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# Does Having a Pet Really Benefit Your Mental Health?

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# Does Having a Pet Really Benefit Your Mental Health?

A simple question with counterintuitive answers.

Posted March 31, 2022 | [Reviewed by Lybi Ma](#)

## KEY POINTS

- Millions of people adopted pets during the COVID pandemic to help them cope with stress and isolation.
- A study examined the relationship between mental health and the degree pet owners were attached to their companion animals.
- Pet owners were no better off than non-owners.
- There was a surprising relationship between pet attachment, depression, loneliness, and well-being.

[This post is in response to Pandemic Puppy Pandemonium Requires Lots of Time and Love By Marc Bekoff Ph.D.](#)



Source: Photo by Timofeev/123RF

Fueled by media reports such as [Pets Combat Loneliness and Stress for Those Isolated During the Covid-19 Pandemic](#), one in five American households adopted a pet during the pandemic. But will getting a pet really cure the COVID blues? A research group headed by Deborah Wells, Ph.D., of Queens University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, examined this question. The results, which will appear in the journal *Anthrozoos*, were, well, surprising.

In December 2020, the number of new cases of COVID in the United Kingdom

skyrocketed from about 50,000 to over 190,000 cases a day. Anticipating a lockdown, Wells and her colleagues designed a survey to assess the impact of [pets](#) in mitigating the [stress](#) and isolation associated with the pandemic.

Thus, the Belfast group was ready to go when the UK announced a national lockdown on January 1, 2021. They immediately put their survey online and advertised it to the general public in the UK by word of mouth and on social media—Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. The study remained online during the first month of the lockdown.

## The Questions: Pet Ownership, Pet Attachment, and Mental Health

The researchers were interested in two questions.

- Were pet owners better off psychologically during the lockdown than those who did not live with a pet?
- Is the quality of the human-animal bond related to the mental health of pet owners?

The survey included basic demographic questions ([sex](#), age, parental status, pet ownership, and so on) and standardized psychological scales related to four aspects of mental health—[depression](#), “positive experiences” ([happiness](#)), [loneliness](#), and stress. In addition, the participants who owned pets completed the 23-item Lexington [Attachment](#) to Pet Scale. This is a widely used measure of the strength of the human-animal bond. Between January 1 and January 31 when it was taken offline, 146 pet owners and 103 non-owners completed the survey.

As other studies have found, pet-owner demographics differed from people without pets. Pet owners were more likely to be female, have children living at home, and be between the ages of 30 and 39. Of the pet owners, 62 percent owned dogs and 38 percent owned cats.

### The Surprising Results

**Question 1:** Were pet owners better off psychologically during the lockdown than people who did not have pets?

**Answer:** No.

Pets did not improve the mental health of the participants during the lockdown. After taking into account sociodemographic factors such as [gender](#), age, and parental status, living with a companion animal made no difference in the levels of depression, happiness, loneliness, or stress in the participants. Further, there were no differences between dog and cat owners in any of the mental health and well-being measures. However, as other studies have found, dog owners were more attached to their pets than cat owners.

- **Question 2:** Is the quality of the human-animal bond related to the well-being of pet owners?

**Answer:** Yes—but not in the way the investigators had expected.

Many researchers have commented on the need for studies on how individual differences in attachment to pets are related to the impact of companion animals on human health and happiness. The study by the Belfast group is one of the few efforts to address this issue. To me, what Wells and her colleagues found was stunning. On three of the four mental health measures, differences in attachment to pets were negatively related to psychological well-being. That is, the owners who were most attached to their companion animals were in worse mental shape than people who were less attached to their pets.

- **Depression:** The participants in the study were more likely to be depressed if they were women, had kids at home, and if they had fewer social connections. But the strongest predictor of depression was owning a pet.
- **Positive Experiences (Happiness):** The subjects tended to have more positive experiences if they were male, older, and had frequent social contacts. But, as with depression, positive experience scores were negatively related to pet attachment. That is, the more owners were bonded to their pets, the fewer positive experiences they had in their lives.
- **Loneliness:** Women and younger people tended to have higher loneliness scores, as did people with fewer social contacts. Loneliness scores, however, were positively correlated with pet attachment. This means that people who were more attached to their pets were lonelier.
- **Stress:** None of the demographic factors including gender, age, and having kids at home were related to levels of stress. And stress scores were the only mental health variable not associated in a bad way with attachment to pets.

## THE BASICS

- [What Is Attachment?](#)
- [Find counselling to strengthen relationships](#)

## Are Highly Attached Pet Owners More Depressed, Lonely, and Unhappy?

Wells and her group found that people with pets were no better off psychologically than non-owners during the COVID lockdown. While readers find this surprising, this result is consistent with dozens of studies that reported pet owners are no less depressed ([here](#)), less lonely ([here](#)), or happier ([here](#)) than people without pets.

I was, however, surprised by the second result. The researchers wrote: "The findings point to a very significant influence of the quality of the human-animal relationship on

psychological health, with stronger attachments to one's companion animal associated with higher levels of depression and loneliness and lower levels of perceived positive experiences."

This finding is non-intuitive. But because of the consistency and size of the effects, I don't think they are a statistical fluke. But why should there be a negative relationship between pet attachment and mental health? The authors point to several possibilities. One is "reverse causation." That is, people who are depressed and lonely might get a pet and become strongly attached to their companion animal as a "[self-help](#) strategy." The researchers also suggested that some people who are especially bonded to animals may lack the social skills to get along well with other people. Indeed, many pet owners have told me that they get along better with animals than they do with other people.

I suspect that species differences might also come into play. Cat owners in the study were less attached to their pets than dog owners, and cats are less likely to pose significant behavior problems to their owners than dogs. Indeed, Kim Brophey, author of *Meet Your Dog: The Game-Changing Guide to Understanding Your Dog's Behavior*, told me that the acquisition of "COVID puppies" has resulted in an international explosion of owners seeking professional help in dealing with dogs that are difficult to live with. Is it possible that issues with seriously recalcitrant pets—more likely dogs than cats—cause mental health issues in their owners, even during pandemic lockdowns?

Does the inverse connection between pet attachment and well-being only occur during crises such as a pandemic lockdown? My daughter Katie, who is intensely attached to her Goldendoodle, Moose, thinks so. When I sent the study to her, she wrote back, "I'm not surprised by the results. COVID meant spending more time with our pets than is typical. This leads to intense, even detrimental, connections, which makes having life-affirming events like travel or even a night out with friends more difficult."

As always, more research is needed.

## References

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