

The Right Kitten

Experiencing the empty nest syndrome? A kitten might be just what you need.

Koren Wetmore

How Cats Help With the kids gone, couples may suddenly feel like strangers, having spent their early years focused more on child-rearing than romance. They need to reconnect and a cat can serve as a common focal point, Rosen-Grandon says.

Couples often grow closer when they adopt a new pet, she says. When spouses refer to each other as 'Mommy or 'Daddy, as in 'Go to Mommy, shell feed you, waves of affection are ignited.

Beverly and Glenn Farnsworth of Acworth, Ga., filled their empty nest with two Siamese cats named Prissy and Ricky. The cats provided welcome companionship and later served as entertainment for the couples grandchildren.

My husband and I talk to each other, but we talk to the cats, as well. And they're Siamese, so they talk back, Beverly Farnsworth says. Its just like having little kids. I call them my babies.

Research conducted by social psychologist Karen Allen, Ph.D., at the University of New York at Buffalo suggests cats may also offer baby boomers protection against high blood pressure and stress. Allen and her colleagues measured blood pressure levels of 240 pet-owning couples, half of them cat owners, while they performed the stressful task of mental arithmetic (solving math problems in their head). Their blood pressure soared in the presence of their spouses, but barely budged when in the company of their cat or dog.

Blood pressure is normally around 120/80 in a healthy person, Allen says. When you put that person under stress without pets, we've found it goes up to 155/100. With pets present, it only goes up to about 125/82. That's a dramatic difference.

What was even more interesting, Allen says, was that the owners didn't need to make physical contact with their pets to receive health benefits. The cats presence in the room was enough, she says.

We believe its because people perceive pets as nonjudgmental, Allen says. Its the perception that the cat is your friend and is on your side.