

Pandemic Pets and Pet Companionship: Seven Benefits/Considerations for Care Coordination and Estate Planning

When my kids started to feel isolated and bored spending so much time at home due to the pandemic, we volunteered to be foster parents for a sweet four-week old kitty, Marigold. She was a fuzzball so tiny that I could hold her in one hand, and she was a little sick and not eating very well. She needed lots of love and attention! It wasn't long before she was feeling well and had the whole family wrapped around her tiny paw. We learned that foster programs are more like pet adoption schemes, and Marigold became a permanent member of the Miller family. She was our first "pandemic pet." Next came Patrick, the Vizsla puppy who recently joined our clan.



• Baby Marigold



Marigold



Patrick

It turns out my family wasn't the only one acquiring new furry members. One of the many unanticipated effects of the pandemic was a surge in interest in fostering and adopting pets. Stay-at-home orders decreased opportunities for social interaction, and people started looking for new companions. The forced time at home created a perfect environment for adding a pet — people could invest more time and money on pets. According to data from PetPoint, animal welfare organizations across the country saw a spike in adoptions starting in March 2020, and many shelters had a hard time keeping up with demand. Cats and dogs were being adopted at unforeseen rates, resulting in a shortage of so-called “pandemic puppies.” The pet care industry also benefited from the surge in demand for pet care products and veterinary services.

This trend made me think about whether pets should play a more significant part in the care coordination and estate planning advice we give our clients, particularly seniors and people with disabilities or special needs.

Owning, or even having regular opportunities to interact with a pet, has lots of benefits.

Seven Benefits for Pet Owners — Including Key Considerations for Aging Individuals and People With Special Needs

1. Reducing Isolation and Loneliness

Pets became a popular way to deal with isolation and loneliness during the pandemic. Seniors and persons with disabilities may experience these feelings, whether there is a pandemic or not, if they spend a lot of time at home — sometimes because they lack mobility. Isolation and loneliness are major risk factors for depression and increase the risk of heart disease, arthritis, diabetes, and dementia. Experts at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) say that pets provide companionship that eases loneliness.

2. Lowering Stress and Anxiety

Petting a dog or cat can make you feel more at ease because it releases “feel-good chemicals” like oxytocin and serotonin. A University of Utah study found that even spending time near a pet can reduce stress levels and nervousness. The companionship of a pet can be particularly beneficial for reducing anxiety for a person with autism.

3. Improving Fitness

A pet increases opportunities for exercise. A daily exercise routine and physical activity can improve mobility and lead to less deterioration in the ability to perform activities of daily living. Some may be able to enjoy the fitness benefits without even owning a pet. For example, shelter dogs have been used for animal-assisted therapies to encourage physical activity for residents of nursing homes and assisted living facilities. A study published in Clinical Nursing Research found that people who walked with shelter dogs were more likely to go for a walk than those who walked with a human companion and even walked faster and for longer distances!

4. Increasing Social Interaction and Connection to the Community

A pet can give its owner a reason to get out of the house and increase opportunities to interact with the community. Programs that allow residents of assisted living facilities to spend time with a pet encourage interaction among the residents and give them something to look forward to.

Pets can help persons with autism improve social skills by facilitating social connections with others, inspiring the person to work harder on communication skills and teaching compassion.

5. Improving Cardiovascular Health

According to the American Heart Association, pet ownership is associated with lower blood pressure and lower heart rate during mental stress. A University of Utah study found that just the presence of a companion dog is associated with lower cardiovascular responses during stress. The CDC lists decreased blood pressure and reduced cholesterol levels as two benefits of pet ownership.

6. Improving Signs of Depression

Pets can be an instant mood booster. The Research Center for Human/Animal Interaction has found that dog owners are less likely to have depression. Animal-assisted activities and therapy have been used successfully with patients struggling with depression, loneliness, and mental illness and can reduce the symptoms of depression. The effects are particularly apparent with seniors.

7. Providing Routine and a Sense of Purpose

Caring for a pet requires some structure and scheduling. Those responsibilities establish a beneficial routine, and lots of older adults who own a pet say that their pets provide a sense of purpose and help them enjoy life.

Pets are so important for all these reasons and more, and encouraging seniors or people with disabilities or special needs to adopt pets or arranging for access to therapy animals can improve their well-being.

Care Coordination and Estate Planning Considerations

If you or a loved one has a beloved pet or recently acquired a pandemic pet, you should consider having a plan in place for the pet's care if you/the owner becomes ill or passes away. Here are some things to consider related to pets and your estate planning:

- Choose someone you trust and who knows your pet to designate as a temporary or permanent caregiver for the pet.
- Estimate how much it will cost to feed, care for, and provide veterinary treatment for your pet's lifetime.
- Include pets in your estate plan to ensure that they have a caregiver and money is set aside to pay for care.
- Write down information about the pet's feeding schedule, personality and behavior, medical conditions, and veterinarian information and provide the information to the designated caregiver.
- Consider the benefits of pet trusts. Learn about your options in "[Three Things You Didn't Know You Could Include in Your Estate Plan](#)."

Our team's professional and personal experience with pets allows us to tailor estate and special needs planning solutions for each client. If you are interested in learning more, please contact [Rebecca Miller](#) or another member of our [Estate Planning](#) team.