

What Your Choice of Pet Really Says About Your Personality

Forget about all the stereotypical beliefs that go with 'cat lady' and 'dog lover' and lifestyle. Your choice of pet may go much deeper into underlying human personality differences.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Why some people like cats while others prefer dogs may be a matter of these peoples' differences in temperaments and lifestyle preferences
- A whopping 79.7 million people in the U.S. own a pet; more than 36% of Americans own at least one dog, and 30% own at least one cat
- Researchers have found some consistencies in personality traits between cat and dog owners around the world; cat people tend to be reserved and sensitive nonconformists who are also intuitive, sensitive and slightly introverted
- Studies demonstrated those who prefer dogs are more inclined to stick to the rulebook and tend to be more gregarious, animated and cheerful
- When you pick a pet, particularly a dog or cat, both of which definitely have a sense of humor, they should bring out the best in both of you

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We all know them — the diehard dog lovers and the feline aficionados. Both groups seem to hold unashamedly to the belief that their animal of choice is superior. In fact, they'll usually tell you so!

Pets make up a sizeable portion of the population, and cats and dogs are overwhelmingly the pets of choice, as the Humane Society statistic discloses. A survey published in 2016 says 79.7 million people in the U.S. own a pet, which is 56%.

More than 36% of Americans own at least one dog, while just over 30% owns at least one cat.¹ Medical Daily observes:

“We tend to make judgments about people based on the type of pet they choose to live with. There is a cultural belief that the pet species, whether it's a dog, cat or some other creature, says something about the owner's personality.

For example, the term ‘cat lady’ has become synonymous with a female who is a lonely, depressed hoarder, while a ‘dog lover’ is expected to be a happy, amiable person.”²

But what makes a person an unwavering proponent for one or the other? Where does the preference come from? It's a question more than a few studies have tackled from a scientific standpoint.

Pet Owners in General — Pets Serve as a Psychological Support System

A series of three studies³ at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio focused on pets in general and whether they can fulfill peoples' social needs as well as, well, people.

On the hierarchy of needs, the studies revealed three ways pets can fill the gap for humans when they come up against life stressors; three different community demographics were used:

- **Study one** — Pet owners did better than people with no pets in regard to general well being and self esteem. They exercised more, were more conscientious and less inclined to exhibit "fearful attachment."
- **Study two** — The second group showed more of a tendency to fill their social needs through their pets, but in a complementary way rather than the pets competing with human interaction.
- **Study three** — Pet owners demonstrated in a lab setting how their pets serve to deflect or prevent possible negativity brought about by social rejection and function as a source of support, not just psychologically, but even physically.

The study showed that peoples' preference in the pet department may have something to do with "underlying human personality differences." Dr. Taylor Truitt, a veterinarian at the Vet Set in New York City, thinks it's simply a matter of which type of pet fits your routine, Medical Daily⁴ noted.

Truitt said that while there are certain dog breeds he loves, he'd never own them because they don't match his lifestyle. Psychologists looking at personality scales think it's more than that.

The Differences Between Cat and Dog Lovers

Associate professor of psychology Dr. Denise Guastello at Carroll University in Wisconsin conducted a study that looked at the personality traits that differentiate between dog lovers and cat lovers, and came up with interesting sets of characteristics belonging to each group.

Guastello's research, which involved 600 college students, brought some interesting and differing temperament traits to the forefront on both sides of the equation, as well as preferences in regard to lifestyle.

Cat people, it seems, tend to be nonconformists, while those who prefer dogs tend to be more inclined to stick to the rulebook, so to speak. Cat lovers are more reserved and sensitive, while those on the dog side are more gregarious and animated.

"It makes sense that a dog person is going to be more lively, because they're going to want to be out there, outside, talking to people [and] bringing their dog," Guastello said in a press release, "whereas if you're more introverted, and sensitive, maybe you're more at home reading a book, and your cat doesn't need to go outside for a walk."⁵

One study on pets and their owners asked volunteers if they preferred cats or dogs, no pet at all or both, assessing the 44-point personality questionnaire on the “feeling, thinking and behaving” scale. People are placed into one of five categories, labeled by the acronym OCEAN:⁶

- Openness
- Conscientiousness
- Extraversion
- Agreeableness
- Neuroticism

Each of the five points has its opposite, of course, which pet owners typically interpret to mean their pet is rounding out their lives and making them a better person.

Dog People — Less Stressed and More Cheerful

Many people believe the saying, “dogs are man’s best friend.” Maybe it’s because owners tend to reflect the personalities of their canine companion, or at least aspire to.

Dogs are thought to be more personable than cats (if “personable” is a term that can be used here), friendlier and generally healthier, both physically and psychologically.

Further, dog people were less apt to be diagnosed with depression, and said they weren’t lonely, especially when they were either single or female. All described themselves as being more outgoing, easier to get along with and more thoughtful than their kitty-loving counterparts.

Dog owners tend to be more honest, religious and duty bound than people who don’t have a dog. As it happens, CEOs or senior vice presidents are primarily dog owners.

Cat Owners — Introverted, Intuitive, Sensitive, and More Receptive

Ask anyone which animal is most prone to ignore, rebuff and demand and the answer will nearly always be a cat. There might be something to the fact that cat owners sometimes describe themselves as moodier at times, like cats.

Cat owners were found to be more adventurous and more creative, but unfortunately more neurotic, with a greater propensity toward neediness in their relationships; more in need of reassurance. The upside? The more introverted and unwilling to “go along to get along” individuals were assessed as more intelligent than dog owners, which undoubtedly was no surprise to the cat enthusiasts.

What Does It Mean When People Own Other Types of Animals?

- **Reptile owners** — The most independent pet owners were found to be those who gravitate toward reptiles as their pet of choice, such as a lizard or snake. Turtle lovers, Psychology Today⁷ reported, were the most upwardly mobile and reliable.

Reptile owners didn't usually describe themselves as "fun-loving," especially when compared to dog people. These owners were also less needy with both their pets and other people, and incidentally, didn't think their pets had a sense of humor. (They were probably correct.)

- **Bird owners** — These pet owners were found to be highly communicative and sociable among all the pet owners, including even dog owners, and more apt to express job satisfaction. People who own birds most often held interactive and administrative positions.

Psychology Today reported them to be at the top of the dominance chart, which is always good in the job market. As for identifying with their pets, Animal In You⁸ says bird owners often seek outside jobs, such as park rangers and construction workers, but also show up in the arts, like dancers, actors and architects.

- **Fish owners** — Another introvert, fish owners were assessed as engaging but with more introverted tendencies than others, but at the same time, more worldly-wise and dogmatic in their belief systems. A study at the University of Oregon noted fish owners to be more optimistic and free-spirited, and less cynical and materialistic.

So what does this all mean for pet owners at large? The upshot of why people choose to be either cat or dog people — or some other type of pet altogether — is that, when picking a pet, particularly a dog or cat, both of which definitely have a sense of humor, they should bring out the best in each other.

As Truitt said in Medical Daily, "I think it's one of the joys of pet ownership, and I think many people love seeing the parts of their personality they enjoy reflected favorably back to them in the form of their pet."⁹

Sources and References

¹ [Humane Society 2016 \(Archived\)](#)

^{2, 4, 9} [Medical Daily March 30, 2016](#)

³ [J Pers Soc Psychol. 2011 December;101\(6\):1239-52](#)

⁵ [Are you a 'dog person' or a 'cat person?' New research finds the two have different personality traits, Carroll University, June 2, 2014](#)

⁶ [Medical Daily April 3, 2015](#)

⁷ [Psychology Today June 17, 2014](#)

⁸ [Animal In You 2016 \(Archived\)](#)
