

A Surprising Link Between Pets and Your Mental Health

Pets can make you laugh and give you comfort, and their ability to measurably lower stress levels is something that animal lovers of every age have learned for themselves.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The American Psychiatric Association's Healthy Minds Poll found the majority of pet owners — 88% — consider their pets part of the family
- Among the pet owners who responded to the survey, 86% said their pets have a mostly positive impact on their mental health
- Mental health benefits of pet ownership include reduced stress and anxiety, companionship, unconditional love and a calming presence
- Compared to dog owners, cat owners were more likely to report that their pet offered companionship, a calming presence and stress relief
- Dog owners were twice as likely to say their pet helps them stay physically active

Pets play a significant role in Americans' mental health and are overwhelmingly viewed as part of the family, according to the American Psychiatric Association's Healthy Minds Poll.¹ Among respondents of this monthly poll, 50% had dogs, 35% had cats and about 3% said they had fish, birds, turtles or other pets.

The remainder had no pets in their home, and may be missing out on mental health benefits as a result. Among pet owners, the majority were clear that sharing their lives with a pet was a positive experience.

Dogs and Cats Play a Positive Role in Mental Health

Among the pet owners who responded to the survey, 86% said their pets have a mostly positive impact on their mental health. The beneficial effects appeared equal whether the pet was a dog or a cat. Among dog owners, 87% said their pet benefitted their mental health, as did 86% of cat owners. Among "other" pet owners, 62% reported a positive mental health impact. Benefits reported included the following:²

- Reduce stress and anxiety (69%)
- Provide unconditional love and support (69%)
- Offer companionship (69%)
- Provide a calming presence (66%)
- Are true friends (63%)

The majority of pet owners — 88% — also said they considered their pets part of the family. APA President Dr. Rebecca Brendel said in an APA news release:³

“People recognize that there is something special about bonds between humans and their pets. The animals we bring into our lives and our families play many roles from non-judgmental companions that we love to key partners in reducing our stress and anxiety. Americans clearly recognize that our relationships with our pets can have noticeable benefits for our overall mental health.”

Interestingly, compared to dog owners, cat owners were more likely to report that their pet offered companionship, a calming presence and stress relief. Dog owners, on the other hand, were twice as likely to say their pet helps them stay physically active.

Caring for a Sick Pet Can Add Stress

Though it wasn't discussed in the survey, there is an exception to the mental health boost that pets provide, which may occur when you're faced with caring for an ill pet. When it came to pet-related stressors, the APA poll found that 56% worried about making arrangements for their pets while traveling while 58% worried about health care expenses.

The most reported concerns, however, were related to **pets aging or passing away** — reported by 71% — and worry over pets' health conditions (66%).⁴ This isn't surprising, since most people view their pets as family members.

In a separate study, researchers assessed “caregiver burden” in 238 owners of a dog or cat. It's well known that caregivers of human patients facing a chronic or terminal illness experience heightened levels of stress, depression and anxiety, so the researchers set out to determine if the same held true for pet caregivers.

As you might suspect, the answer is yes. Compared to owners of healthy animals, the results showed greater burden, stress and symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as poorer quality of life, in owners of pets with chronic or terminal disease.⁵ In turn, the feeling of higher burden was linked to reduced psychosocial functioning.

For Most People, the Positives of Pet Ownership Outweigh the Negatives

“The benefits of pet ownership to many Americans seem to outweigh the stressors,” explained Dr. Saul Levin, APA's CEO and medical director.⁶ It's important to remember that you can't care for your pet unless you care for yourself first. If caring for a sick pet, practice positive self-care, from eating right and journaling your emotions to getting enough sleep, and reach out for support when you need it.

Among people who didn't own pets, 29% cited financial reasons as to why. Another 22% said they didn't have time for pet care, while 11% were mourning a pet. “If pets are not an option for your family,” Levin said, “but you are seeking that connection, there are many opportunities to volunteer with animals that may also benefit your life.”⁷ Fostering pets and volunteering at local animal shelters are just two examples.

As for why owning a pet offers so many mental benefits, one research team suggested the psychological and psychophysiological effects may have to do with the release of the “love hormone” oxytocin (OT). When dogs and their owners engage in a mutual gaze, levels of oxytocin rise in both the owners and their dogs.⁸

It's possible that activation of the oxytocin system is involved in the many positive outcomes that occur during human-animal interactions (HAIs), such as:⁹

- Improvement in mood
- Reduction of stress-related parameters like cortisol, heart rate and blood pressure
- Reduced fear and anxiety

Researchers explained in *Frontiers in Psychology*:¹⁰

"We propose that the reduction of subjective psychological stress (fear, anxiety) due to animal contact, as well as the dampening of physiological stress parameters in connection with activation of the OT system represent a core mechanism in explaining many of the positive effects of HAI."

It's worth noting, too, that not only do pets influence mental health, they have a significant impact on physical health as well. Owning a dog, for instance, is linked to a 24% reduced risk of all-cause mortality at all ages along with a 31% reduced risk of cardiovascular disease.¹¹ If you don't have a pet and are interested in changing that, visit a shelter or rescue organizations in your area. Your next family member may be there waiting for you.

Sources and References

^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7} [American Psychiatric Association March 1, 2023](#)

⁸ [Science. 2015 Apr 17;348\(6232\):333-6](#)

^{9,10} [Front. Psychol., 09 July 2012](#)

¹¹ [Int J Geriatr Psychiatry. 2022 Nov; 37\(11\): 10.1002/gps.5815](#)
