

Ben

I used to be a heroin addict. For 10 years I lived on the streets, often in abandoned buildings. There really wasn't much going for me. To make some money I would busk in the city, but I never made enough to be able to get my own place. Whatever I did make would go towards paying for my habit.

It all changed one day when a cat climbed through my window. He looked pretty sick - like he'd been injured in a fight. I spent the last of my cash to take him to the vet, and I tried to find his owner but no one came forward. I figured he must've been a street cat, so I tried to let him go.

But he kept coming back! We eventually became friends, and he started busking with me. Things really started turning around when that cat came into my life.

Dr Hughes

Finding purpose in your life can be a deeply introspective journey and can take some time.

Having a sense of meaning can be extremely motivating, and can have positive impacts on your relationships and wellbeing. Research suggests that people who live with meaning in their lives are more likely to experience positive emotions and make healthy choices.

It's believed that the feeling of happiness linked with meaning arises from establishing social connections and helping others.

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Harry the street cat really changed my life. Before he came along my life was all about when and how I was going to get the next high. Having this new person in my life gave me someone else I needed to take care of.

After a while I realised that if I wanted to take care of Harry, I had to take care of myself. This meant getting off the drugs completely. It wasn't easy, but I knew it was what I had to do. And I had to do it for him.

Dr Hughes

Humans and animals have enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship for thousands of years, and research has shown that owning or caring for a pet has a range of benefits for physical and mental health. Benefits can include: lower rates of depression; a better ability to cope with

stress, loss and grief; enhanced social skills and connectedness; better cardiovascular health; and companionship. Pet ownership can have such a positive impact on our health that the RSPCA quoted a report that found that in one year, cat and dog ownership in Australia saved approximately \$3.86 billion in health expenditure.

Research suggests that human-animal interaction affects the oxytocin system and may help explain the many health benefits associated with animal companionship. In response to sensory stimulation and usually in the context of a trusting relationship, the hormone oxytocin is released into the brain and circulatory system: increasing empathy, trust, positive self-perception, social skills and generosity; and reducing depression and helping neutralise aggression.

Caring for a pet can also give your life purpose. Having a sense of meaning in your life contributes to a positive mental health state. A sense of purpose can be created when you forge and value social connections, and when you feel that you have purpose you feel motivated to help other people and give back to your community.

When we perform selfless acts for others – such as sacrificing personal gratification for someone else's benefit – endorphins and serotonin are released by the brain. This makes us feel satisfied and happy, and improves our sense of wellbeing. These positive feelings that the giver experiences can create a loop of positivity: because the act of giving is so rewarding, the recipient feels motivated to give in turn, and a whole community can experience an upward spiral of wellbeing.

Taking notes each day about what you're grateful for can also contribute towards your general happiness. Gratitude involves having a deep appreciation for something or someone and it extends feelings of positivity.

Adopting an optimistic approach to life has benefits for mental and physical health, and indeed research has shown that in patients who adopt an optimistic approach to a chronic disease diagnosis, their health status improves. It is possible to cultivate an attitude of optimism, and one way to do so is by undertaking self-affirmation exercises, such as writing about your core personal values. Research shows that affirmations can improve health, education and relationship outcomes, and the benefits can last for months and even years.

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Once I was off the drugs, I was able to take small steps towards rebuilding my life, and Harry's been there with me the whole way. I feel

like a different person now. I have purpose, I feel connected with Harry and with my community that's helped me on this journey, and I feel so grateful for this second chance at life. If it weren't for Harry choosing my window that night, who knows where I'd be right now!

Dr Hughes

Having a sense of meaning in your life can motivate you to overcome difficulties and to connect with others. When you connect with others on a deep level and practice selfless acts of kindness, your happiness and health benefit. There are many ways to improve your general feelings of happiness and optimism and you can do so through voluntary actions like expressing gratitude for what and who you have in your life.