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Little healers

Taking dedicated care of children and animals infuses our life with joy, gives it purpose, expiates karma, and even heals chronic diseases, says **Nandini Sarkar**

Few human beings, says the great teacher, Eknath Easwaran, are born with the skill to weather storms and bear stress with grace. Yet everyone can learn. We can instal stabilisers - in the mind.

Modern medical research has come to a remarkable conclusion: a healthy body and a stable mind need a life purpose, a life of giving and nurturing others. Medicines treat disease only superficially and it takes a lot of

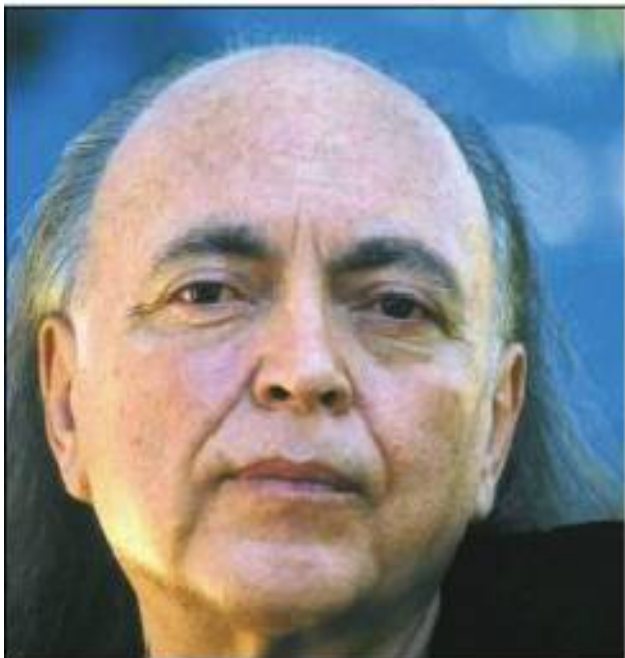
practice and patience before meditation and alternative healing start showing results. So what can we do to accelerate or boost the healing process? The answer lies in nurturing and supporting others. People who have meaning and purpose in their lives are happier, feel more in control, and get more out of what they do. They also experience less stress, anxiety and depression. But where do we find meaning and purpose? In recent times, Western medical research has been excited to discover that children and pets are powerful triggers for wellness and healing.

Caring for children and pets

Interestingly, very few Indians consider caring for children and pets as stress busters, leave alone karma busters. Raising children is something we Indians are genetically programmed to do, and raising pets is a new fad. However, research shows that when we truly nurture children or pets, with genuine concern, patience and understanding, a host of debilitating diseases, such as depression, nervousness, heart disease, autism and multiple sclerosis can actually melt and disappear. The answers vary for each of us, but they all involve being connected to something bigger than ourselves.

Any modern parent will tell you that children are 50 per cent joy and 50 per cent pain. Modern parents are so short on time and so stressed themselves, that handling a child's moods, his or her peer pressures and tantrums, and the growing trend of teenage depression and teenage relationships becomes an added burden. Parents refuse to see imperfections in their children even when it is pointed out by teachers, friends or family, and keep giving children the next activity, the next gadget, so that they can avoid tackling the issue head on. New gadgets and visits to the mall are substituted for tenderness and nurturing. In my own life, this was happening for several years. I was short on tenderness and time with my children. I fooled myself into thinking that their loving grandmother and concerned father

would handle and resolve their issues. I could go on with my busy and exciting lifestyle as a successful career woman, without bothering about my emotional contribution to their life. Then suddenly, I hit a wall. My once thriving business went through a period of stagnation. Colleagues who were important for the business started leaving. I suffered a car accident and had two fires in my office that caused much financial loss. To add to my growing problems, my daughter started displaying negative behaviour with friends, teachers and tutors. I was being summoned to school and asked to do a reality check. At this difficult time, my spiritual Master, who is physically invisible but ever present in my life, started sending me urgent messages. "Give! Give! Give, he whispered to me daily, urgently, insistently, from the depths of my being. When I started thinking what it was that Master wanted me to give, the answer flashed into my mind. I had to give love and tenderness to my children. Dear readers, I can vouch for the difference this revelation has made to my life. Today, I see nurturing children as an opportunity to give, rather than as an added chore or as a drag on my lifestyle. My heart opens and exults in joy when I see



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Sushobhan Sarkar with his children Aishi and Riddhiman

the difference that my sincere attention and counselling has made to their lives and their self-confidence. My life and business have improved by leaps and bounds, as though I have been given a second janam, a second life. My time management is now bang on! And I have been blessed at the workplace with more and more efficient colleagues, who share my business pressures. Granted, we will not be able to prevent every tragedy or misfortune, but nurturing children installs the much needed stabilisers in life and comes with the following positive karmic and health effects.

Children make us happier

When we do something good for our children we feel good. On a spiritual level we are doing seva to souls and improving our karmic bank balance. On a biochemical level, the good feeling we get is due to higher levels of dopamine in the brain, so we get a natural high, often referred to as 'Helper's High.'

Children give us healthier hearts

Acts of nurturing children are often accompanied by emotional warmth. Emotional warmth produces the hormone oxytocin which causes the release of nitric oxide in blood vessels, expanding the blood vessels. This reduces blood pressure, and therefore oxytocin is known as a 'cardio-protective' hormone because it protects the heart by lowering blood pressure.

Children slow aging

Aging on a biochemical level is a combination of many things, but two culprits that speed the process are free radicals and inflammation, both of which result from making unhealthy lifestyle choices. But research now shows that oxytocin (which we produce through emotional warmth) reduces levels of free radicals and inflammation in the cardiovascular system and slows aging at its source. There have also been suggestions in the scientific journals of the strong link between compassion and the activity of the vagus nerve. The vagus nerve, in addition to regulating heart rate, also

controls inflammation levels in the body. Therefore the warmer your interaction with children, the higher is your chance of staying and looking young.

Children give us a purpose in life

My cousin's world was shattered when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. She had a wonderful marriage, two loving children and great success in her career. To add to her woes, she was diagnosed with an optic nerve problem that caused periodic loss of vision in her left eye. She developed very high blood sugar for which she was immediately put on daily insulin injections. She became extremely sensitive to heat and had to remain in an air conditioned room at all times. She started having fainting spells and even a little effort at work would lead to tremendous fatigue. She had to seek a transfer from her high flying job that involved lots of foreign travel, which she loved, to a routine desk job that had nil challenges and zero opportunity for further career advancement. One day, her elder daughter came back from school and burst into tears asking whether she had an incurable disease and whether she would soon be dead? My cousin's mother herself told us in private that she was not hopeful for her daughter's life. However, my cousin is a very strong-willed person and devoted to the Divine Mother. She refused to cave in to the gossip that her days were numbered or that she would be on lifelong medicines. There had to be a way out, so she started searching for it. First, she consulted a famous psychic, who told her bluntly, that the root cause of her multiple sclerosis was her adamant, obstinate and rigid nature that had caused immense hurt to certain people close to her and she could get rid of the bad karma through daily, intense japa. But she had never done japa before and did not know where to

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start. Around this time, she read Eknath Easwaran's powerful book, *Strength in the Storm*, and learnt the efficacy of mantra and how to chant them. But any journey such as a spirited fight with a deadly disease takes time and patience. My cousin was finding visible improvement in her condition through daily japa but she was also desperate for her healing to be accelerated. This time around, the psychic gave her an unusual prescription: get two dogs and look after them with devotion. The psychic added that many high souls consciously take birth as animals to help families work out negative karma. Her husband was very supportive because he saw the value of taking her mind off the disease by doing something she loved: taking care of pets. They started calling the dogs their "sons". Interestingly, three years after getting the pets, one of the dogs fell critically ill. My cousin and her husband spent nearly nine months and tens of thousands of rupees in restoring the dog back to health. Many people in the family advised them against spending so much money and energy on a mere dog when my cousin's own treatment was so expensive. But they were unsparing in their

seva. Coincidentally or maybe as an act of synchronicity, soon after the dog recovered, my cousin was also declared free of multiple sclerosis after living with it for seven years. She continues to take insulin for her blood sugar and is still sensitive to heat but her life is a song once again. She has moved back to her previous job and is shining in her career. She gives enormous credit to both mantra and her dogs for her turnaround. Her deep felt love and concern for her canine sons took her mind off her own problems. Sri Yukteswar Giri said: look disease in the face and it will soon cease to bother you! My cousin learnt that animals can be powerful triggers to take our mind off disease and add a lifeline to the energy that mantra or meditation brings.

On a personal note, I can actually see all that I have written in this article, manifesting in my husband's life, as he approaches his 50th birthday. My husband has such a nurturing and caring nature, that the children give him a huge thumbs up. The children tell their teachers and friends privately, that they think the world of their father, and that they have escaped a lot of teenage turmoil because of his care. And life has given him back so much, touch wood! Even at 50, he looks so young, that people think he is our daughter's elder brother! He is so agile that he can climb a mountain like a deer. And the biggest gift is that even though both the children are now young adults, they involve him actively in every facet of their lives. They demand his presence at every happy event, at every success and share their secrets, unlike most grown up children, who shy away from their parents. His life flows with added meaning and purpose. He has no time to be depressed, unwell or anxious because the feel-good factor from two young, intelligent, openly loving and accomplished souls now flows into his life, like manna from the heavens, after years and years of harvesting the relationship with care, patience, unconditional support and understanding.

So, nurturing is not only good for the subjects; it's good for us too. The giving and nurturing exercise also creates stronger connections between people and helps to build a happier environment for everyone. As Bob Hope famously said: If you haven't got any charity in your heart, you have the worst kind of heart trouble!

Why wait? Let's act NOW!



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