



The Pet Effect, Health and Psychological Wellbeing: A Brief Review

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Abstract

Numerous studies have linked owning a companion animal to a variety of physical, psychological, and social health benefits. This paper investigates the evidence that pets can significantly improve human health, both physical and psychological, in the short and long term, serving as a "therapist" for mankind without regard to age, race, or gender, and in particular, assisting in the diagnosis and treatment of specific chronic diseases such as cancer, epilepsy, and diabetes. The literature reviewed substantially supports the commonly held and established belief that pets are healthy for humans, as well as understanding the human-pet connection and motivating sufferers in particular and people in general to interact with their pets to enhance their own health and wellbeing.

Keywords: Pet- Human dynamics, Health, Psychological wellbeing, Pet-ownership.

INTRODUCTION:

The World Health Organization regards mental well-being as a fundamental component of health. A positive state of mental well-being permits individuals to acknowledge their capabilities, cope with day to day stresses, work productively and contribute to society. Many usual stressors like poor economic conditions, hectic work schedule and low patterns of physical activity can lower mental well-being. Mental illness is one of the chief patron to the global burden of disease.

Dog ownership is common worldwide. It has been proposed that dog ownership can boost human mental well-being through several possible pathways. Dogs can provide social support and companionship to their owners, as well as serve as catalysts for increased human social contacts. Acute human-dog encounters have been proven to have therapeutic hormonal benefits, including lower cortisol levels, a stress biomarker, and higher

oxytocin levels. As a result of dog walking, dog owners may be more physically active than non-owners, with a well-established correlation between physical activity and positive mental well-being.

Most research investigating mental well-being and human–dog interactions have examined the efficacy of animal-assisted therapies to improve psychological outcomes among institutionalized individuals, such as those living in nursing homes, or clinical populations with mental illness or chronic disease. Amid university students, dog-assisted interpositions have also revealed that vital human–dog interactions have advantageous consequences on measures of positive and negative affect. Dog ownership and mental well-being longitudinal studies among community dwelling are not so common. Only two studies, to date, have analyzed the impact of companion animal acquisition on human physical and psychological health, one of which reported positive results. Both studies investigated one factor of mental well-being pre and post pet acquisition, with a follow-up period of 6–10 months. Pet ownership and psychological well-being were also investigated in a one-year prospective cohort study with 955 community-based older individuals (65 years), which found no link between ownership and happiness, satisfaction, or perceived mental health. The few cross-sectional correlation studies that have been done in the field have yielded mixed results.

The dearth of information and contradictory findings are partially attributable to a slew of methodological issues that have plagued the field of human-animal interaction research. The above cross-sectional studies are limited as they compare existing dog or pet owners to non-owners and cannot rule-out reverse causation, i.e. the probability of individuals interested in dog ownership are encountering superior health prior to acquiring a dog. Randomized controlled trials, in which human participants are randomly allocated to dog ownership, are not feasible in this field. Randomized allotments of dogs to dispassionate community members would raise incompatible animal welfare concerns, such as possibilities for neglect or inadequate care, including veterinary care. Dog ownership demands considerable economic and time commitments which also introduce human ethical concerns in case of dispassionate individuals. As randomized controlled trials are not feasible, the strongest possible design for examining the impact of dog ownership on mental well-being may be controlled studies in which non-owners acquire a companion dog.



REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Numerous studies have been conducted throughout the years on a variety of topics relating to the much-loved domestic pets. Some are concerned with animal therapy (E. Paul Cherniack, 2014), pets and disabilities such as asthma (E. Eller, 2008) or depression (I. Enmarker, 2015), and others are concerned with pets' contribution to human mental health (Herzog, 2011).

According to the American Pet Products Association, the majority of people in the world own one or more pets, and the number of pets owned in America has increased in the last two years (2017-2018). While several of the

pet selections alter depending to their statistics, such as horses, fish, and reptiles, cats and dogs are always among the top three most owned pets (American Pet Products Association, Archive). The United States isn't the only country where pet ownership is on the upswing. According to Pet Insurance (2014), Europe has a large number of pet-owning households.

Souter and Miller (2007) conducted a meta-analysis on animal-assisted activities (AAA) and their effectiveness in treating depression. When deciding which studies would be allowed to participate in their investigation, they utilised highly severe criteria. Random assignments, a control group, a measure of depressive symptoms, and, of course, exposure to either AAA or AAT were all required in the research.

The focus for anxiety-based pet studies will be on a study by Hoffman, Lee, Wertenuer, Ricken, Jansen, Gallinat, and Lang (2009) that looks at anxiety in hospitalized patients with serious depression and how dog-assisted therapy affects them. AAT normally entails interaction between a patient and any type of animal, the most popular of which are dogs or cats; however, there are farm AATs as well, which entail the most common of which are horses, but also other farm animals. The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, or STAI, is the tool used to measure anxiety during the assessment.

Hoffman et al. were interested in comparing anxiety levels before and after therapy with the dogs to see if there was a change. They discovered a substantial change in the anxiety STAI scale before and after results, with a significant difference of $p=0.016$ with dog ownership and $p=0.327$ without it. The important study revealed that dog ownership may provide additional pet therapy benefits for patients and therapists by reducing anxiety and improving psychotherapeutic tactics and motivation.

A different study by Enmarker et al. (2015) focused on depression in older population who were cat and dog owners. Their cross-sectional study observed the older population, with over 12000 participants between the ages of 65 and 101 and the tool used for this study was Hospital Anxiety and Depression scale or HADS. Within their demographic factors multiple areas were observed like gender, age, marital status, cohabiting or living alone to check whether any of these factors play any role in their depressive symptoms. The results highlighted that individuals with pets tended to rate higher on poor health and higher on loneliness status compared to non-pet owners but, did not prove significant in approval of the pets or gender.

Studies highlighting the effects pets have on people's stress levels. A study by Karen M. Allen et al. studies the involuntary responses to stress in women with human friends and pet dogs, for which 45 women between 27-55 years of age group were studied into a lab setting and were put in a stressful situation where only the experimenter was present, after 2 weeks they did the experiment again, however this time at home with either a female friend present, a dog or nothing else. The self-report results show the participant's attitude towards their pets did not change and unaffected by the given experimental situation. From the lab environment the tests highlighted significant findings in its ability to cause stress to the participant when examined. These findings show that subjects with their dogs present felt less psychologically intimidated than subjects of other group explaining that individuals could have been possibly diverted attending their dogs instead of fully focusing on the examination therefore, were least stressed in the presence of their pet dogs. However, it could also be assumed that individuals may have felt self-conscious or nervous and anxious of making any mistakes when were with the friend. Very often unwarily people go to their pets for comfort when stressed.

DISCUSSION:

Mental health is an ever-growing interest both within society as well as in psychology. Because the importance of our pets plays an important and crucial role and position in our lives, this study set out to find significant results between our pets and positive mental health. As we know a generous amount of money is annually invested in preventative medicine and therapeutic treatment for people facing comprehensive physical as well as psychological health problems. Currently a wide range of escalated evidences and studies suggest and supports the idea that companion animals or pets such as dogs and cats, can enhance the health (both physical and psychological) of their human owners and thus contributing significantly to the health valuation of the country as a whole.

Pet ownership can help people improve their health by acting as a motivator for exercise, reducing stress and anxiety, and providing an external focus of attention. Pets can also provide physical touch and comfort, which can help to reduce loneliness and depression while also encouraging the owner to live a more engaging lifestyle. The advantages of pet ownership are constant with the health promotion and disease prevention which may include (a) increasing physical activity and fitness and (b) improving mental health and preventing mental disorders. Thus, ranging from higher survival rates in both better physical as well as psychological wellbeing in community dwelling younger to older people.

The field of human-animal bond researches have examined the health benefits of pets and human-animal interaction proposing a positive human-animal interaction relating to changes in physiological variables both in humans and animals, including depletion of subjective psychological stress (fear, anxiety), alleviation of risk relating to cardiovascular disease and an increase of oxytocin levels in the brain (measurable clinical effects). Interactions with animals can help people manage their long-term mental health conditions as research findings do highlight that pets and therapy animals can help alleviate stress, anxiety, depression, and feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Pets provide a sense of security and routine that provides emotional and social support, as well as pets as mediators for friendship formation and building social support networks, according to a few studies that looked into the role of pets in the social networks of people managing a long-term mental health problem. Majority of surveys highlight that around 74% of pet owners reflect mental health improvements, and around 75% of the same in case of their friends or family members because of pet ownership.

Another theory proposes that pets can improve social interactions with other people, resulting in an indirect effect on happiness and wellbeing. Social contact has been long acknowledged as beneficial as it reduces the feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Pets undeniably act as “social catalytic agent,” directing to prominent social contact between people particularly important for those at risk of social isolation, such as elderly or people with physical disabilities due to lack of opportunities for social interactions.

There are also proposals focusing on ways in which pet ownership may exert an undeviating effect on human health and wellbeing through the nature of the relationship. Close human relationships have strong influence on wellbeing by delivering emotional support which may not just reduce discernments of stressful events resulting in safeguarding against anxiety related illness but also bestowing confidence that can help as successful coping strategies to deal with stress, and may enhance recovery from serious illness such as stroke, myocardial infarction, and cancer. These areas of a relationship are aggregately referred as social support. Social relationships exhibit notable menacing factors for health, emulating the effects of well confirmed risk factors such as cigarette smoking, blood pressure, blood lipid concentrations, obesity, and lack of physical activity.

Thus, it can be summarized that the bonds between humans and animals are powerful. Also, the positive correlation between pets/ companion animals and mental health is undeniable, no matter how old we are

children, adolescents, adults, and elderly all find joy in their pets. Therefore, pets and mental health go conjointly. Pet owners readily acknowledge that pet ownership provides many benefits, including constant love, friendship, and affection. In the presence of animals, people are not only happy, but also healthier.

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