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Why Has the “Pet Effect” Meme Spread So Rapidly?

Does media hype promote unrealistic beliefs about the healing powers of pets?

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Source: Photo by Ulrike Schanz/123RF

The "Pet Effect" is the idea that getting a pet will make you healthier and happier. This idea is highly promoted by the marketing departments of industry giants like Zoetis, the world's largest veterinary products corporation. (Check out their [advertising](#) campaign, [The Pet Effect](#).)

Psychotherapist Dana Dorfman is a believer. In a [recent Psychology Today post](#), she extolled the benefits of pet ownership. She wrote, “A preponderance of evidence supports the contention that [pets](#) affect our overall health—mental and physical.”

Dr. Dorfman is not alone in her enthusiastic acceptance of the notion that pets are panaceas. A 2016 survey by the [Human Animal Bond Research Institute](#) found that 71 percent of pet owners were aware of studies showing that pets improve human mental and physical health. Another survey reported that 97 percent of family doctors now believe there are health benefits from owning pets. Further, 69 percent of them said they had discussed the health benefits of pets with patients. As a prominent human-animal relationship

researcher once said to me over drinks, “The surprising thing about the pet effect meme is how rapidly it has been accepted by the public.”

Wishful Thinking vs. Research Findings

Clearly, pets can make our lives more enjoyable. But, as Psychology Today blogger Marc Bekoff pointed out [his thoughtful response](#) to Dr. Dorfman’s post, the preponderance of the evidence does not support the hype about the curative powers of companion animals.

Take pet industry claims that living with companion animals results in lower levels of [loneliness](#), [depression](#), and [obesity](#). In a series of Psychology Today posts ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), I reviewed the results of 77 published research papers on these topics. Only 6 of 21 studies found pet owners were less lonely than non-owners, only 5 of 31 studies reported that pet owners were less depressed, and in only 5 of 25 papers were pet owners less likely to be obese. So, while some studies have found evidence linking pets and human health, most published research has not.

The Pet Effect Meme and the Availability Heuristic

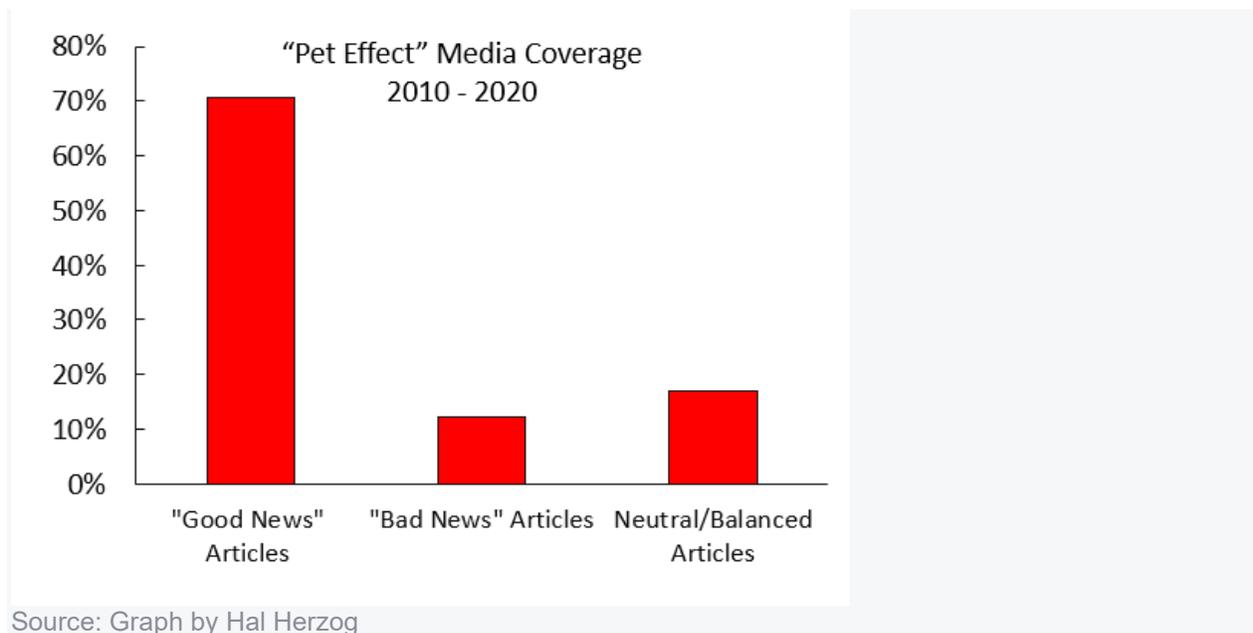
Why is there such a big mismatch between what the public believes about the healing powers of pets and the decidedly mixed results of published studies? I think this is due to a quirk in human thinking psychologists call the [availability heuristic](#). This is the idea that we are biased by information that easily comes to mind, usually because we are frequently exposed to it.

An obvious source of information about pets and health is the media. As far as I can tell, however, there have not been any systematic studies of media coverage research on the impact of pets on human health and [happiness](#). So, I recently turned to Google to examine media stories related to the pet effect.

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Using the Google News search engine I located 81 news items on the pet effect between 2010 and 2020. I searched using the phrase “the impact of pets on human health and happiness.” I did not include articles on the health of pets *per se*, or the debate over emotional support animals on planes, or articles by Psychology Today bloggers.

The articles fell into three categories—the good news, the bad news, and the balanced news.



“Good News” Articles

As expected, most of the articles (70 percent) fell into the “good news” category. These stories unabashedly played up the health benefits. They did not mention the results of studies which found that that pet owners were no better off than non-owners nor studies reporting that pet owners were mentally or physically worse off. Many of these articles committed the statistical sin of imputing causation from correlational data. The titles speak for themselves: ["Why Cats and Dogs Might Be the Best Prescription for Surviving A Pandemic,"](#) ["Dogs Have a Magic Effect: How Pets Can Improve Our Mental Health,"](#) and ["8 Reasons Pets Improve Your Health and Wellbeing."](#)

“Bad News” Articles

Only a handful of the articles (10 percent) emphasized the negative aspects of living with animals. Among them were ["Veterinarians, People Who Treat Animals Face Higher Risk Of Mental Health Issues,"](#) ["Why Pets In The Workplace May Not Be As Great As You Thought,"](#) and ["People With Sick Pets Have More Anxiety and Depression."](#)

Balanced Articles

Seventeen percent of the media reports included balanced evaluations of research in which the authors discussed the mixed results of research on the Pet Effect. They included ["Therapy Dogs Work Miracles. But Do They Like Their Jobs?"](#), ["Pets and Your Health: The Good and the Bad,"](#) and ["Can Pet Ownership Have an Impact on Your Mental Health?"](#)

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In short, articles extolling industry claims about the positive impact of pets on people outnumbered reports on the downsides of pet-keeping by more than 6 to 1. And they beat out informative articles with balanced coverage by 4 to 1.

“An Inexhaustible Appetite for Good News About Pets”

In [a recent review](#), the University of Pennsylvania’s James Serpell and his colleagues wrote, “The mass media and the public seem to have an inexhaustible [appetite](#) for stories of animals helping people with their illnesses and disabilities.” My quick examination of pet effect news reports suggests they are right.

I ran up against the media’s preference for feel-good animal stories when I was shopping for a literary agent for [the book I was writing](#) on the psychology of human-animal relationships. During a long phone call with a high profile New York-based agent, I told her there would be a section on [animal-assisted therapy](#). And that, contrary to prevailing public opinion, there was no good evidence that swim-with-dolphin programs had any long-term psychological benefits.

After a long pause, she said, “...No one wants to read about that.”

References

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