

Researchers find pet owners do not have better mental health

September 4 2024



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We all remember news stories about the so-called "pandemic puppies" and the soaring number of pet adoptions in countries all over the world as the COVID-19 lockdowns brought social life to a halt in 2020.

The sudden surge in [pet ownership](#) was largely attributed to people seeking comfort and companionship from animals to cope with things like isolation, anxiety, and depression. However, a new comprehensive study, conducted by researchers from Aarhus University and King's College London, suggests that the benefits of owning a pet might be overstated.

The study, recently [published](#) in *Mental Health & Prevention*, reveals that pet ownership does not necessarily offer the emotional boost many people expect.

No mental health benefits found

The study tracked 6,018 individuals in the UK over a 12-month period, assessing their levels of depression, anxiety, anhedonia (loss of pleasure), and loneliness.

Contrary to popular assumptions, the study found no evidence that pet ownership improved these mental health outcomes. In fact, pet owners reported slightly worse mental health outcomes compared to non-owners.

"Although the body of research done on the topic has been mixed, we were genuinely surprised to find that pet owners generally experienced slightly higher levels of depression, anxiety, and anhedonia during the COVID-19 pandemic," says lead author of the study Professor Christine Parsons from the Department of Clinical Medicine and continues:

"This runs counter to a prevailing public belief that pets are beneficial for mental health."

Testing the validity of the 'Lassie effect'

Another commonly held belief is that dog owners in particular benefit from increased [physical activity](#) and a more structured daily routine, which in turn might lead to improved mental health.

Here researchers found that dog owners really were more likely to engage in daily exercise (40% compared to 35% of non-owners).

However, this increased activity did not correlate with better mental health outcomes and no significant difference was found between [dog owners](#) and non-owners with regards to maintaining a daily structure.

The myth of the lonely 'Cat lady'

The only area where pet ownership provides a mental health benefit is in relation to loneliness. In popular culture, the trope of the "Cat lady" is a lonely, anxious woman with mental health issues. The new study also gave researchers the opportunity to test some of these cultural assumptions against reality.

Among individuals living alone, both dog and cat owners reported slightly lower levels of loneliness than those without pets. Even though the effects were small, they ran opposite to the lonely "Cat lady" trope.

For those living as couples, families, or roommates, pet owners reported no measurable difference in the feeling of loneliness.

While women in the study were clearly more likely to own cats (30.3 % compared to 22.7% in males), they were not more lonely, depressed, anxious or anhedonic than men who owned cats.

Hope for a more informed public conversation

According to Parsons, this new study will be useful in managing expectations about the [mental health benefits](#) of pet ownership. She hopes that the results will nuance the [public perception](#) and [media coverage](#), which she and her team of researchers have shown to be in favor of the positive narrative.

"Our findings suggest that while pets can provide companionship, they are by no means a cure-all for [mental health issues](#), especially during stressful times like a pandemic," says Parsons.

Dr. Katherine Young, the senior author notes, "This study adds to the mixed body of research on pet ownership and mental health. While some previous studies have suggested benefits, the large, longitudinal nature of this research provides robust evidence to the contrary."

More information: Christine E. Parsons et al, No beneficial associations between living with a pet and mental health outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic in a large UK longitudinal sample, *Mental Health & Prevention* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.mhp.2024.200354](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhp.2024.200354)

Provided by Aarhus University

Citation: Researchers find pet owners do not have better mental health (2024, September 4) retrieved 5 September 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-09-pet-owners-mental-health.html>

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