

**The Positive Effects of Grooming**  
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By now, most people are probably aware that having pets or even being around companion animals can have positive effects on the physical and emotional well-being of people. Companion animals can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, they can help in the therapy of physically and emotionally disabled people and can even lower the heart rates and blood pressure of people that simply watch them or pet them. What of the companion animals themselves? Is there any benefit to them of being around people?

There are the obvious benefits that pets derive from the food, shelter and veterinary care that their owners provide. There is also a growing body of evidence that dogs and perhaps other companion animals may show physiological benefits from simple petting. Over 50 years ago a behavioral scientist named Gantt stumbled upon the observation that petting a dog could reduce her heart rate, if the person and the dog had a positive relationship. If the person had previously punished the dog, the dog's heart rate would go up, not down. Heart rate changes can occur for a number of reasons, but there is some evidence that a decrease in heart rate can be associated with decreased stress and increased well-being.

The social basis of this effect can be seen in the grooming behavior of social animals. In pig-tailed monkeys it has been found that when individuals are groomed by others, their heart rates go down. Such allogrooming, as it is called, is thought to reduce tensions and cement bonds between members of the social group. Similar results have been seen in horses where grooming at the back of the neck and on the withers reduced the heart rate of the groomed animal. People scratching familiar horses in the same place also reduces the heart rate of the horse. Interestingly, only grooming or scratching in this one spot produces the heart rate change in horses. There does not appear to be such specificity in the heart rate effects of monkeys and dogs.

The fact that petting by people can reduce the heart rates of dogs and horses suggests that it may reduce tensions and even be healthy for our companion animals. For those of us that enjoy petting our companion animals, we now have a good excuse to do more of it!