

# Pet Ownership and Quality of Life

Subjects: [Health Care Sciences & Services](#)

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Pet ownership is the most common form of human–animal interaction, and anecdotally, pet ownership can lead to improved physical and mental health for owners. The entry summarizes the literature to determine the evidence for the role pets play in quality of life for their owners.

pet ownership

mental health

human-animal bond

human-animal interactions

## 1. Introduction

Throughout history, animals have played a significant role in society including in agriculture and pet ownership. A recent survey conducted in the United States estimated that approximately 67% of homes had at least one pet, equating about 63 million homes with at least one dog and 42 million homes with at least one cat <sup>[1]</sup>. Pets can constitute a connection to nature, function in recreational and work activities, and provide companionship in our homes <sup>[2][3][4]</sup>. The importance of animals in our lives is founded on the human–animal bond concept, which is the “mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship that exists between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both” <sup>[5]</sup>. This concept has championed animals as companions and family members, leading to their essential part of everyday life for many. The human–animal bond has additionally driven the common belief that pets are good for human health, both physical and mental <sup>[6][7][8]</sup>.

While there are some qualitative <sup>[9][10]</sup> studies that claim that pet ownership benefits people, particularly in regard to improved mental health, there are few studies with substantial evidence from large, diverse population samples to support this theory. The studies that have been published are often not substantiated with regard to study populations or methods, making broad conclusions difficult. Furthermore, some studies that have investigated the correlation between pet ownership and mental health have revealed no effect, or even worse, negative effects of pet ownership <sup>[11][12][13][14][15]</sup>.

## 2. Pet Ownership and Quality of Life

Factors that influenced mental health include (a) age (middle-aged female caregivers had more psychological stress than young female and male caregivers), (b) obedience and aggressiveness of the pet, (c) marital status (single women who owned a dog were less lonely and socially isolated than women without pets), and (d) attachment to the pet (high level of bonding has lower anxiety and depression scores than lower level of bonding) <sup>[16][17][18][19][20][21]</sup>. A few representative studies with mixed results include one examining the general population, which found that unmarried men who live with a pet had the most depressive symptoms and unmarried women

who live with a pet had the fewest [\[16\]](#). Another study examining the impact of companion animals on cancer patients found that mental health was associated with the status of cancer treatment, with those receiving intense treatment having poorer mental health [\[17\]](#).

Research studies either compared mental health outcomes in pet owners versus non-pet owners ( $n = 41$ ) or with regard to owner attachment to the pet ( $n = 13$ ). Similar to the overall distribution, the outcomes within these two different types of studies were distributed across all four categories (**Table 1** and **Table 2**).

**Table 1.** Outcomes of 41 studies that examined mental health outcomes in pet owners compared to non-pet owners.

Population Studied	Negative Impact	Mixed Impact	Positive Impact	No Impact	Total
Older adult	2	7		5	14 (34%)
Severely mentally ill		1	2		3 (7%)
Children and adolescents		1	4	1	6 (15%)
General	1	4	3	3	11 (27%)
Illness (cancer, back pain, etc.)		1	2	2	5 (12%)
Caregivers		1			1 (2%)
Veterans			1		1 (2%)
Totals	3 (7%)	15 (37%)	12 (29%)	11 (27%)	41

**Table 2.** Outcomes of nine studies that examined mental health outcomes in relationship to the pet owner's attachment bond with their pet.

Population Studied	Negative Impact	Mixed Impact	Positive Impact	No Impact	Total
Older adult				1	1 (8%)
Children and adolescents			2		2 (15%)
General	1	3	3	1	8 (61%)
Illness (cancer, back pain, etc.)		1			1 (8%)
Adults living alone	1				1 (8%)
Totals	2 (15%)	4 (31%)	5 (38%)	2 (15%)	13

Understanding the nature of the relationship between mental health and pet ownership is important for both human and animal welfare and to better determine the impact of human–animal interactions. Over the years, the perspective that “pets are good for you” has become an assumption [22] and when negative implications are recognized it often relates to zoonotic diseases rather than human–animal interactions [23]. This belief in the positive aspects of the human–animal bond is strengthened by marketing tools used by the pet industry [24]. While there certainly is evidence that supports the benefits of the human–animal bond to people’s mental health [25][26], there is also clear and consistent evidence that the relationship is complex and sometimes negative [27][28]. The question of whether pets should be prescribed by health professionals is an especially important one. Recent qualitative research supports that attending to a pet can help a person manage mental health crises [29], however, doing so can also cause a person to rely on the pet instead of other evidenced based methods of seeking mental health support. The recommendation of obtaining a pet in the presence of mental illness ought to be coupled with other evidenced based strategies for mental health recovery such as increasing social support and engaging in third wave behaviorally based interventions such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy or Dialectical Behavior Therapy.

The broad perspectives that pets are good for mental health may cause people to place false expectations on the role a dog or cat must play in their lives [30]. The anthropomorphism of pets (people placing human cognitive motivations on pets’ behavior and treating pets as people) can in fact have a negative impact on the animal’s welfare [31]. The untreated stress of people who turn to their pets instead of their human social supports and health professionals may in fact be causing pets to be more stressed [32]. Although initial data suggest relinquishment rates were not higher after COVID-19 lockdowns were lifted [33], some still have concerns that the recent increase in pet adoptions from shelters may result in pet relinquishment once the pandemic is more managed and people return to their daily work environments [34] (J. Schumacher personal communication, 5 May 2021). Developing clear guidelines about the benefits and liabilities of pet ownership and mental health is important to mitigate the public halo effect that suggests that simply acquiring a pet will improve your mental health.

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