The Benefits of Animal Companionship and Bipolar Disorder

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Pet Therapy for Bipolar

With contributions from Andrew.

Bipolar disorder is not an easy condition to manage, but many patients have found that one simple change can make a world of difference: spend some time with an animal. The attention of a loving pet or service animal can help you overcome mood swings, beat the isolation of depression, and even reduce the physical side effects of your disease and medication.

Pets also provide a sense of purpose, an obligation to something other than yourself, and that can be very important if you are having suicidal thoughts. But no matter where you are in your physical symptoms, emotional challenges or bipolar treatment, inviting an animal into your life can have many happy – and healing – consequences.

Why Should You Consider Getting a Pet?

Pets can be great companions for people with bipolar disorder. The companionship can often combat the feelings of loneliness and hopelessness that often come along with cycling moods. The need to care for a pet also provides you with a sense of purpose, and a daily routine which can help combat depressive episodes.

Pets can assist with the highs brought about during manic episodes too. There are even animals who are trained to assist people going through a manic episode.

Not only have trained service animals been shown to reduce anxiety amongst patients with bipolar disorder, but they've also been shown to reduce anxiety in a variety of other psychiatric illnesses too.

The Psychological Benefits of Animal Companionship

There's a reason why animal therapy has been so successful for so many conditions. In fact, there are several ways a pet or service animal can calm and center those with mood disorders:

- **Reassurance**. The calm gaze of an animal can offer much-needed reassurance, especially when they're trained to spot unusual events. Service animals can be incredibly helpful for bipolar patients who suffer from hallucinations, seizures, or delusions during manic episodes since they will spot and react to unsafe or unnatural events. By observing your animal's reaction, you can tell whether there is a real danger or if you're imagining the problem.
- **Protection**. Living with a mental illness can leave you feeling vulnerable day in and day out, which often leads to anxiety and paranoia. Having a loyal and reliable friend by your side can restore a sense of strength and confidence.
- **Connection**. Animals are natural icebreakers: they attract friendly attention, and they're eager to meet

new people. Taking a dog for a walk will not only force you to get outside, but it will also push you into social situations, which is important to overcome the sense of isolation brought on by depressive episodes.
- **Comfort**. Whether it's a trained service animal or a loving pet, animals bring comfort – and that's more important than you might imagine. When family and friends don't seem to understand the how your bipolar disorder interferes with your life, it can be difficult for everyone; pets offer unwavering love and support, no questions asked. That reliable companionship can go far to restoring a bipolar patient's sense of empathy.

Physical Improvements that Come with Pet Ownership

The physical presence of a pet or service animal is powerful medicine. In fact, the body responds in positive, measurable ways when you have a beloved animal by your side:

- **Exercise**. Regular exercise will help to counter the weight-gaining effects of common bipolar medication, boost feel-good hormones, and build self-esteem. Having a pet means getting active (to some degree); a dog will get you out into the fresh air every day, but even a cat or rabbit will engage you in play and activity. Sure, some pets stay in their tanks or cages for you to admire, but you still have to get out of bed to feed and care for them – and that can be enough to inject a little more activity into your home life.
- **Stress relief**. Petting a dog or cat promotes the release of oxytocin, a chemical in your brain that reduces stress and feeds emotional bonding. In fact, your pet releases this helpful hormone, too, making the relationship (and the benefits of companionship) truly reciprocal. Studies have shown that blood pressure, heart rate, and respiratory rate all decrease when you pet a dog with whom you've formed a bond.
- **Coping**. Pet ownership is very therapeutic for children who are dealing with a chronic illness – whether it's their own or that of a parent or caregiver. If you're having a difficult time communicating the realities of your bipolar disorder to a child, you may find that a pet can bridge the gap and offer comfort when you cannot.

Next page: how animal-assisted therapy helps bipolar patients and advice on what type of pet is best for you.

How Animal-Assisted Therapy Helps Bipolar Patients

The physical and psychological benefits of animal companionship are so well documented and have been used by so many people, that there is an entire therapeutic branch called Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) dedicated to managing bipolar through animal companionship.

The concept is simple: working with a handler, trained animals visit patients to offer entertainment and interaction, often within a hospital or other institutional setting.

Animal-assisted activities are a nice distraction from unhappy physical circumstances, but bipolar patients may benefit more from a more specific type of companionship.

Psychiatric service dogs are trained to perform specific tasks to help patients cope with their mental distress, whether that involves coping with emotional overload or even assisting in medical crises.

But to qualify for a trained service dog under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), both the patient and the animal must meet a few criteria:

- Your condition must fall under the ADA definition of disability. If your bipolar disorder substantially limits your daily activities, you are a good candidate.
- To be recognized by the ADA, animals (often dogs, but not exclusively) must be individually trained to provide assistance to a person with a disability. Although you'll have to provide some proof of proper training, the animal doesn't necessarily need a special state license or government certification.

If you don’t qualify for an ADA certified animal, rest assured that you are not out of options. Service dogs are immensely helpful, but for many bipolar patients, an adopted pet is a huge source of emotional support, and the right sort of companionship to improve their quality of life.

What Pet Is Best for You?

The type of pet you choose often comes down to personal preference, what you expect to do with your pet, and how much time you can spend with them.

Dogs

If you enjoy the greater outdoors, having a dog to take on walks and to play catch with might be a great outlet for you.

Dogs encourage exercise, and their positive energy can often be contagious which can help combat depressive episodes. Feel free to take along a friend and their canine companion too. Not only is this interaction healthy for you, but it’s also some great social interaction for your dog. Dogs make for great service animals too!

However, just be prepared for a lot of responsibility. Dogs often require annual vet visits/shots (which can be pricey), and they shouldn’t be left alone for long periods of time if it can be avoided. This can be difficult for those who work long hours.

Dogs are great for people who identify themselves as extroverts because they often share the same type of social energy.

Cats

If you’re not too much of an extrovert, or you’d like a pet that isn’t extremely energetic, cats make great companions too.

They tend to be more independent, and laid back than dogs. They don’t need to be walked, and they are often more content with being alone for longer periods of time than dogs.

Many cats enjoy snuggling, being pet, and exploring. Their curiosity is endless, and very often entertaining as you see the extreme interest some of them have when they make a new discovery.

This type of companionship is great if you’re looking for an animal that’s a bit more independent, yet with a bond just as strong.

Birds

Birds are also a great pet for some. Not only do many birds last a lifetime, but you’re also able to enjoy a unique bond with your feathered friends.

You can teach them songs, how to whistle, and plenty of other sounds. When they’re happy, they’ll sing the day away which can be both adorable, and comforting. They love spending time with their owners, and often their emotional health is very dependent on it.

I love having a bird as a pet! When I have a rough day, or I’m feeling depressed, the innocent tunes of my cockatiel, Kairi, are heartwarming. She whistles to songs I taught her, and that’s just evidence of the special bond her and I have. It’s a constant reminder that I have a little-feathered friend who always wants to spend time with me!

However, if you live in a place where you’re worried about making a lot of noise, or if you’re not to keen on lots of chirping yourself, birds may not be for you.

Other Pets to Consider

If some of these other options seem like too much responsibility, or if you don't have the time needed to spend with them in order to keep them healthy/happy, getting a fish may be the better option for you.

As long as their tank is large enough and clean, and you adhere to a proper feeding schedule, most fish are able to function on their own for hours happily.

Many of them have vibrant colors, and their gracefulness as they swim through the water can be very relaxing.

Things to Keep in Mind About Pet Therapy for Bipolar

Regardless of what type of pet you have, you're responsible for their well being and happiness. Before taking in an animal (hopefully, you choose to adopt if it's possible), research on how to care for the animal. This will provide you with a better idea of what will be expected of you as their caretaker.

Sadly, there are some instances where individuals with bipolar disorder aren't able to properly care for themselves. This can make taking care of an animal difficult. Before getting a pet, see if you have someone who can take care of the animal just in case something happens where you're struggling to care for them.

If you keep these things in mind, it's very likely that you'll be a great pet owner! Not only will you enjoy their company, but they'll likely come to very much enjoy yours with some time too.