

Pets good medicine for those battling mental ills

February 16 2018, by Serena Gordon, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—Can the adoring gaze of a dog or the comforting purr of a

cat be helpful to people with mental illness? Absolutely, new research suggests.

Although furry companions won't replace medications or therapy for mental health concerns, they can provide significant benefits, according to British researchers. Their [review](#) of 17 studies found that pets can provide comfort, alleviate worry, loneliness and isolation, increase physical activity and provide distraction from symptoms.

"The participants included in the review enjoyed keeping their animals and believed that they gained psychological benefits from these relationships," said the study's lead author, Helen Louise Brooks, a lecturer in psychology at the University of Liverpool.

The studies included in the review focused mostly on dogs and cats, but also included birds, rabbits and other animals. Brooks said that past research has shown it's important that [people](#) be able to choose a pet that pairs well with their individual needs, living situation and limits based on their condition.

Study participants represented a range of mental illnesses—from those that were self-reported to serious conditions diagnosed by a mental health professional. The studies also included [mental health](#) issues associated with a physical health condition or with a developmental disorder. But the review didn't specify the exact types of [mental illness](#) that participants had.

A major theme that the researchers found was that companion animals provided emotional comfort and offered unconditional, nonjudgmental care. Sometimes people with mental illness preferred their pets over the people in their lives, as illustrated by this example:

"The dog approaches Karin when she's crying and comforts her by lying

next to her and licking away her tears. The dog hears her, and wherever he is in the house, he comes to her. We can't always comfort her. Sometimes Karin has said, 'It's a good thing we have the dog, otherwise no one would be able to comfort me.' "

Pets also provide a sense of responsibility and can help distract from symptoms of mental illness, even the most serious:

"They are something that is very important in my recovery and helping me not get too depressed. Even when I was so depressed, I was kind of suicidal. I never got really bad, but I was suicidal at one time. The thing that made me stop was wondering what the rabbits would do. That was the first thing I thought of, and I thought, 'Oh, yeah, I can't leave because the rabbits need me.' "

Other benefits cited by the pet owners included increased exercise and contact with nature, keeping people focused on the present instead of ruminating on the past, helping them be more open to social interactions, and giving them a sense of pride and a feeling of being wanted or valued.

"My best quality is that I love animals and I take care of animals. ... Other than that, I can't think of anything real outstanding."

Of course, as anyone who's had a pet knows, there are negative aspects, too. Sometimes caring for a pet can be difficult and costly. And pets don't live as long as their owners do.

But Brooks said the participants included in the review "felt that the positive impact of pet ownership outweighed these negative aspects."

Psychiatrist Dr. Jeffrey Borenstein, president and CEO of the Brain & Behavior Research Foundation in New York City, said this was a good study that confirms what people might have already suspected was true.

"In many ways, the benefits of having a pet for people with mental illness are very similar to the benefits that anyone with a pet experiences," said Borenstein, who wasn't involved with the review. "The relationship with a pet is really very beneficial for all people."

If someone with a mental [illness](#) is concerned about being able to care for an animal, he said, they should discuss it with their psychiatrist or psychologist, who could help them figure out what type of pet might be best for them.

The study was published online Feb. 5 in *BMC Psychiatry*.

More information: Helen Louise Brooks, Ph.D., lecturer, psychology, University of Liverpool, England; Jeffrey Borenstein, M.D., president and CEO, Brain & Behavior Research Foundation, New York City; *BMC Psychiatry*, Feb. 5, 2018, online

The American Kennel Club has more on [emotional support animals](#).

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