

# Pets may protect against suicide in older people

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Credit: (Joenomias) Menno de Jong from Pixabay

It's a sad fact that suicide rates among people over 60 are the highest of

any age group in Australia, but a new study published today from the University of South Australia has found an unexpected savior—pets.

The mere presence of a dog, cat, or even birds can be enough to stop some older people from taking their own life, according to lead author Dr. Janette Young, a UniSA Health Sciences lecturer.

In a paper published in the journal *Anthrozoos*, Dr. Young and colleagues discuss the unexpected findings from 35 interviews with older people (aged 60-83 years) on the impact of pets on their health.

More than one third (12) who reported being "actively suicidal" or "significantly traumatized" discussed how their pets gave them a reason to live. Feeling "known" by their pet was crucial. Taking responsibility for an animal (feeding, grooming and exercising it) gave them purpose, and the constant physical presence of a pet helped mitigate the loneliness and despair they felt.

"Pets are just wonderful companions," one woman testified. "Just being there in your dark times, loving you, knowing you and appreciating you is a powerful thing, offering a sense of protection."

Men, in particular, identified their pets as playing a key role in their mental health, Dr. Young says.

"This pattern seems significant given the higher suicide rate among men, which increases with age in western countries."

Older people are more likely to experience complex [health](#) needs, social isolation and loneliness, and fear of burdening their families. For these reasons alone, pets can play a protective role, the researchers say.

"Pets offer a counter to many older people's sense of uselessness," Dr.

Young says. "Animals need looking after which creates a sense of purpose for older people, and they also promote social connections with other people."

The dearth of pet accommodation in [aged care](#) should be re-examined in light of these findings, the researchers say.

"Health and care providers need to understand the distress that many older people face when they have to relinquish their pets if they move into aged accommodation, lose their spouse or downsize their home.

"For some people, the loss of a pet may mean the loss of a significant [mental health](#) support, one that was perhaps even protecting them from ending their life."

However, Dr. Young says not all pet owners will fit this profile. "One pat of a dog per day isn't going to work for everyone. And just giving an animal to someone hoping it will make them feel needed, is risky for both humans and animals."

**More information:** Janette Young et al. A Qualitative Analysis of Pets as Suicide Protection for Older People, *Anthrozoös* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/08927936.2020.1719759](#)

Provided by University of South Australia

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