

Pandemic blues? Turns out, our pets have been waiting for this moment

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As a child, Jen Currin-McCulloch noticed the effects of the human-animal bond while following her dad around his veterinary clinic.

"I began to notice the strong bonds that humans had with their animals, and the roles that they played in their lives for companionship, comfort, and a sense of purpose," she said.

When she became an oncology/[palliative care](#) social worker, Currin-McCulloch observed human-animal interactions in a hospital where animal-assisted therapy teams visited patients once a week.

"To see my patients, who were depressed, grieving, and feeling isolated, begin to feel a sense of connection to the world gave us all tremendous hope," she said.

Today, as an assistant professor and researcher in Colorado State University's School of Social Work, Jen Currin-McCulloch says the results of two large surveys show the COVID-19 pandemic is bringing us together with our pets like never before, and our pets are helping to reduce feelings of depression, anxiety, and loneliness.

More than 5,000 dog and [cat owners](#) said that, besides helping them feel better, their pets also help them maintain a regular schedule, cope with uncertainty, boost self-compassion, and find purpose in their lives. The surveys were conducted in partnership with researchers from Colorado State University, Washington State University, the University of San Francisco, and Palo Alto University.

Strengthening human-animal bond

"We wanted to understand how being with our dogs 24/7 would impact the relationship," said Phyllis Erdman, a professor at Washington State University. The surveys took place in April, and most of the participants were females living in cities that were recommending or mandating that residents stay at home, with only essential services remaining open.

"The results of our study, especially the positive impact of pets on people's feelings of loneliness and isolation, are critically important because, in these times of social distancing, human contact and support are significantly limited," said Lori Kogan, a professor in CSU's College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences.

Indeed, most of the [survey respondents](#) reported they have less social support during the COVID-19 pandemic than before.

"Pets are helping to fill at least some of this void," said Kogan. "Companion animals have perhaps never been more important, as people struggle to adapt to their new reality."

More than 70% of the dog survey respondents reported spending more overall time with their dog as a result of COVID-19, and 42.5% said they were walking their dogs more frequently. More than 60% of the cat survey respondents reported spending more time overall with their cat as a result of COVID-19.

Coping with the pandemic

The second part of both the dog and cat surveys had to do with how relationships with our pets affect our feelings and emotions about the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as how we plan to care for our pets during the pandemic.

"This is one of the first and only studies to assess social/emotional and practical issues related to caring for a companion animal during a global pandemic," said Cori Bussolari, an associate professor at the University of San Francisco.

When asked how their relationship with their dogs affected feelings associated with COVID-19, nearly 70% of respondents in the dog survey

reported decreased feelings of loneliness and isolation. More than half also reported dogs helped ease depression and anxiety, and gave purpose to their lives.

When asked how cats influenced their feelings related to COVID-19, more than 60% of respondents in the cat survey said their cats helped to decrease feelings of loneliness, and more than half said being with their cats gave meaning and purpose to their lives during self-isolation.

But while pets like [dogs](#) and cats have clearly made a positive difference in the lives of their humans during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the more concerning results of both surveys showed that humans may need to do a better job of caring for their pets in case of emergency.

"Many participants were concerned about who would take care of their animal in the event of caregiver illness, but only about 60% took concrete steps to arrange for caretaking," said Wendy Packman, a professor at Palo Alto University.

Also, many people expressed concerns about how to prepare their [companion animals](#) for an eventual return to pre-pandemic lifestyles.

"Many respondents worry about their dog's separation anxiety and how their animals will react and cope emotionally when they are left at home alone again," said Currin-McCulloch.

Impact on mental health

"In [social work](#), one of our Grand Challenges, or clinical and research initiatives, is to reduce the physical and psychosocial impacts of social isolation," Currin-McCulloch said. "We know that social isolation increases one's risk for developing poor physical and mental health outcomes."

The surveys clearly show that our pets have adapted to increased time spent with us, and this human-animal bond has even helped us with feelings of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. Pets also provide a sense of purpose during these times of social distancing, travel restrictions, and shutdowns related to COVID-19.

"Many folks also shared that the increased time at home with their animals has resulted in more walks, playing outside, and cuddles," Currin-McCulloch said. "So I would say it may also be providing physical health benefits regarding increased physical activity."

Kogan said, "For many of these pet owners, as exemplified in their own words, their pets are a lifeline. They are a top priority and seen as an important component in mitigating the negative aspects associated with this time of uncertainty and fear."

Provided by Colorado State University

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