

# Fostering a cat can ease loneliness, study finds

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No one needs science to tell them that dogs make faithful and loving companions. Cats, on the other hand, could use the endorsement. The University of Georgia and Brenau University have provided just that in [a](#)

[pilot study](#) that proves fostering a cat can ease loneliness among older adults.

Susan Cannone, one of 29 participants in the study, responded to an advertisement in 2020 seeking [human subjects](#) to foster shelter [cats](#). Volunteers had to be 60 or older and living alone with no other pets in the house.

"I couldn't stand coming home to nothing except the house," Cannone said. "To have somebody that you know is waiting for you and is happy to see you just makes all the difference."

After Cannone passed a cognitive test and assessments of her physical and [mental health](#), co-investigator Sherry Sanderson, associate professor in the College of Veterinary Medicine's Department of Biomedical Sciences, brought Cannone to the Athens Area Humane Society to select a cat.

Sanderson went straight to a kennel of kittens with a warning sign that said, "Don't bother us. We're stressed." She pulled out a male kitten who, in her expert opinion, didn't look stressed at all. Cannone saw him, he saw her, "and that was it," she recalled. "It was love at first sight."

## **Loneliness is an epidemic**

In May 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General released a study that called loneliness and isolation an epidemic. Kerstin Emerson, clinical associate professor in the College of Public Health's Institute of Gerontology, Health Policy & Management and a co-investigator on the UGA study, said the report placed an emphasis on the urgent need for a cure.

"While there are many causes of loneliness, we know that there are interventions that can help," she said. "We wanted to know if a cat

fostering program could be one intervention that could help [older adults](#) who are experiencing loneliness,"

Sanderson said cats are a good option for older adults because they are more self-sufficient than dogs but still social enough to engage their owners in play and talk. Unlike dogs, they don't require walks or intense physical exercise, which makes them good companions for owners with arthritis, heart disease, and other health conditions.

Don Scott, campus director of geriatrics and [palliative care](#) and associate professor of medicine at the Augusta University-University of Georgia Medical Partnership and a co-investigator on the study, said the UGA study adds to the growing body of research indicating the benefits of pet ownership. "While a great deal of such research has focused on dogs, our study is the first to demonstrate that cat companions can decrease feelings of loneliness in older adults," Scott said.

## **Attachment to a pet can improve health**

Volunteers agreed to foster shelter kittens or cats for a minimum of four months with an option to adopt after the first month. Participants were asked to quantify the comfort they received from their cats and the perceived effect the cats had on their physical and mental well-being in surveys given in their first and fourth months enrolled in the study.

For those who adopted, a third survey measured their satisfaction at 12 months. Veterinary care and food were provided during the study, and adoption fees were paid for those who decided to keep their foster cats, removing the financial barriers that often discourage older adults from adopting shelter animals.

Scott said that an attachment to a pet appears to mediate the relationship between loneliness and general health for older women. However, not all

older adults are able to meet the physical or cognitive demands of pet ownership, and there are potential risks, such as bites, scratches, or falls.

"So, pet ownership must be carefully considered in the context of an older adult's health status, both for the welfare of the human and the animal," Scott said.

By all appearances, Frankie—aka, Mama's best baby, sweetheart, darling, angel—is a perfect match for Marion Newburn. The male tabby was selected by Sanderson with guidance from Newburn, who named the cat Frankie after her second husband, Frank Collins.

Cats can be strategic lovers at best, cozying up to their humans when food or attention is needed—by them. As a rule, they aren't generally as obedient as dogs, but Frankie eagerly responds to Newburn's call for "love-ins" when she settles on the couch to read at night. He provides hours of entertainment, especially when he's had a hit of catnip. He earns his keep by ridding the house of bugs.

That's also a benefit Starbucks, Cannone's cat, has brought to her home. He once caught a small snake that had slithered into the house.

"I can hardly wait to get home," Cannone said of life since adopting Starbucks. If he's not in the room when she walks in, he comes running as soon as he hears her.

**More information:** Sherry L Sanderson et al, The Impact of Cat Fostering on Older Adult Well-Being and Loneliness: A Feasibility Study, *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/geronb/gbad140](https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbad140)

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