

## Proof of Power

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

*Brad Kollus*

This effect works for the animal, too. Andrea Looney, DVM, performed an experiment while at the Cornell Feline Health Center in Ithaca, N.Y., where she attached a tiny cuff to a cat's leg to take its blood pressure. After just five minutes of petting, the cat's blood pressure dropped 25 points.

Most Amazing Power Johannes Odendaal, Ph.D., research professor of the Life Sciences Research Institute in Pretoria, South Africa, and author of *Pets and Our Mental Health*, took this research even further. With his colleagues, Odendaal conducted experiments in which he took blood samples from humans and dogs, both while the person petted the dog and before. The researchers measured the change in several brain neurochemicals that directly influence feelings and emotions such as exhilaration, positive excitement, pleasurable experiences, social bonding, sense of well-being and contentment, and feelings of comfort and security. The researchers also measured cortisol, which increases during stress and can have a negative effect on the immune system, leaving the body vulnerable to illness.

Their results found statistically significant increases in all the positive brain chemicals, in both the human and the dog during the petting, as well as a decrease in cortisol. Would petting a cat reveal the same results?

The answer is yes. In the context of petting a cat where blood pressure decreases, it is expected that the same neurochemical changes in the brain would have taken place - not because of the decreased blood pressure, but as part of the complex physiological processes taking place during positive interaction, Odendaal says.

Would cats also experience petting's same beneficial effects on their neurochemicals? Odendaal believes that cats will have similar health benefits and physiological changes. The difference does not lie in the species, but in the positive experience with an animal, Odendaal explains.

The researchers also measured the differences between people petting an unfamiliar dog and petting their own dog. It turned out the effects are greater when a person interacts with their own pet. Bonding with familiar animals will have a more predictable positive effect than interaction with unfamiliar animals, Odendaal says.