

## The truth about cats and dogs: Pets are good for mental health of 'everyday people'

July 11 2011

---

Pets can serve as important sources of social and emotional support for "everyday people," not just individuals facing significant health challenges, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

And, the study found, pet owners were just as close to key people in their lives as to their animals, indicating no evidence that relationships with pets came at the expense of relationships with other people, or that people relied more on pets when their human social support was poorer.

[Psychologists](#) at Miami University and Saint Louis University conducted three experiments to examine the potential benefits of [pet ownership](#) among what they called everyday people. The results of the current study were reported in the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#), published online by APA.

"We observed evidence that pet owners fared better, both in terms of well-being outcomes and individual differences, than non-owners on several dimensions," said lead researcher Allen R. McConnell, PhD, of Miami University in Ohio. "Specifically, pet owners had greater self-esteem, were more physically fit, tended to be less lonely, were more conscientious, were more extraverted, tended to be less fearful and tended to be less preoccupied than non-owners."

Until now, most research into the benefits of pets has been correlational, meaning it looked at the relationship between two variables but didn't

show that one caused the other. For example, prior research showed that elderly [Medicare patients](#) with pets had fewer doctor visits than similar patients without pets, or that HIV-positive men with pets were less depressed than those without.

In this study, 217 people (79 percent women, mean age 31, mean annual family income \$77,000) answered surveys aimed at determining whether pet owners in the group differed from people who didn't have pets in the areas of well-being, [personality type](#) and attachment style. Several differences between the groups emerged, and in all cases, pet owners were happier, healthier and better adjusted than were non-owners.

A second experiment, involving 56 dog owners (91 percent of whom were women, with a mean age of 42 and average annual family income of \$65,000), examined whether pet owners benefit more when their pet is perceived to fulfill their social needs better. This study found greater well-being among owners whose dogs increased their feelings of belonging, self-esteem and meaningful existence.

The last study, comprising 97 undergraduates with an average age of 19, found that pets can make people feel better after experiencing rejection. Subjects were asked to write about a time when they felt excluded. Then they were asked to write about their favorite pet, or to write about their favorite friend, or to draw a map of their campus. The researchers found that writing about pets was just as effective as writing about a friend when it came to staving off feelings of rejection.

"[T]he present work presents considerable evidence that pets benefit the lives of their owners, both psychologically and physically, by serving as an important source of social support," the researchers wrote. "Whereas past work has focused primarily on [pet owners](#) facing significant health challenges ... the present study establishes that there are many positive consequences for everyday people who own pets."

**More information:** "Friends With Benefits: On the Positive Consequences of Pet Ownership," Allen R. McConnell, PhD, Miami University; Christina M. Brown, PhD, Saint Louis University; Tonya M. Shoda, MA, Laura E. Stayton, BA, and Colleen E. Martin, BA, Miami University; *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Online, July 4, 2011.

Provided by American Psychological Association

Citation: The truth about cats and dogs: Pets are good for mental health of 'everyday people' (2011, July 11) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-07-truth-cats-dogs-pets-good.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.