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What You Didn't Know About Having a Pandemic Pet

Herzog Harold

Western Carolina University

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Hal Herzog Ph.D.

Animals and Us

What You Didn't Know About Having a Pandemic Pet

New studies question the impact of pets on mental health during lockdowns.

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KEY POINTS

- Surveys show that most pet owners are convinced that living with companion animals improves their mental health and psychological well-being.
- However, many research reports have found that the mental health of pet owners is not measurably better than that of people without a pet.
- The isolation and stress associated with COVID lockdowns afforded investigators an opportunity to test this "pet effect paradox."
- Contrary to conventional wisdom, a large majority of studies found pets have little or no impact on human mental health during pandemics.

According to some estimates, 23 million American households acquired a cat or dog during the first year of the pandemic. One of the lucky pups was Moose, a golden doodle my daughter Katie and her wife Janna adopted. When I asked Katie if her pet had improved their lives during COVID, she said, "Definitely. He's my little buddy, my best friend. I love Moose so much I find it hard to imagine life without him."

Katie is not alone. Nearly every pet owner I know believes our companion animals have a positive influence on our psychological well-being. I'm certainly convinced that my late cat Tilly helped me cope with the stress of writing a book on human-animal interactions. The pet industry refers to the idea that living with a companion animal causes improvements in human physical and mental health as "the pet effect." A [2021 survey](#) by the Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) found that 87 percent of pet owners reported they had personally experienced the mental health benefits of pet ownership.

But here is the problem—the bulk of published studies have reported that pet owners are not psychologically better off than non-owners. While even my friends and family say they don't believe me, most studies have found that people who live with pets are not less depressed, less lonely, or happier than people who don't live with companion animals. (See, for example, [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).)

The Pet Effect Paradox

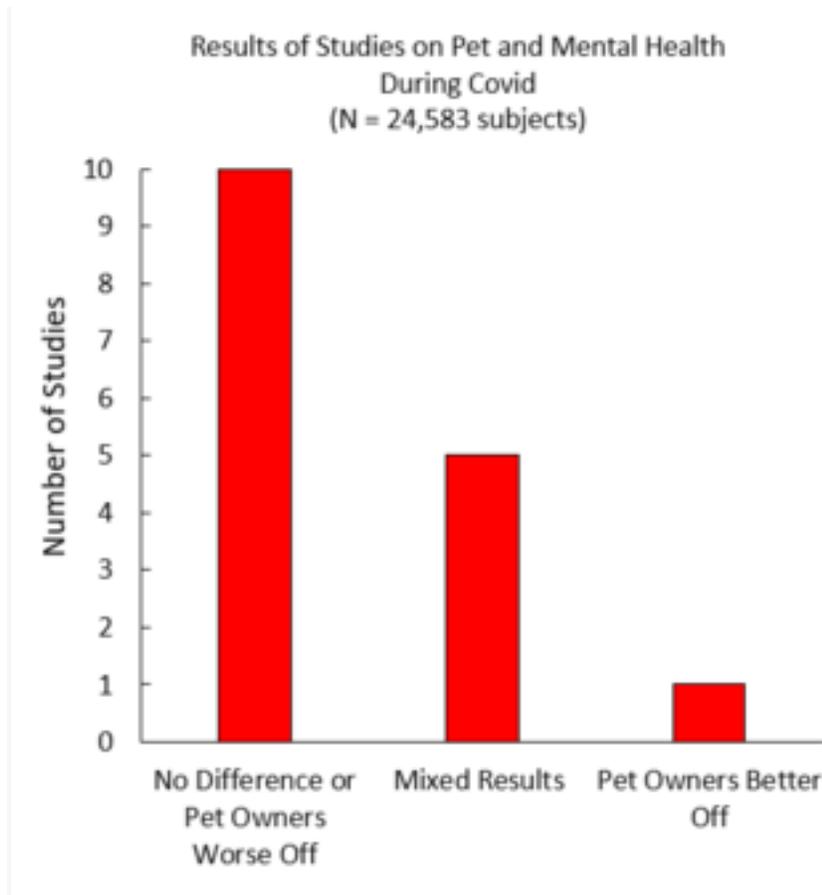
The pet effect paradox is the mismatch between the personal experiences of pet lovers (including myself) that our pets improve our psychological well-being and the decidedly mixed results of actual research. What about the impact of pets during COVID lockdowns? News reports like "[How Pets Are Protecting Mental Health During Quarantine](#)" tout the idea that getting a pet will help you cope with the dark days of the pandemic. But are these claims true? Fortunately, COVID-19 offered researchers a unique opportunity to examine the extent pets buffer the stress and isolation associated with the pandemic.

I recently reviewed published research reports in which investigators compared the mental health of pet owners and non-owners since the first COVID lockdowns in the spring of 2020. As a long-time pet lover, I was surprised by what I found.

The COVID Studies On Pets and Mental Health

I found 16 empirical studies that examined the impact of pets on psychological wellness during the time of COVID. To be included on my list of studies, the research had to have been published in English in peer-reviewed journals. The studies also had to compare quantitative measures of aspects of mental health of pet owners and non-owners, including statistical analyses. These included, for example, depression, anxiety, stress, and loneliness. (I did not include research that was based only on qualitative interviews or studies that did not compare the mental health of pet owners and non-owners.) The 16 studies involved a total of 24,583 subjects, and they were conducted by research teams from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Portugal, Singapore, Pakistan, and China.

Most studies found no (or negative) effects of pets on well-being.



Source: Graph by Hal Herzog

Most of the studies found little or no evidence that living with a pet improved the mental health of their owners. Indeed, several of these reported that the pet owners were worse off than non-owners.

Here are samples of typical findings.

- [University of Quebec researchers](#) found that “*Canadian pet owners reported lower vitality, lower life satisfaction, lower presence of life meaning, and higher loneliness compared to non-pet owners. Pet owners were also found to experience higher COVID-related impacts compared to non-pet owners.*”
- Researchers at Queens University in Northern Ireland [reported](#), “*no significant relationship between companion animal ownership and any of the mental health outcome measures.*”
- Heather Clements of the University of West Scotland and her colleagues [found](#) that “*Companion animal guardianship alone was not linked to loneliness or well-being during the pandemic, but there was evidence that people who interact more with dogs...were lonelier and had poorer well-being.*”

- Investigators from the University of Montreal [reported](#), *“Our results suggest that there was no association between pet ownership and the mental health and well-being indicators measured in the present study.”*
- A research team headed by Tufts University psychologist Megan Mueller on the impact of pets on anxiety in adolescents during COVID [found](#), *“Contrary to our hypotheses, the results did not support a buffering effect of pet ownership on loneliness....Pet ownership predicted an increase in loneliness from pre-pandemic to during the pandemic.”*
- A research group from Australia examined measures of the quality of life of pet owners during lockdowns. They [reported](#), *“These current findings suggest that having a cat or dog was associated with reduced life satisfaction, perhaps resulting from increased pressures in a lockdown situation.”*

A few studies reported mixed results.

- A Portuguese [study found](#) that owning a dog was associated with reduced depression in rural areas. However, urban dog owners were more depressed than city dwellers without a dog.
- [New Zealand researchers concluded](#), *“Pet ownership was associated with lower depression and anxiety.”* Pet-keeping, however, did not alleviate loneliness.
- Malaysian researchers [found](#) that pet owners experienced more “positive emotions” during a lockdown, but that pet-owning had no effect on depression, stress, anxiety, or negative emotions.
- [A Nestle Purina research team found](#) dog owners were less depressed than non-owners. But while the difference in depression scores was “statistically significant,” the size of the pet effect on depression was very small (for stat nerds, $d = .07$.) There were no differences between dog owners and non-owners in measures of anxiety or happiness.
- In a U.K. study, pet owners scored slightly higher on mental health measures, but the [researchers noted](#) that the differences between owners and non-owners were small and *“did not support the idea that a companion animal, in general, strongly protects against worsened mental health and increased loneliness in a pandemic context.”*

Only one study found overall positive effects of pets on mental health.

- [Investigators from Singapore used standardized](#) measures to assess the physical and mental health of 431 pet owners and 103 non-pet owners. They found that pet owners had higher scores on measures of emotional well-being, energy, and social functioning. The researchers concluded, that “during a period of lockdown, pet-owning served as a positive factor against detrimental psychological effects of a pandemic.”

A Mystery in the Study of Human-Animal Relationships

The pattern of the results of this body of research is remarkable. Only one of 16 studies conducted on the benefits of pet ownership during lockdowns found strong evidence for a relationship between pet ownership, mental health, and psychological well-being. Five studies produced mixed results. In the other 10 studies—which involved nearly 21,000 subjects from six countries—pet owners were no better off psychologically than non-pet owners. In some cases, pet owners had significantly more mental health issues than people without companion animals.

The results of these studies on the impact of pets on mental health during the pandemic provide convincing evidence for the “pet effect paradox.” To me, this is the biggest mystery in the new science of human-animal relationships. What accounts for the mismatch between our personal experience with the benefits of loving animals and the large body of empirical findings that pet-keeping, in and of itself, has little or no positive impact on human mental or physical health?

I don’t have an answer. Neither does Tufts University’s Megan Mueller. She tells me she thinks about it all the time. So do I.

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