

Dog ownership and mental health—for better and worse

July 28 2022



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It is often believed that a close relationship between owners and their dogs can bring many mental health benefits to owners, but findings from a new study led by the University of Liverpool paint a more complicated

picture.

Researchers surveyed 1,693 adult dog [owners](#) in the UK to investigate whether [dog owners](#) with stronger relationships with their [dogs](#) experience better mental health.

Published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*, their analysis found that a stronger dog–owner relationship was associated with greater feelings of emotional support and companionship but poorer levels of anxiety or depression.

Key themes included positive impacts on owner well-being and happiness through providing purpose, companionship and self-acceptance, pleasure and distraction, as well as lessening emotional pain and suffering. For example, dogs were mentioned as a useful aid for dealing with mental health symptoms, such as suicidal thoughts. However, negative impacts of a strong relationship included anticipatory grief over loss of the dog, and concerns regarding the burden of responsibility and ability to meet dog's needs.

The researchers found that it was this perceived 'burden' of dog ownership that was most closely associated to owners' mental well-being.

"A lower perceived burden was beneficially associated with all mental health outcomes, including lower anxiety and depression, and also was found to be important in our qualitative explorations, and so it is important for future research and practical interventions to address issues that lead to a sense of burden created by owning and caring for a dog," explains lead researcher Dr. Carri Westgarth.

While further research is needed, the authors suggest that ensuring the right help is in place for owners is the key to a healthy dog–owner [relationship](#) that supports owner mental well-being. This includes access

to affordable veterinary care and dog training, walking, and boarding services, access to pet-friendly housing and dog-supportive environments, and [mental health](#) support for people who may be struggling with anticipatory grief or who may have recently lost a pet, particularly for those with limited social support.

More information: Aikaterini Merkouri et al, Dogs and the Good Life: A Cross-Sectional Study of the Association Between the Dog–Owner Relationship and Owner Mental Wellbeing, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.903647](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.903647)

Provided by University of Liverpool

Citation: Dog ownership and mental health—for better and worse (2022, July 28) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-07-dog-ownership-mental-healthfor-worse.html>

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