

Happy Pets

By Michelle Posage, DVM



A relationship with a pet can be like a relationship with a spouse. The emotional state of the person or animal in your life with will eventually affect you. So, it is difficult to be happy unless they are. If you don't think this is true, just consider what unhappy pets do.

A bored dog will eat your couch, dig holes in your yard, and bark at the slightest provocation. An anxious cat will use your wall-to-wall carpet as a litter box. Behaviors like these can challenge any pet owner's state of happiness.

Most of us genuinely want our pets to be happy. But what is happiness to a cat or a dog? It is actually not much different than what make us happy. Cats and dogs need a safe, secure environment, relationships with others, and something to keep them physically and mentally engaged.

Here is what your pet needs for a good quality of life:

- **Play and exercise:** If there is one thing lacking in the lives of even our most pampered pets, it is usually physical activity. Many dogs were bred to be athletes-hunters, retrievers, and the like. Without the opportunity to expend energy, these dogs will suffer. Even indoor cats and small dogs need opportunities for active play.
- **Ability to express normal species behavior:** Cats need to scratch and dogs need to chew. It is unreasonable to expect them not to have these behaviors. Providing attractive scratching posts and interesting chew things, however, is a good way to keep scratches and teeth marks off your furniture.
- **Mental stimulation:** Imagine the life you would have if you were confined to your own home isolated from contact with the outside world. Our pets often spend good portions of their day alone in an environment that is largely unchanging. Normally dogs and cats in the wild are mentally engaged in hunting for food. In fact, many animals enjoy working for their food even when they don't have to. Hollow toys designed for hiding food can replace a meal in a bowl and provide a stimulating challenge for your pet.
- **Choices:** Cats and dogs need to be able to decide a few things for themselves. Having a choice between which litter box to use and which tree to sniff is more important than it might seem. Variety is the spice of life.
- **Social companionship:** Dogs are pack animals. They instinctively live in groups in which it would be unusual to spend time alone. Cats are certainly more solitary but are still capable of thriving in a close relationship with another cat, dog, or human.
- **Freedom from pain or fear:** Any number of things may cause discomfort or anxiety for a pet. Teasing, maltreatment, and abuse must not be tolerated. Medications should be considered for any animal suffering from a painful medical condition. Anxiety resulting from fears or phobias should be diagnosed and treated by a veterinary behaviorist.

Happy pets make happy pet owners. Cats and dogs are intelligent, social creatures that will suffer without a rich, safe environment. Give them what they need and they will return the happiness in multiples.

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