

“One more thing to be thankful for...”

It's a few days before Thanksgiving as I sit and write this month's column. It occurs to me that the older I get the more Thanksgiving seems to get lost (maybe trampled is a better term) in the hectic push for Christmas, Hanukkah, and the New Year. It's important to slow down and not speed through this holiday too quickly. We should all pause and reflect on what we have, and be grateful. This is particularly important since we live in a world that seems to constantly tell us we need more. For animal lovers this exercise should be a no-brainer. As I pause and reflect this year, it again becomes clear how our animal family members enhance our lives in many wonderful ways. To follow is an excerpt from a piece I wrote four years ago. It reviews some of the many ways animals affect our lives. And for that we should all be grateful.

We can thank our furry friends for facilitating social contact with friends, neighbors, and even strangers. People who live with animals can find them to be a sort of “social lubricant” that facilitates human interaction. So often two strangers passing on the street would never speak, but they likely will strike up a conversation to discuss their mutual interest in the creature on the far end of a leash. I'm often impressed how clients in our office (usually complete strangers) will chat while waiting in the reception area. The discussions usually center on their pet's healthcare but probably wouldn't even get started if their animals weren't there with them. I can't think of the last time I “chatted “ with someone while waiting in my doctor or dentist's office.

Animal lovers can be thankful that our pets bring us better health-both mental and physical. The companionship and warmth a pet provides can be vital to getting past those stressful periods in our lives. I don't have to look past my own practice to see just how important pets have become to people. Every day I see bonds between people and their pets that rival the closeness of any person to person bond.

Children benefit from pets by learning nurturing and caring skills valuable throughout life. The enriching quality of pet ownership may help children through difficult family events such as divorce or relocation. By caring for a pet, children can develop self-esteem and learn life habits of compassion, sensitivity, and empathy so important for developing strong inter-human bonds (i.e., making friends at school). In some classrooms animals are part of a new approach helping children to deal with attention-deficit problems and improve their learning experience.

Animal-assisted therapy is the latest term for involving animals in all kinds of rehabilitation. This therapy may be for physically challenged individuals recovering from injury or illness, as well as those with mental illness encouraging them to participate in group therapy sessions.

We all have seen how liberating the guide dog or the hearing dog can be for their masters. For people confined to a wheelchair a specially trained canine companion can open and close doors, pick-up dropped items, and generally provide a level of independence otherwise not possible.

Recent studies suggest that pet ownership can improve physical health parameters such as cholesterol levels and blood pressure. Pets seem to have their most striking health benefits with seniors. In one study of Medicare recipients, those who owned companion animals reported fewer health complaints and subsequently fewer trips to their physician. For seniors living alone their pets can be their major source for social and emotional support.

Service dogs such as police dogs, drug and explosives sniffing dogs and search and rescue dogs are not only beloved pets, they also help keep our community safe by providing their special services in times of need. These quiet heroes benefit us each day. So much to be thankful for!

While I won't speak for everyone, I think it's fair to say that our pets should be near the top of our “I'm thankful for...” list. These creatures, big and small, young and old, pretty and not so pretty, all give us unlimited and unconditional love. They don't ask us about our past, what our income is, our political affiliation, or what kind of car we drive. They don't care if we work long hours and don't get home until late. They patiently wait all day just for those few minutes we might have for them-and are happy for that. Our animal friends are infinitely loyal, lifelong companions and ask relatively little in return. The least we can do is give them an extra hug, a pat on the head, or a few extra minutes on their walk to show our appreciation for all they do for us. (Just don't set a place at the Thanksgiving dinner table for them... they're better off without all the rich food).

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