

The Life-Changing Advantages of Having Pets

Dive into the heartwarming world of pet ownership and uncover the myriad ways pets enrich our lives, from offering unmatched companionship to significantly improving our mental and physical health.

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

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Pet ownership in the U.S. is trending downward, which is truly unfortunate given that animal shelters are overflowing, and in addition, pets have a significant positive impact on the mental health of their humans
- According to the results of a recent poll of 2,200 adults, two-thirds of pet parents referred to their pet as a "true friend," a "companion" and someone who "provides unconditional love and support"
- Past studies have shown that pet ownership gives people of all ages a sense of purpose in life, which is closely linked to feelings of well-being
- Other studies have demonstrated that pets help their owners get exercise and stay active, which is a proven strategy to improve mental health

According to the results of the 2023-2024 American Pet Products Association (APPA) National Pet Owners Survey, 66% of U.S. households (approximately 86.9 million) included a pet in 2022.¹ The 66% figure reflects a decline from 70% in 2020 according to the 2021-2022 APPA survey.

Dogs and cats are far and away the most popular pets in the U.S. Dogs top the list, with nearly 20 million more households including a dog than a cat:

2022 U.S. Pet Ownership	
Dogs — 65.1 million	Birds — 6.1 million
Cats — 46.5 million	Reptiles — 6.0 million
Freshwater Fish — 11.1 million	Saltwater Fish — 2.2 million
Small Animal — 6.7 million	Horses — 2.2 million

Pets Contribute to the Mental Health of Their Humans

The dwindling number of pet parents in this country is terribly unfortunate, not only for animal companions in search of loving homes, but also for our fellow humans.

According to a poll funded by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), the vast majority (84%) of U.S. pet parents say their furry, feathered, or finned family member brings a positive mental impact to their lives.²

The poll of more than 2,200 adults also revealed that about two-thirds referred to their pet as a "true friend," a "companion" and someone who "**provide[s] unconditional love and support.**"

*"It's easy to overlook the role of pets when we're talking about mental health," said APA president Dr. Petros Levounis. "But for people who do enjoy the company of animals, they can be a source of companionship, comfort, love and friendship. I routinely encourage adoption of a pet to my patients who struggle with addiction to alcohol, drugs or technology. We're also starting to see more and more research around the role that animals can play in recovery from depression and other psychiatric disorders."*³

About one in five people with pets said one or more of their animals was a certified emotional support animal.

More Benefits of Animal Companions

Additional discoveries from the poll:

- Nearly two-thirds of pet parents said their companion animal is a calming presence
- The same amount said their pet is a real stressbuster
- About a third said having a pet encourages them to be physically active
- About 3 in 10 said pets add structure to their schedule
- About one in five respondents said having an animal companion boosts their social life

Veterinarian Rena Carlson, president of the AVMA, is not surprised by the poll results:

"As veterinarians, we witness firsthand the powerful bond between people and their animals, and the positive impact pets can have on their emotional well-being," she said. "From offering companionship and unconditional love to reducing stress and anxiety, pets can be invaluable sources of comfort and support. These survey results further reinforce the importance of responsible pet ownership and the critical role pets play in our lives."

It goes without saying that worry is a price we all pay for loving our animal companions. The poll revealed that 76% of pet owners were concerned about their pet passing away, and about two-thirds (67%) had concerns about a pet's health.

Two Ways Pets Help Our Mental Health

According to psychologist Mark Travers, Ph.D., in an article for Psychology Today, there are two ways pets help their humans preserve their mental health:⁴

1. **Pet ownership gives people a sense of purpose, which is crucial to well-being** — Conventional wisdom would have us believe that human well-being is the result of happiness and the absence of physical and mental illness. However, an article published in the journal *Health and Quality of Life Outcomes* in 2020 analyzed data from 21 countries and suggests that well-being is the result of several factors, including having a sense of purpose in life.⁵

A 2018 study on the effects of pet ownership on people with a mental health condition found that those who reported losing their sense of purpose following their diagnosis regained control of the direction of their lives after adding a pet to their household. Some even reported that their pet gave them a reason to live.⁶

*"Research has shown repeatedly that pets have the potential to increase feelings of social support, give owners a sense of meaning, and improve their lifestyles by increasing physical activity and adding structure to daily routines," writes Travers. "Pets are also particularly effective in treating and managing conditions such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and dementia, as evidenced by a 2022 study ... claiming that owning a pet can reduce one's brain age by up to 15 years."*⁷

Travers consulted Zach Mills of The Vets, a veterinary care service focused on reducing the stress and anxiety associated with owning a pet, about what types of companion animals are most helpful in buffering mental and emotional health.

"The human-animal bond can extend to any number of animals, and different animals and different people will have different responses," says Mills. "There are also people who identify with one species of animal more than another. The individual results that people get can vary. Most of the studies around the benefits of the human-animal bond are done on dogs and horses, but any animal and human can potentially build a beneficial bond."

2. **Pets help us get exercise and stay active, which is a proven strategy to improve mental health** — It's no secret that physical activity can benefit psychological health, and people with pets, especially dogs who need to be walked and exercised outdoors, have an increased level of physical activity.

Travers points to a 2023 overview of 97 systematic reviews that revealed that exercise may be up to 1.5 times more effective in reducing symptoms of common mental health conditions compared to traditional methods of treatment.⁸ According to lead study author Ben Singh of the University of South Australia:

"We found that doing 150 minutes each week of various types of physical activity — such as brisk walking, lifting weights, and yoga — significantly reduces depression, anxiety and psychological distress, compared to usual care, such as medications."

However, Travers cautions, before getting a pet to improve your mental health through exercise, it's important to ensure your exercise goals are in alignment with the needs of a prospective animal companion. Especially in the case of dogs, while all require **regular walks**, there are significant differences in how much and what kind of exercise different breeds benefit from.

It's also important to note that while pet ownership can have positive psychological benefits, it shouldn't be viewed as an alternative to clinical treatment that may be necessary to address a specific mental health condition. A more integrative approach to treatment that includes pet ownership may be the most effective and rewarding of all.

Above all, guardianship involves the lifelong commitment to always put the needs of those that cannot make

their own choices, first. It's never acceptable to acquire more animals unless you're 100% committed to attending to every detail of their mental, emotional, physical, and environmental **well-being**.

Sources and References

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[HealthDay, March 4, 2024](#)

¹ [American Pet Products Association \(APPA\), Industry Trends and Stats](#)

^{2,3} [American Psychiatric Association, March 1, 2024](#)

⁴ [Psychology Today, July 19, 2023](#)

⁵ [Ruggeri, K. et al. Health and Quality of Life Outcomes, 18, Article number: 192 \(2020\).](#)

⁶ [Brooks, H.L. et al. BMC Psychiatry volume 18, Article number: 31 \(2018\).](#)

⁷ [McDonough, I.M. et al. Front. Aging Neurosci., 20 October 2022 Sec. Neurocognitive Aging and Behavior Volume 14 - 2022](#)

⁸ [Singh, B. et al. British Journal of Sports Medicine, Published Online First: 16 February 2023](#)
