

Proof of Power

Scientific studies may prove what cat lovers have known all along: Petting your cat is good for you.

Brad Kollus

Most cat owners do this several times a day without even thinking about it: pet their cats. Its probably the most personal, intimate way we regularly interact with our cats. But what powers does petting hold?

Brain Benefits

Alexali Brubaker, a graduate student in psychology at San Francisco State University, is studying the effects that petting a cat or dog has on people, by measuring human brain waves using an EEG (electroencephalogram) recorder. Brubaker and her colleagues research looks at two major brain waves, alpha and theta.

Brubaker and her team tested individuals brain waves while subjects petted a stuffed toy and then while petting a real cat or dog. People were also tested while performing a stress test in the laboratory and while resting.

When the person had the real pet, it didn't matter whether they were in the resting condition or doing the stress test, their theta waves increased and that is consistent with relief of anxiety, Brubaker says.

The teams results also showed that greater alpha waves on the left side, which indicated depression and a depressed immune system, evens itself out and becomes less pronounced when [a person is] accompanied by a real pet, either at rest or during the stress test, Brubaker says. These results strongly suggest that an animals presence also reduces depression and strengthens the immune system.

According to the numbers, there is statistical significance that petting your cat lowers your stress level and improves your immune system, Brubaker says. This is really encouraging both as a researcher and as a pet lover.

Pressure Positive

Researchers have also demonstrated that when petting a cat, a persons blood pressure goes down. This is important because, with anxiety, your blood pressure goes up, your heart rate gets faster and too much of it - sustained anxiety, or hypertension - over a long period of time can cause really detrimental health problems and psychological problems, says Cindy Wilson, MS in animal science and statistics, co-editor of Companion Animals in Human Health.