

FEELING STRESSED OR SICK? TRY SOME PET THERAPY

By Stephanie Bouchard

In September 2014, Josh Brown, then 31 years old, was showing off the dramatic landscape of the western end of Alaska's Chugach (pronounced CHEW-gatch) National Forest to some travelers from Australia and New Zealand. They were riding 4x4 ATVs on the switchbacks along the Crown Point Mine Trail, which, at its center, has an elevation of 3,596 ft.



Josh Brown and Blue

“We were having fun but not doing anything crazy,” he remembers from his home near Anchorage. He rode his Honda Rancher to the edge of the trail to take a look, and in the next instant, his life changed. “I remember gasping as the wheels went over the edge,” he says. Knowing that hitting the brakes would be suicide as he gained speed down the mountain, Brown launched himself off his 4x4. He lost consciousness.

A small cadre of emergency personnel got him from the wilderness to the hospital in nearby Seward. He was transferred to a hospital in Anchorage where surgeons put plates into his broken right wrist, and the medical team worked on managing his brain injuries.

Brown's medical team put him back together, but it was his three-year-old German shepherd, Blue, who really spurred his recovery. Blue would lie on the bed with him to keep him company, got him out of the house for walks, and helped calm his frustration and anxiety.

Without Blue, he said, he would have been extremely depressed. Instead of dwelling on all he couldn't do because of his injuries, he focused on Blue. “I could start every day with someone acting like I'm the greatest thing [he's] ever seen. That made such a huge

difference in how I perceived my life,” he said. “They can’t prescribe an antidepressant that can do that.”

As Brown learned firsthand with his dog, research increasingly has shown that pets have a positive effect on human health, from lowering stress levels and blood pressure to combating depression and even detecting medical issues such as cancer or low blood sugar.

“I do think on the whole more people are healthier because they have pets in their lives,” says Mary Margaret Callahan, the senior national director of program development at **Pet Partners**, a national nonprofit promoting animal-assisted therapy, activities, and education.



Mary Margaret Callahan with her Pet Partners llama

Pet Partners uses nine different species of animals in animal-assisted therapy. “You don’t know what kind of animal someone is going to find therapeutic,” she notes. At least one study has shown that simply having fish in a tank calms Alzheimer’s patients and improves their eating habits.

“I do suspect that we may get to the point one day that people associate pet ownership and good health,” she says. “It wasn’t so long ago there wasn’t as strong a connection between lifestyle choices like healthy eating and smoking and drinking and how your overall health was. Certainly, we’ve made a dramatic shift in how we think about our lifestyle choices and how they affect our overall health.”

Pets don’t just benefit physical and emotional health, says Steven Feldman, executive director of the **Human-Animal Bond Research Initiative (HABRI) Foundation**, a nonprofit research and education organization founded by PetCo, the American Pet Products Association, and global animal health company Zoetis. There’s some strong evidence that having a pet enhances social interaction and support, too.

“When you have pets, you’re more likely to form friendships and have wider social interactions,” he says. These friendships and social interactions then form your social support structure, something that is important for everything from work-life balance to career networking to handling crisis situations.

In fact, not only can pets lead to a stronger human support system, but they can be a crucial part of a person's support structure, as [Kathleen O'Keefe Kanavos](#), a three-time breast cancer survivor and author of the book, *Surviving Cancerland* can attest.

"It takes a whole family to get someone through the crisis of cancer or any other health crisis," she says, "and that includes the pets."

O'Keefe Kanavos had 21 surgeries her first year of treatment for breast cancer. She endured a double mastectomy and chemotherapy and radiation twice. "I was so sick," she says. During her 10 years of treatment, her Siamese cat, Baby Cakes, nursed her as only a cat can.

"My cat would actually climb into bed with me and he would get behind me and be up against my back," she recalls. "The ringing in my ears from the chemotherapy was so horrific, I couldn't sleep. Sometimes I would cry because I couldn't sleep because I couldn't get the ringing to stop. He would put his paws around my neck from behind me and lay his head on my head and purr as loud as he could, and it would drown out the ringing and I would fall asleep."

Whenever she went to the bathroom in the middle of the night, Baby Cakes would sit on her feet to keep them warm, groomed her head as her hair fell out, and when she didn't feel like eating, he would carry his favorite food, chicken wings, from the kitchen and deposit them on her chest as she lay in bed. He would stare at her as if to say, "I know you're sick, but you need to eat."

After being in remission for five years, O'Keefe Kanavos was finally given the all-clear. Shortly thereafter, her beloved Baby Cakes died at the age of 26. "Once he realized I was fine, I was over my illness, he left. He'd done his job," she says.

"He was just as important on an emotional level as the chemotherapy and the medications were on a physical level in getting me well," she says. "When we are ill, our animals know, and just as we take care of them, they will take care of us. They're very connected to us by heart. When we allow them to do what it is they do to help us get over our illness, we bring healing to another level because we're so much more than just physical."

Stephanie Bouchard is a freelance writer based in Maine. Visit her [website](#).