

# IMPACT OF PETS ON WELL-BEING OF HUMANS DURING COVID-19

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## Abstract

**Well-being is a state of happiness and contentment. During the lockdown phase due to COVID-19 pandemic, social restrictions were imposed. As a result, people were socially isolated and reported higher levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness, insomnia and stress. However, during this period only, it was observed that people were getting attached to pets. This research paper aims to assess the impact of pets on the well-being of individuals during the period of COVID-19. It was concluded that pets increase the overall well-being of individuals and pet owners reported better quality of life and life satisfaction along with good mental and physical health.**

**Keywords:** well-being, pets, pet-owners, COVID-19, mental and physical health

## Introduction

Pets are the animals who are domesticated by humans in their homes. The most popular ones are dogs or cats, but pets can also be other animals like rabbits and rats as well as a variety of birds. Pets are usually considered as a part of the family by humans and are given names to be referred to as. Like other family members, pets are also offered their private bed and clothes. It is notable that most pet owners consider their pets as significant members of their family, and report they offer comfort, friendship, and aid to cope with stress.

On the other hand, well-being can be defined as the state of contentment and prosperity with lower levels of distress, anxiety. It includes having a sense of meaning in life, the ability to manage stressful situations, having good mental health and life satisfaction.

Statistically, in India, there are over 10,200,000 pet dogs and it is forecasted to reach over 31 million by 2023. On the contrary, the number of pet cats in India is forecasted to reach over 2.4 million by 2023. This implies, about 60% of the population in India owns a pet. Every year, 6,00,000 pets are adopted in India.

In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, social restrictions were imposed all over the globe in order to decrease the chances of the spread of deadly COVID-19 virus which continued till 2021. This marked an intensively difficult time span for the people. Due to the lack of social interaction and moving out of the residents, a huge number of people reported higher levels of depression, anxiety, stress, loneliness, boredom, insomnia, poor quality of life and less life satisfaction. This was the period of highest risk for mental and physical health issues.

It was during this period, it was observed that people were getting indulged with animals like dogs and cats. They were domesticating street dogs and adopting pets and considered them as crucial part of their families. They also called themselves as pet parents.

Owning a pet had a positive impact on their well-being. This helped in reducing the sense of social isolation. Due to owning a pet, physical activity like jumping, walking or jogging increased, which led to a healthy body.

Biologically, pets showed to decrease the level of stress hormone (cortisol) and blood pressure and elevated levels of feel good hormone (oxytocin), due to which individuals called themselves as pet parents because oxytocin is the same hormone that bonds mothers to their babies.

There are a number of studies that have considered some benefits regarding mental health as well as well-being of pet ownership. Talking about sleep quality, while Smith et al., 2018 found that co-sleeping with dogs elevated arousal and the frequency of wake ups in humans, Hoffman et al., 2018 found that dogs were perceived as bed partners and were considered less disturbing than human bed partners, which promoted stronger feelings of comfort and security. Serpell, 1991 also found that people who adopted dogs or cats experienced a crucial limitation in minor health problems consisting of headaches and painful joints.

Discussing social interactions, it was pointed out that pet ownership is positively related with perceptions of neighbourhood friendliness, favour exchanges, civic engagement, along with the sense of community (Bulsara et al., 2007). Additionally, dog owners exhibited more interest in the neighbourhood (Cutt et al., 2008) and showed higher chances to engage in a conversation with strangers during a walk (McNicholas and Collis, 2000). Regarding conscientiousness, Allen et al, 2000 reported that pet owners expressed a sense of responsibility for their pets, which led to the structure and organisation of their everyday activities. Daily

routines of pet maintenance motivated physical exercise consisting of daily walks, grooming and bathing, veterinary visits, as well as social events with other pet owners.

Dogs are the most common and popular pets as they provide unconditional and non-judgmental love and dog companionship is associated with fewer physical health and mental health problems. Owning a dog has also been shown to decrease isolation and loneliness as well as provide support and ability to deal with stressful times. It has been seen that the attachments and bonds formed with dogs are as strong or even stronger as compared to human connections. Indeed, it is increasingly clear that humans bond with nonhuman animals in ways that are comparable with human–human attachment.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Catherine E. Amiot, Christophe Gagné, et al. (2022) explored the deviations between pet vs. non-pet owners in terms of their well-being during the period of COVID-19 pandemic, as well as examine among different socio demographic strata, for whom pet ownership can be more beneficial or less beneficial. 1220 pet owners and 1204 non-pet owners were part of the study and a cross-sectional questionnaire was conducted. The results showed that pet owners showed lower well-being as compared to the non-pet owners but when investigating the effect of pet ownership within different socioeconomic strata, being a pet owner was related with lower level of well-being among women and other people who have 2+ children living at home as well as those who are unemployed. It was also seen that dog owners reported higher levels of well-being as compared to other pet owners.

Deborah L. Wells, Megan A. Clements, et al. (2022) examined the association between the quality of the companion animal–human bond as well as mental wellbeing during COVID-19-induced national lockdown in the United Kingdom. 249 UK-based adults out of which 146 were companion animal owners & 103 were non-owners completed the purpose-designed online survey which measured companion animal ownership status, sociodemographic background, attachment level, and various components of mental wellbeing (like, depression, loneliness, positive experience, stress). The result indicated that there was no significant relationship between companion animal ownership and any of the mental health outcome measures. Moreover, it was found that the attachment to one's companion animal to be a strong predictor of mental wellbeing, means higher levels of bonds of attachment associated with higher levels of loneliness, depression, and lower levels of positive experience.

Ece Beren Barklam, Fatima Maria Felisberti (2022) investigated the association among pet ownership, pet attachment, and wellbeing with the help of two online surveys, in which the first part was conducted during the early stages of the pandemic (May 2020) whereas, the second part was conducted during the year 2021 (September 2021). In the study, resilience, optimism, as well as basic psychological need satisfaction (like, autonomy, competence, and relatedness) were kept as potential moderators. The first part of the study in which the international sample of 495 participants (70% pet owners) participated, while the second part of the study had a UK sample of 243 participants (57% pet owners). It was concluded that pets provide emotional comfort and had a positive impact in the lives of pet-owners during the early stages of the pandemic. Pet ownership as well as pet attachment were positively associated with wellbeing in people who showed low levels of resilience. On the contrary, people with high resilience who were pet owners or had higher pet attachment had lower levels of wellbeing than non-pet owners and those less attached. Moreover, optimism as well as basic psychological need satisfaction were not significant moderators.

Kirily Zablan, Glenn Melvin, et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study and examined how companion animal ownership influenced the subjective well being of 177 older adult companion animal owners aged 65–84 years during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. A cross-sectional design and online/phone semi-structured survey methodology were adopted. The results showed that older adult companion animal owners perceived their companion animals to provide mental, social, as well as physical wellbeing benefits during the pandemic. Moreover, participants reported that their companion animals provided “COVID-safe” tactile comfort, social support, along with companionship.

Ana Martos Martinez-Caja, Veerle De Herdt, et al. (2022) examined whether feelings of loneliness had an influence on the mood of people during the COVID-19 lockdown and whether pet ownership may have had a positive influence on both loneliness as well as general mood. This was examined with the help of pets in lockdown, an international questionnaire. The results showed that higher loneliness scores were related with higher negative as well as lower positive affective states. Additionally, lower loneliness scores were related with pet ownership along with living with other people. Hence, it was seen that during the lockdown period, pets had benefited people with smaller social networks by relieving loneliness and offering comfort and embodied close contact.

Jennifer W. Applebaum, Carlyn Ellison, et al (2021) investigated the influence of pets on the everyday lives of older adults during the early stages of COVID-19 pandemic. A survey of U.S. pet owners was administered in order to assess the influence of the association with pets during COVID-19 on human health along with well-being. Bivariate analyses was done in order to compare and contrast the levels of social support, loneliness, pet attachment, and family income for a subset of older adults (ages 65 and older) with a younger comparison group (ages 18–64). The results revealed that older adults showed less levels of loneliness and social support as compared to the ones who are below 65 years. Moreover, it was seen that there were no significant differences in the strength of attachment to pets nor income among the younger and older respondents.

Dasha Grajfoner, Guek Nee Ke, et al. (2021) examined how pets have an influence on the mental health and wellbeing of Malaysians during the lockdown, due to COVID-19 pandemic. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 448 Malaysian participants,

who finished online assessments for psychological outcomes, psychological well being, positive–negative emotions, resilience, as well as coping self-efficacy. The results revealed that pet owners reported significantly better coping self-efficacy, significantly more positive emotions, and better psychological well being, while on the other hand, there were no differences on other measures. It was observed that among pet owners, cat owners reported more positive emotions and greater wellbeing as compared to dog owners. Hence, it was concluded that the pets have some impact on the improved psychological health of their owners.

Xing Xin, Ling Cheng, et al. (2021) investigated the influence of pets on the intervention of people's psychological problems during the period of the COVID-19 epidemic. An online survey from April 9, 2020 to April 29, 2020 was conducted on 756 participants. Using a comparative analysis, the results showed that pet owners exhibited lower than average scores of insomnia as compared to non-pet owners. It was also seen that the individuals with more than one pet exhibited lower than average scores of depression than having one pet.

Francois Martin, Katherine E. Bachert, et al. (2021) explored that dogs may supply social support to their owners and can shield the heightened symptoms of anxiety, stress and depression and contribute to happiness during the period of COVID-19. Various tools like validated depression, anxiety, happiness psychometric scales, attitude to and commitment towards pets, and perceived social support. Were used online to collect the responses from 768 pet dog owners as well as 767 potential pet dog owners. The results revealed that dog owners showed having significantly more social support available to them as well as their depression scores were also lower as compared to the potential dog owners (the ones who would like to have a dog).

Joel Shi Quan Tan, Waikit Fung, et al. (2021) investigated the relationship between pet ownership, physical activity levels and mental health during the period of COVID-19 pandemic. From May 19, 2020 to July 13, 2020, a cross-sectional study was conducted among Singapore residents aged 21 to 64 years with the help of a previously published questionnaire. Data was collected on pet ownership, duration along with the intensity of physical activity, and RAND 36-item Health Survey mental health domains during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic by 431 pet owners and 103 non-pet owners. The results demonstrated that pet owners did more physical activity as compared to the non-pet owners and they had better emotional well-being, energy as well as social functioning.

A Phillipou, EJ Tan, et al. (2021) aimed to recognize whether owning a pet (cat and/or dog) was related to enhanced psychological wellbeing during the period of lockdown in Victoria, Australia, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were analysed from a large-scale mental health study, that is, the COVID-19 and you, mental health in Australia now survey (COLLATE) and the influence of pet ownership was examined on resilience, loneliness and quality of life on the sample of 138 pet owners and 125 non-pet owners. It was seen that pet ownership results in lower quality of life and there was no significant effect on resilience and loneliness.

Jessica Lee Oliva, Kim Louise Johnston (2021) explored the experience of lockdown in Australian living alone having a pet or not having a pet. The sample size included 384 participants. To collect the data, an online survey was conducted in order to evaluate the levels of loneliness, mindfulness and mood. Moreover, for participants who had a dog or a cat, a measure of dog/cat interactions was also conducted as well as two open-ended questions about how being a pet owner had an influence on their experience of COVID-19 and how COVID-19 affected their pet. The results demonstrated that pet interactions did not account for levels of loneliness or levels of mindfulness. However, it was seen that stress and depression positively predicted loneliness, whereas, mindfulness and being a dog owner were protective against it.

Emily Shoesmith, Lion Shahab, et al. (2021) how animal-human interaction influenced the physical as well as mental health during the period of COVID-19 in the U.K. Between April 2020 and June 2020, a cross-sectional online survey was conducted among the adults in the U.K. aged over 18 years. The last item of the survey invited open-ended free-text responses which allowed participants to describe any experiences and/or perceptions of their human–animal relationships during the period of COVID-19 lockdown phase. A qualitative thematic analysis of responses was undertaken under which four predominant themes were observed related to the aspects of human-animal interaction during lockdown phase of COVID-19, which are, the positive impact of animal ownership during the COVID-19 lockdown (that is, improvement of wellbeing and mental health), concerns associated with animal ownership during the COVID-19 lockdown (that is, concerns over animals carrying the COVID-19 virus), grief and loss of an animal during the COVID-19 lockdown as well as the impact of engaging with non-companion animals during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Cori Bussolari, Jennifer Currin-McCulloch, et al. (2021) how the COVID-19 lockdown enhanced dog owners' relationships and sense of connection and the thoughts, experiences and concerns of adults (N=4105) regarding their companion dog during the initial months of Covid-19. Data were collected (between March 31st–April 19th, 2020) with the help of an online survey and themes from open-ended questions were coded by the researchers using directed content analysis. The results depicted a strong human–animal appreciation, and that dog ownership during this pandemic diminished participants' sense of isolation and loneliness, as well as supported their mental/physical health.

Megan K. Mueller, Amanda M. Richer, et al. (2021) aimed to examine the association between pet ownership, pet attachment, loneliness, along with coping with stress before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Longitudinal quantitative survey and data was collected prior to and during the pandemic in order to explore the role of pets in predicting adolescent loneliness. The results demonstrated that the pet ownership was not a significant predictor of loneliness before the pandemic, but did predict higher levels of loneliness during COVID-19 as well as higher increases in loneliness from before to during the pandemic. Dog ownership did not predict lower levels of loneliness during the pandemic period as dog owners were more attached with their pets. Adolescents

with pets showed spending more time with their pets during the period of pandemic, as well as frequently reported pet interactions as a strategy for coping with stress.

Shelby E. McDonald, Kelly E. O'Connor, et al. (2021) assessed whether, and to what extent, attachment to pets was related with changes in latent patterns of adults' perceived mental health symptoms during the period of COVID-19 pandemic. Latent transition analysis was used to determine the firmness of subgroup membership both pre and post COVID as well as the effect of attachment to pets on transition probabilities. Five groups were identified which are low symptoms, mild symptoms, moderate symptoms, high symptoms, and severe symptoms. The results showed that among people in the moderate and high symptoms subgroups, those who reported high attachment to pets generally had greater odds of transitioning to a less severe symptom profile over time than those with low attachment to pets. However, those who had a severe symptom profile and high attachment to pets had lower odds of transitioning to a less severe symptom profile and higher odds of maintaining a severe symptom profile than those with low attachment to pets.

Tomoko Ikeuchi, Yu Taniguchi, et al. (2021) aimed to assess the psychological health of older adults with or without the experience of pet (i.e., dog or cat) ownership who are socially isolated or not socially isolated. From 9856 communities-dwelling older adults in a metropolitan area of Japan, a cross-sectional data was utilised. The results showed that the socially isolated older adults who never owned a dog were 1.22 times more likely to report lower psychological health as compared to the socially isolated current or past dog owners. However, no such difference was observed among cat owners. It was also seen that the experience of dog ownership may be effective to ameliorate the psychological health among socially isolated older adults.

Renata Defelipe, Carine Savalli, et al. (2020) explored socio-demographic characteristics and well-being indicators which are related with pet ownership. The sample size constituted 801 participants from the five macro-regions of Brazil, precisely, 8% North, 28% Northeast, 36% Southeast, 18% South and 10% Central-Wes, whose age ranged from 20 to 50 years, where about 60% of the participants lived with pets. Furthermore, logistic regression reported that residence type (to be owner versus renter) and parental status (to be childless versus to have children) to be the predictors of pet ownership. An interaction between pets and the sex was also considered where with the help of Mann-Whitney test, it was seen that men who owned a pet showed better sleep quality, better relationship with neighbours and less sadness; whereas women who owned a pet showed lower life organisation. However, there were no significant differences found in life satisfaction for both pet owners as well as non-pet owners. Roxanne D. Hawkins, Brodie, Z.P. (2020) explored whether pet presence and human-pet attachment has a role as a protective factor against the negative impact of lockdown measures on human mental health during the period of COVID-19. The sample size constituted 86 participants who completed three time-points over lockdown, 2-weeks apart. The results were shown for two categories of individuals, highly attached and less attached pet owners. It was seen that, at the beginning of lockdown, highly attached pet owners showed less psychological well-being and high scores on depression, stress, negative affect and anxiety. However, by the second and third time, only negative affect was found higher as well as less level of anxiety second time and less negative affect in third time. On the other hand, less attached pet owners showed an increase in negative affect as well as in anxiety from first time to second time, and an increase in negative effect from second time to third time. Hence, it was concluded that being highly attached to a pet may have been beneficial for reducing anxiety and negative emotions as restrictions began to lift.

## Conclusion and Discussion

In this research, we have undergone the influence of pets on the well-being of humans during the period of COVID-19 lockdown. Through this secondary research, we were able to find how pets can have an overall impact on the mental health of the humans and how the lockdown period was made easy to survive. It was seen that pet-owners showed an increase in well-being and decreased levels of depression, anxiety and loneliness.

Drawing from the various studies discussed in this secondary research, it has been observed that pets fulfilled social and emotional needs for the majority of people including the older adults during the period of isolation. Pets also help their owners to cope with the adverse situations and difficulties as well as negative emotions arising as a result of these situations. Moreover, pet owners showed significantly more positive attitudes towards life and more resilience. Additionally, it was also found that pet-owners were also more physically active as compared to the non-pet owners.

Through the course of finding, it was also revealed that pet-owners also undergo certain burdens as a result of the responsibility of the pet. They also show lower quality of life. Pet-owners were also concerned for their pets to contract the COVID-19 virus. Some also felt grief and loss of their pet.

In my opinion, pets have a positive effect on the mental health of individuals. They eliminate the sense of social isolation from the lives of their owners. Pets decrease the levels of stress hormone, cortisol and increase the levels of feel-good hormone, oxytocin, which is the same hormone that bonds mothers to babies. Hence, more pets, especially dogs are now domesticated by the masses outside.

## Limitations and further suggestions

This research paper included a limited number of studies and the conclusion can not be aptly generalised. Hence, a larger number of recent studies must be taken into account. Moreover, primary research can be conducted on a sample in order to achieve a concrete conclusion. For the future references, more recent studies must be considered which studies the topic deeply.

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