

Pets and Mental Health

Honors Thesis

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Abstract

Mental health is a growing concern in the United States. Despite this, mental health is often misunderstood, misrepresented, or not taken seriously. Misconceptions about mental health can have devastating consequences, including high rates of suicide. It is crucial that mental health be given more attention and that those struggling are encouraged to seek help. For many people, pets can play a vital role in supporting mental health. Numerous studies have explored the health benefits of pet ownership and have found that pets not only improve mental well-being but also contribute to physical health, such as lowering blood pressure and reducing other cardiovascular problems. This thesis aims to present the research on how our pets at home help us each day. Since this was an art project, art will also be considered a behavior to improve mental health. To convey this message in art form, a collage of many different pets, from cats and dogs to crabs and rats, was created with a brain and heart in the center to show how important pets can be. The written and art pieces together aim to promote healthier ways to deal with mental health and promote more research on how pets are beneficial to humans.

Mental health is a growing concern in the United States. Despite its importance, mental health is often misunderstood, misrepresented, or not taken seriously. Misconceptions about mental health can have devastating consequences, including high rates of suicide (Reinert et al. 2024). It is crucial that mental health be given more attention and that those struggling are encouraged to seek help. For many people, pets can play a vital role in supporting mental health, something I have experienced personally. Numerous studies have explored the health benefits of pet ownership and have found that pets not only improve mental well-being but also contribute to physical health, such as lowering blood pressure and reducing other cardiovascular problems (Crawford et al., 2006; Headey et al., 2007; Hussien et al., 202; Biswas, 2019). This paper will examine how pets contribute to both mental and physical health, drawing on research about the benefits of pet ownership, and reflecting on my own experiences and the role of art in supporting mental well-being.

A companion animal is any domestic or domestic-bred animal whose daily needs are met in the home or close relationship with humans. Essentially, a good way to think about it is that without humans, they can't survive. These needs are physical, emotional, behavioral, and social. Cats and dogs are the most common companion animals, or pets, around the world, followed by horses and rabbits. While these animals might be the most common when discussing health benefits, non-conventional pets should be considered as well. No matter what species the companion animal is, it can still provide humans with mental and physical health benefits (Macauley and Chur-Hansen 2022). These non-conventional pets include but are not limited to reptiles, amphibians, fish, birds, and insects. When studying companion animals, a great deal of research attention has been paid to "attachment." Attachment to a pet can influence the benefits of having a pet (Crawford et al., 2006). This idea of attachment can be difficult to apply to pets

because traditional models apply to human-human relationships, and anthropomorphizing pets, while helpful, can distort our understanding of their behavior. This leads to a lot of studies being controversial because there is no finite way of presenting the results and data. To try and fix this definition and apply it to pets, many different ideas were proposed. Crawford et al. (2006) introduced different definitions of human-animal attachment, the first from Bowlby (1982), “behavior resulting in an individual seeking or maintaining proximity to another, clearly specified individual, who functions as a secure base and who is perceived as a better able to cope with life stressors.” The next definition was from Keil (1998), “a hierarchical relationship between a human and an animal.” The final definition was from Budge et al. (1998), “the emotional bond felt and expressed between pet and its owner.” These definitions are not consistent with the traditional definition of attachment (Crawford et al., 2006). The human-animal bond can be extremely complicated, so some aspects of the attachment theory apply while others do not. A different definition needs to be developed to describe this important relationship (Crawford et al., 2006). The more the human-animal bond is understood will also help us improve people's lives with pets (Biswas, 2019). This will help further research by making studies easier and less controversial.

Previous research on pets in western countries has shown increases in health in pet owners, but the increase gained was lower than expected. It is hard to know if the benefits are from the pets themselves or due to the household people live in. This is because pets are common in western households, especially in the United States. Between 60 and 68% of households have a pet (Hui Gan et al., 2019; O'Haire, 2010). The apparent benefit in these cases could be caused by healthier individuals selecting to own a pet and not the pets benefiting the owners themselves (Headey et al., 2007). To get around this issue, a study was conducted in China. Until 1992, in

China, pets were banned in urban areas. Since the ban was lifted, pet ownership, mainly dogs, has increased, especially among women ages 25-40. This study is a better indicator of health benefits acquired through pets because, unlike many Americans, the Chinese were self-selected owners and not raised in a pet-friendly household (Headey et al., 2007). This study eliminates many of the variables that created issues in western studies and allows for a more accurate representation of the benefits gained from pets. These women did not grow up with pets like many western families, removing the issues. In the study, scientists looked into six aspects of the participants' lives over five years (1996-2001): regular exercise, physical fitness, self-reported health, sleep, sick days taken, and doctor visits. For each of these six aspects, dog owners were compared to non-owners. At the end of the study, they found that dog owners had better health overall than non-owners. They believe that the six aspects that they looked into are all linked, and the main starting point is owning a dog. Owning a dog leads to more exercise and companionship. More exercise led to better sleep. Better sleep and companionship lead to feeling healthier and fitter. Feeling healthier and fitter led to fewer doctor visits and taking sick days off work (Headey et al., 2007). Dog ownership was the catalyst for a healthy lifestyle.

The previous research discussed focused mostly on the physical benefits provided by pets, but those physical benefits can lead to mental health benefits. The next papers discuss mental health and how some physical benefits can lead to mental benefits. The primary reason I chose to undertake this project is because of the mental health benefits pets provide. Pets have been an important part of my life and were present when I needed them the most. They made me happy when I was sad and helped me calm down when anxiety was trying to overtake me. The first study wanted to determine if there was an association between owning pets and anxiety (AN), depression (DE), and stress (ST) in Turkey. Their results suggest cats and dogs provide

benefits to human psychological health, particularly in single women with a strong bond (attachment) with their pets. They found that pet owners had lower AN, DE, and ST compared to non-owners. Their findings support previous empirical data (SİNMEZ et al., 2024). One study saw that pets reduced anxiety and depression in patients with Parkinson's disease (Hussien et al., 2021). Pets can also act as a protective buffer against stress and loneliness, which was very apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic (SİNMEZ et al., 2024). The pandemic was hard for everyone; people needed ways to cope with what was happening, and pets helped significantly. During the pandemic, not being able to interact with people was very hard, especially being a high schooler. My cats were a great comfort during this stressful time. They definitely made it so I didn't feel lonely, even if I wasn't interacting with another human. My cats gave me someone to talk to and confide in. Even if they didn't answer back, it still helped fill the gaps left by COVID.

The next study showed how pets have benefited community-dwelling adults 65 and older. As adults get older, they are at risk of a decline in mental health as they deal with life stressors that are specific to later in life. From their interview-based study, they found four themes: pets provided comfort and safety, social inclusion and participation, purposeful routine and structure, and a meaningful role (Hui Gan et al., 2019). For comfort and safety, pets were viewed as being able to uplift their owners' moods, provide companionship, and provide a sense of security. The pets provide as much care to the owner as the owner gave to the pet. For inclusion, pets acted as a catalyst. It allowed owners to engage in pet-related activities and interact with friends and family. Pets also provided their owners with daily routines (Hui Gan et al., 2019; Hussien et al., 2021). Routines are very important. I thrive when my day or week has structure, it lets me know what I have to do and when I have to do it. It also helps with planning other activities outside

your schedule. At my house, I feed my cats twice a day at the same times every day and clean the litter boxes twice a week. When I was dog-sitting, I had to feed and walk the dog at the same time every day. Physical and cognitive tasks like this have been shown to influence mental health (Hui Gan et al., 2019). The final benefit provided by pets was giving their owners a meaningful life role. Losing a pet was similar to losing a child; owners would do anything they could to try and save their pets. The commitments to their pets show how important they are in people's lives. They provide people with a sense of purpose or give them a parenting role. All of these themes show how older adults with pets experienced positive mental health benefits. It made owners feel loved and accepted, decreased loneliness, and brought meaning to their lives (Hui Gan et al., 2019). Losing a pet is very hard. I have lost many cats. In my family, we honor the cat we have lost by rescuing another. We believe that these cats do so much for us that we need to help them, too, by giving them a loving home.

Pets can be looked at as “resources” that help people recover emotionally and psychologically from stressful days, reducing the negative effects of these stressors (Junça-Silva, 2025). While I don't particularly like the word resources in the context of a pet, it shows the importance of pets. Resources are ecologically important to every living thing on this planet. The more one has, the higher their fitness is. This resource happens to improve mental health and happens to be another living thing. Every new day brings new, unique experiences; while they may be micro in nature, they have a cumulative effect on your emotional and psychological health. These events are called daily micro-events. They can trigger emotional responses that can influence attitude, cognitions, and behavior. Most of these events are experienced at work, and through recent research, mental health is declining; understanding how work experiences may affect mental health is becoming increasingly important (Junça-Silva, 2025). Pets need to be

considered in this equation because they are part of our lives and are usually the first thing you see when you get home. When someone gets home, pets can provide moments of comfort, allowing their owner to replenish their resources, effectively acting as a buffer. This reduces the negative effects of stress and promotes a sense of calm and well-being (Junça-Silva, 2025). This promotes the positive health outcomes that pets can and do provide. This is why pets can be used in therapy (Hussien et al., 2021). They have been shown to help in occupational therapy, speech therapy, and physical rehabilitation (Biswas, 2019). They provide the same benefits to therapy patients that they provide to you when you get home from work.

Pets provide humans with many benefits in many different ways; they can build social capital, act as agents of harm reduction, motivate healthy behaviors, and potential participants in doctor treatment plans (Hodgson et al., 2015). Pets are extremely helpful in the health and well-being of humans; however, like most things in life, there are downsides. Pets can cause harm through bites and scratches, challenge family financial and social prioritization, and are potential sources of zoonotic diseases (Hodgson et al., 2015). While most bites and scratches are not that serious, some can be worse than others. As a cat owner, I have dealt with my share of bites and scratches. Most, if not all, the bites and scratches I have received are self-provoked. My cats were not intending to harm me most of the time; I was just caught in the crossfire when playing with them or annoyed them a bit. Pets may also drain family resources. The cost of raising a pet can be expensive, and this can be a struggle for some families. Emotional concerns for a pet can also have an adverse effect. It affects decision-making, which has caused people to not seek medical attention for fear of being separated from their pet. Zoonotic diseases are the most serious concern with pets because they affect both the pet and the owner. Out of the known infectious diseases 61% are zoonotic, and 75% of new and emerging diseases around the world

are zoonotic. The young, old, pregnant, immunocompromised, and mentally challenged have the most risk (Hodgson et al., 2015). Other issues can just be owning pets. As people move towards living in more urban areas, people are losing their connection with nature and animals. People renting living spaces is also on the rise, most of which do not allow pets. Many public spaces do not allow pets either (O'Haire, 2010). This adds to the issues surrounding pets. With pets being very popular, there needs to be a shift for the world to be more pet-friendly. Even with the risks pets pose and issues with owning them, there are more benefits, but they cannot be ignored when considering owning a pet.

This paper has discussed how pets improve our mental and physical well-being. Art also offers mental health benefits. As part of this project, I made a collage with my pets and the pets of my friends and family. I wanted to do something interdisciplinary and outside of my comfort zone. With this in mind, I did an art project. Participation in art enhances individual and collective mental health. As more research has focused on the benefits of art, it has been recognized by the public health sector as a health behavior and asset. This benefit is seen across all modes (ways people engage in art) and forms of art (Rodriguez et al., 2023). While making my collage, I felt calm and at ease. It was fun, and I was excited when I finished it. Art has not always been my strong suit, so to design something and have it look really good was very uplifting. Even though this was a homework project, it didn't feel like a homework assignment. Amongst all the other work I had to do for classes like physics and forensic chemistry, this project was a nice change of pace. It was a nice, calm break in a stressful day of classes and homework. It was a great stress reliever.

Pets are pivotal aspects of our lives, and they provide benefits to our mental and physical health. They decrease loneliness by providing companionship and helping people engage in

social events. They decrease depression, stress, and anxiety. They help people participate in healthier lifestyles, such as more exercise and quitting smoking. They can also lower blood pressure by just petting them. Art is another way to improve mental health. Mental health is a serious issue that many people struggle with, including myself. These are just a few ways of helping mediate mental health issues in more constructive and positive ways.

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