

# Feeling Frazzled? Your Dog Might Be the Best Therapy

Dogs (and pets in general) help you manage stress, improve mental health, and even protect your long-term well-being — here are the many incredible ways a wagging tail can turn your whole day around.

Reviewed by Dr. Tracy Duffner

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dogs are natural stressbusters. From lowering cortisol to boosting oxytocin, their presence helps your body respond to pressure in healthier, calmer, and more balanced ways
- Daily walks, playful fetch sessions, and regular outings with your pup ensure you stay active, which improves mood, strengthens the heart, and builds healthier habits
- Dogs provide unconditional love and social connection, helping prevent isolation while also sparking new friendships during walks, park visits, and community gatherings
- Whether it is easing anxiety or helping veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dogs deliver powerful comfort that makes challenges feel more manageable
- Caring for your dog creates structure, responsibility, and motivation, giving you a stronger sense of meaning — especially valuable during stressful or overwhelming times

Life has a way of piling on stress. Between work deadlines, family responsibilities, bills, and the constant buzz of modern life, it is easy to feel stretched thin. Even if you have tried deep breathing, yoga, or meditation apps, the stress still sneaks back.

But what if the best solution is already curled up at your feet or wagging their tail at the door?

Dogs, along with other pets, are not just companions. They can be powerful partners in keeping your mind and body healthy. From lowering blood pressure to easing loneliness, your four-legged friend offers more than love — your dog might be the therapy you never knew you needed.

## Why Stress Matters More Than You Think

Before we get into the paws-on benefits, let's pause to understand why stress is such a big deal. Stress is not just "feeling busy" or "being worried." When your body senses pressure — whether it is a tight deadline, a traffic jam, or financial strain — it flips into fight-or-flight mode.

This response releases hormones like cortisol (the stress hormone) and adrenaline. In short bursts, these chemicals are useful; they help you focus and react quickly. But when stress sticks around, your body never gets to relax. Over time, chronic stress has been linked to:<sup>1</sup>

- Heart disease and high blood pressure
- Weakened immune system
- Anxiety and depression
- Sleep problems
- Memory issues and even dementia

That is why finding ways to manage stress is not just about feeling better — it is also about protecting your health and future.

## The Science Behind Dogs and Stress Relief

It may feel like magic when petting your dog calms you down, but science shows it is more than a warm fuzzy feeling. Researchers at the University of Denver studied how dogs affect stress response. They looked at two key systems in your body:<sup>2</sup>

- The HPA (Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal) axis, which controls cortisol
- The SAM (Sympathetic-Adrenal-Medullary) axis, which regulates your body's alertness and "fight-or-flight" reaction

When people went through a stressful test, those who had their dogs with them showed lower spikes in cortisol and a more balanced stress response. In other words, dogs did not just comfort their owners — they helped their bodies handle stress in a healthier way.<sup>3</sup>

And it is not only about cortisol. Petting your dog boosts oxytocin, the "bonding hormone" that makes you feel connected and safe. It is the same hormone that helps mothers bond with babies. Just stroking your dog can bring down stress levels while increasing feelings of love and security.<sup>4</sup>

## 5 Big Ways Dogs Help You Cope with Stress

Whether it is through a morning walk, a snuggle on the couch, or just being present, dogs provide small but powerful ways to help you handle life's pressures. Here are five different ways dogs step in as natural stress-busters:

1. **They help reduce work-related stress** — Work stress is one of the biggest modern problems. Studies show that nearly two-thirds of employees say their jobs stress them out, and many feel it harms their health.

Here is where dogs step in. Companies that allow pets in the workplace report lower stress levels and higher employee satisfaction. Even if you work remotely, having your dog by your side while you type away at your laptop can lighten the mood.

In fact, research shows that when a dog joins a virtual meeting, people rate their teammates higher on trust, camaraderie, and cooperation. That's right — your dog might be the best coworker you never hired.<sup>5</sup>

2. **Dogs help you stay active** — Dog ownership is the ultimate excuse-proof exercise plan. Daily walks, games of fetch, or even short play sessions in the yard keep you moving. Regular activity not only lowers stress but

also improves sleep, boosts mood, and strengthens your heart. So while your pup may think it is all about sniffing trees and chasing squirrels, they are also helping you build healthier habits.

3. **They help you fight loneliness** — Loneliness has been linked to serious health risks, including depression and early death. Your dog helps fill that gap by providing constant companionship.

Whether you live alone or simply crave more connection, your dog makes sure you are never truly by yourself. And dogs are natural social icebreakers. A walk in the park often leads to conversations with other dog lovers, helping you build new friendships.<sup>6</sup>

For older adults, this benefit is even more important. A survey on healthy aging found that pet owners over 50 reported less stress, a stronger sense of purpose, and greater social connection.<sup>7</sup>

4. **Dogs provide emotional support** — From easing anxiety to helping people with PTSD, dogs are powerful emotional anchors. In fact, 84% of veterans with PTSD paired with service dogs reported a major reduction in symptoms, and nearly half were able to reduce their medication.<sup>8</sup>

Even if your dog is not a trained service animal, their steady presence helps ground you when emotions run high. For children and teens, who often struggle to put feelings into words, dogs provide silent support that helps them feel understood without judgment.

5. **They give you purpose** — On days when stress makes it hard to get out of bed, your dog becomes your reason to move. Feeding, walking, and caring for your pet creates routine and responsibility, which provides structure to your day. That sense of purpose is especially important for older adults, helping them feel needed and engaged.

Think of it this way — While you may be taking care of your dog, your dog is also taking care of you, keeping you motivated, connected, and anchored when life feels overwhelming.

## What if You Do Not (or Cannot) Own a Dog?

Not everyone can bring a dog into their home. Maybe your apartment does not allow pets, or your lifestyle makes ownership impractical. The good news is you do not need a full-time pet to get the benefits. Here are a few ideas you can try:

- Offer to walk a neighbor's dog
- Volunteer at a local shelter
- Dog-sit for friends or family
- Visit therapy dog programs in hospitals, schools, or nursing homes

## Building a Lifelong Relationship with Your Furry Buddy

Your dog is not just a pet. They are your partner in health, your therapist on four legs, and your reminder to slow down and enjoy life. When you stroke their fur, toss a ball, or share a quiet moment, you are not only making your dog happy — you are healing yourself.

Stress may be an unavoidable part of modern life, but with your dog by your side, you have a powerful ally. The next time you feel frazzled, take a deep breath, look down at that wagging tail, and remember: your dog might just be the best therapy you will ever find.

Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [Health, June 8, 2024](#)  
<sup>2</sup> [Animal Wellness Magazine, July 28, 2025](#)  
<sup>3</sup> [Emotion, 24\(2\), 384–396](#)  
<sup>4,6,8</sup> [Johns Hopkins Medicine, The Friend Who Keeps You Young](#)  
<sup>5,7</sup> [American Heart Association, October 8, 2024](#)

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