets. Pet owners reported laughing more on a daily basis, including reactions to their pet and spontaneous laughter, compared to non-pet owners.<sup>3</sup>



## 3

## Pets Reduce Loneliness

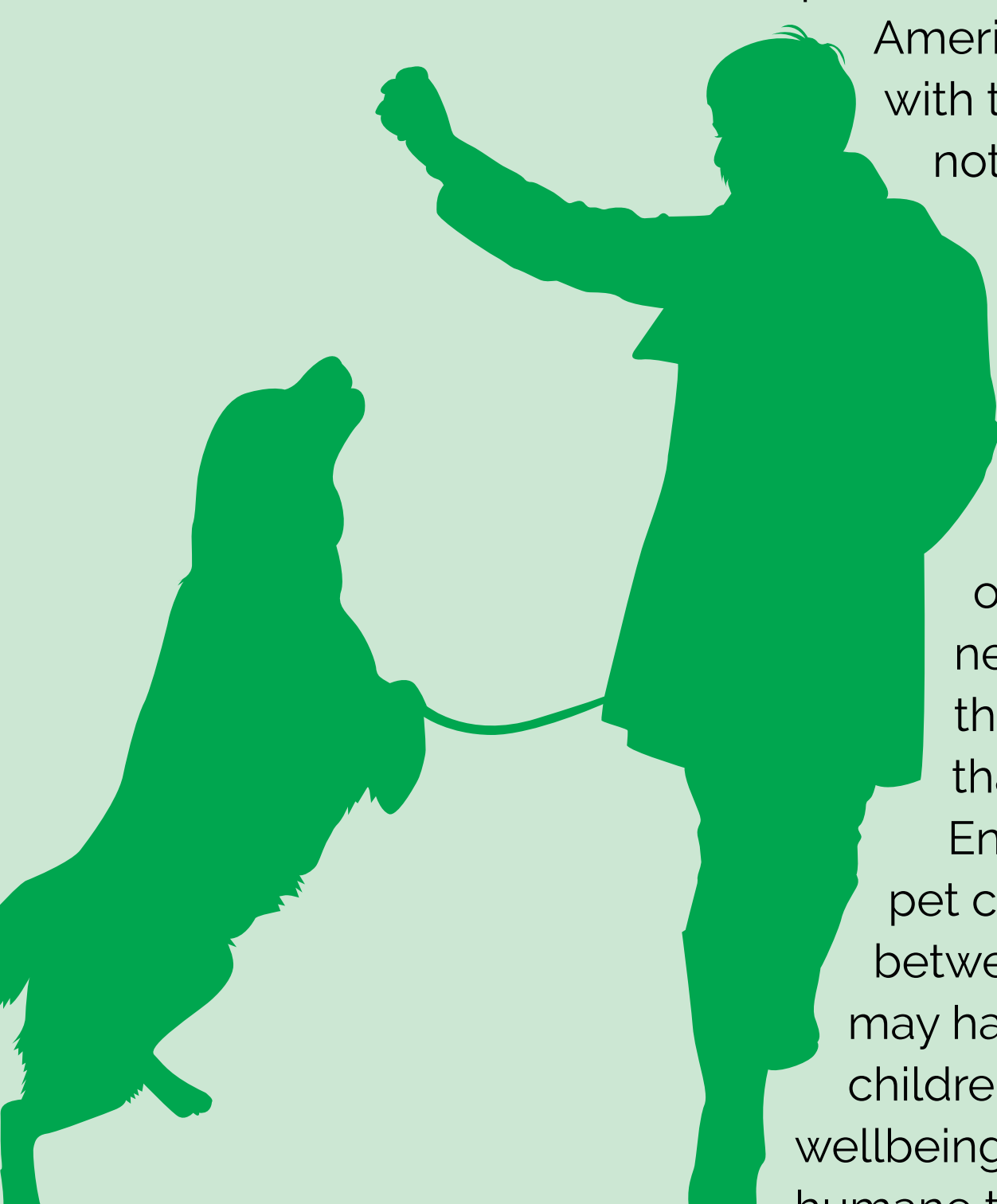
Pets can provide people with the kind of social support that can help reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation. A [survey](#) commissioned by HABRI and Mars Petcare<sup>4</sup> found that 85% of respondents (pet owners and non-pet owners) believe pet interaction can help reduce loneliness and 76% agree human-pet interactions can help address social isolation. In older adults, the role of pet ownership may provide a sense of purpose and meaning, reducing loneliness and increasing socialization. These benefits may also increase resilience in older adults against mental health disorders, which may positively influence their mental health outcomes.<sup>5</sup> A study involving 217 people found that pet owners were less lonely, exhibited greater self-esteem, were more physically fit, were more conscientious, were more socially outgoing, and had healthier relationship styles (i.e., they were less fearful and less preoccupied) than non-owners.<sup>6</sup> Research has also demonstrated that for those living alone, pet ownership can help reduce loneliness. In particular, pet ownership is associated with increased morale<sup>7</sup> and decreased loneliness<sup>8</sup> in women living alone.



## 4

## Pets Improve Wellbeing

According to a [Nationwide/HABRI survey](#), 96% of pet owners agreed that their pet has had a positive impact on their life. 85% of pet owners reported their pet brings them joy, 82% said their pet comforts them, and 73% said their pet enhances their mental health. In a study of 263 American adults, pet owners were more satisfied with their lives than non-pet owners, but did not differ on other wellbeing measures. Dog owners scored higher on all aspects of wellbeing compared with cat owners.<sup>9</sup> In a web-based study, dog owners enjoyed better wellbeing (belongingness, meaningful existence, control and self-esteem, and were less lonely and stressed out) when their pets fulfilled their social needs more effectively, and the support that pets provided complemented rather than competed with human sources.<sup>10</sup> Encouraging children to participate in pet care behavior may promote attachment between children and their pet, which in turn may have a range of positive outcomes for both children, such as reduced aggression, better wellbeing and quality of life, and pets, such as humane treatment.<sup>11</sup>



## 5

## Pets Provide Long-Term Help for Those with Mental Health Challenges

Research has found that pets can contribute, overtime, to individuals developing routines that provide emotional and social support to those with a diagnosis of a long-term mental health problem. In a 2016 study of 54 people with a mental health diagnosis, pets provided the ability to gain a sense of control inherent to caring for the pet. The participants reported that their pet provided a sense of security and routine developed in the relationship, which reinforced stable conditions from the creation of certainty that they could turn to and rely on pets in times of need. Pets also provided a distraction and disruption from distressing symptoms, such as hearing voices, rumination and facilitated routine and exercise for those who cared for them.<sup>12</sup>



## The Oxytocin System

One scientifically-documented reason for the powerful health boost provided by pets is the activation of the oxytocin system. Oxytocin, commonly known as the 'bonding hormone', plays a powerful role in bonding, trust and altruism between a mother and her infant. Oxytocin causes many physiological changes, including slowing heart rate and breathing, decreasing blood pressure, inhibiting stress hormones, and creating a sense of calm, comfort and focus.<sup>13</sup>

Studies have demonstrated that human-animal interaction increases oxytocin levels in the brain.<sup>14-15-16</sup> Science has also shown that oxytocin levels are increased in dogs interacting with their own owners too.<sup>17-18</sup> While more research is focused on dogs in comparison to cats, there is science that indicates cats form secure bonds with humans too. Results of one recently-published study found that cats display distinct attachment styles toward human caregivers.<sup>19</sup> A 2017 study found that in comparison to food, toy and scent, cats most preferred human social interaction.<sup>20</sup>

In good times and in bad, we can turn to our pets for comfort, joy and support. HABRI hopes that in sharing this information, more people will benefit from the human-animal bond as a source of support in this time of need. For more information about the health benefits of pets, visit [www.habri.org](http://www.habri.org) and for mental health information and resources, visit [www.mhanational.org](http://www.mhanational.org).