

Faux Fido eases loneliness in nursing home residents as well as real dog, study finds

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A sophisticated robotic dog could be a good companion for your dog-loving grandmother who can't care for a living pet, a new Saint Louis University study suggests.

The researchers compared how residents of three nursing homes interacted with Sparky, a living, medium-sized gentle mutt, and Aibo, a doggie robot once manufactured by Sony that looks like a three-dimensional cartoon.

“The most surprising thing is they worked almost equally well in terms of alleviating loneliness and causing residents to form attachments,” says William A. Banks, M.D., professor of geriatric medicine at Saint Louis University.

“For those people who can't have a living pet but who would like to have a pet, robotics could address the issue of companionship,” Banks says.

To test whether residents connected better with Sparky or Aibo, researchers divided a total of 38 nursing home residents into three groups. All were asked questions to assess their level of loneliness. One group saw Sparky once a week for 30 minutes, another group had similar visits with Aibo, and a control group saw neither furry nor mechanical critter.

During visits, Marian Banks, Banks' wife and co-researcher, brought Sparky or Aibo into a resident's room and placed the pet companion near

the resident. Both pets interacted with residents -- wagging their tails and responding to the people they visited.

After seven weeks, all residents were asked questions about how lonely they felt and how attached they were to Sparky or Aibo.

The residents who received visits from real and artificial pooches felt less lonely and more attached to their canine attention-givers than those who got visits from neither.

There was no statistical difference between whether the real or robotic dog did a better job easing loneliness and fostering attachments.

Whether powered by a beating heart or by a rechargeable battery, dogs can be powerful weapons in helping pet-loving nursing home residents feel less lonely and more connected to another being, Banks says.

“There is a lot of loneliness in nursing homes and animal-assisted therapy – whether from a dog or a robot – is one answer for addressing that,” he says.

Robots with personality also could help care for older adults who live alone and need a little monitoring, Banks adds. Think R2D2.

“This health companion could follow a person in his home, giving reminders on when to take medication or sending out an alert when a person has suddenly gone from a vertical position to a horizontal one,” Banks says.

“A person could get tired of a robot following him around. But if you could change that inanimate voyeur to a personal part of his life and a companion, that could be entirely different.”

Source: Saint Louis University

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