

Pet Owners' Emotional Support, Well-being, Mental Health, and Attachment

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### Abstract

Animal companions can be beneficial to the owner. The goal of this study was to determine the effects of pet ownership on several aspects of well-being. We investigated whether pet owners who seek and receive emotional support would indicate increased well-being and attachment to their pets. We hypothesized that pet owners who seek and receive emotional support from their pets will report greater pet attachment, greater physical well-being, greater social well-being, and greater mental health. We recruited 663 participants ages 18 years and older. Participants were recruited using email and social media, and were asked to take an online survey using SurveyMonkey. We found that seeking and receiving emotional support from pets was associated with pet attachment, but not physical well-being. Pet owners that seek emotional support from their pets reported greater social well-being, but not greater mental health. This study is important to conduct as 62% of American households include at least one pet (Humane Society of the United States, 2014), and extends the research about pet ownership of employed individuals. The major implication from this study is pet owners and their animal companions have a mutually beneficial relationship, and that pets can influence pet owners' social and relational well-being.

## Pet Ownership

Having animal companions in the household can be more beneficial than once thought. A “man’s best friend” can also be “man’s best health remedy” and can improve people’s overall well-being. Well-being can be defined as holistically being and doing well, which can include increasing the well-being of others (Hays, 2014), such as a pet. Past research has supported the idea that owning a pet can be mutually beneficial for both pets and owners of several demographics, especially older age groups (Risley–Curtiss, 2010). Furthermore, having an animal companion can improve one’s emotional, psychological, and social health (Wells, 2009). Just the presence of a four-legged friend has demonstrated benefits inside the household and in residential communities (Noonan, 2008; Wood, Giles–Corti, Bulsara, & Bosch, 2007). The goal of this current study is to determine the effects of pet ownership of a variety of companion animals on several aspects of well-being.

### **Physical Well-being**

This research study will cover three aspects of well-being, the first of which is physical. According to Wells (2009), pet–human relationships are beneficial for both humans and their animal companions. A pet can have positive short-term effects on the owner’s physical health such as lowered heart rate, by being in the presence of a pet, by petting an animal companion, and/or by watching a video that include pets (Wells, 2009).

Having a pet can prevent and facilitate providing stronger physical as well as stronger mental health (Wells, 2009). Dog owners gain more health advantages as compared to cat owners; dog owners, for instance, maintained a decrease in minor physical ailments longer than those of cat owners (Serpell, 1991 as cited in Wells, 2009). Pets have been shown to decrease

stress, blood pressure, and cholesterol levels (Walsh, 2009; Wells, 2009). Furthermore, pets can detect other physical illnesses early on as well as reduce loneliness. Therefore, pets can offer physical, psychological, and therapeutic benefits in the long run (Wells, 2011).

### **Mental Health**

Pets can aid in improving physical as well as mental health. The benefits of owning a pet can outweigh the costs (i.e., financial and time) for many owners (Bagley & Gonsman, 2005). For example, after distributing an online survey with 132 Canadian pet owners and non-pet owners, Antonacopoulos and Pychyl (2010) found that dog owners with high levels of human social support were found to be less lonely than non-dog owners with high levels of human support. In addition, male pet owners tended to score higher on levels of self-esteem and locus of control (Hecht, McMillin, & Silverman, 2001). Furthermore, McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton, and Martin (2011) found that pet owners had greater self-esteem, greater levels of exercise and physical fitness, and they tended to be less lonely than non-owners.

Moreover, pet owners are more conscientious, less fearful, and less preoccupied than non-owners. Specifically, male owners aged 60–64 years old scored higher levels on extraversion (Parslow, Christensen, Rodgers, & Jacomb, 2005). Companion animals are also useful in the owner's social facilitation with other humans; for instance, pets make it socially and culturally acceptable to approach strangers to converse, play, or make a fool of his or herself (Noonan, 2008). Overall, pet owners' personalities tend to be healthier than those who do not have an animal companion. The study done by McConnell and colleagues (2011) also found that pet owners scored better on several well-being and personality measures, that owners have better well-being when their pets fulfilled social needs, and that pets can provide sources of positive psychological and social support. When used in the correct manner, a pet can relieve stress

through therapeutic programs (Wells, 2011). Sable (2013) explained “there is now convincing scientific evidence that companion animals have positive effects on psychological . . . well-being, [and that they help] shape how people regulate their emotions, deal with stress or trauma, and relate to others” (p. 93). Therefore, being mentally healthy coincides with developing and maintaining healthy social relationships.

### **Social Well-being**

Having a companion animal is not a recent trend, and evidence of such can be traced as far back as medieval times, especially in Europe and Asia; the domestication of dogs and cats are estimated to have been around 6,000 to 12,000 years ago (Woodward & Bauer, 2007). Although first used for food, shelter, and protection, pets (i.e., dogs and cats) were later considered entertainment, comforters, nurturers, and companions (Walsh, 2009). The pet and its owner most often have a mutual relationship where both give and receive social benefits. Pets help decrease loneliness after the loss of a loved one (Sable, 1995) and provide a source of safe haven for emotional distress, defined as the act of confiding in someone (i.e., a dog) in times of emotional suffering (Kurdek, 2009a). In fact, the presence of animal companions in medieval households came about to compensate the loss of family members, as early parental and child mortality was frequent in that era (Walsh, 2009).

Pets can help activate warm and positive inner emotions as well as help identify feelings and emotional states within the caregiver (Koppel, 2011). In addition, companion animals, according to Noonan (2008) are considered supplements, not substitutes, for human relationships, meaning that pets can provide benefits to humans. Furthermore, research done by Beck and Madresh (2008) found that pets provide a secure and consistent relationship with their owner. Sometimes owner and pet relationships are more dependable than relationships with the

owner's romantic partner. Relationships with pets tend to be simpler, rewarding, and less demanding. Also, relationships with companion animals are easier to dispose of if both parties are not compatible, as shown by the growing presence of animals in shelters. Nevertheless, pet-owner relationships can be so strong that owners are more likely to turn to their dogs than they would their parents, siblings, and friends in times of emotional distress (Kurdek, 2009a).

Pets can relieve stress for owners who deal with conflict among other household members; they are considered by researchers to be a *distraction* from housemates (Wood et. al., 2007) and *stabilizers* (Risley-Curtiss, 2010) in critical situations because they offer constant, unconditional love and acceptance. Companion animals are also considered to be family members and part of family systems (Risley-Curtiss, 2010). Research has shown that even neighborhoods that welcome pets can benefit from their presence; companion animals can have a positive contribution to the overall well-being of the inhabitants by influencing broader social interactions, civic engagements, and a sense of community (Wood et. al., 2007). Even the brief presence of a companion animal can make a positive difference on occupants of institutions outside the home, such as hospitals and prisons. Pets can provide benefits such as a sense of social responsibility and feelings of less isolation (Noonan, 2008). Developing strong relationships with pets can later help develop healthy relationships with people; pets serve as mediators in human relationships (Noonan, 2008).

### **Attachment**

Pet owners can form a relationship so strong with their animal companion that an attachment to one another is formed. Attachments to others cause a dependency for another person or being and are “based on the premise that humans, like many animals, are biologically predisposed to seek out and sustain physical contact and emotional connection to selective

figures with whom they become familiar and come to rely on for psychological and physical protection . . .” (Sable, 2013, p. 94). In the United States, elderly females outnumber elderly males in population size, many of whom live alone. Eshbaugh and others (2011) have indicated that pets are meaningful to elders living in retirement communities, regardless of whether or not they own one at the time. This was concluded after administering tests measuring pet attachment and loneliness to elders residing in two retirement communities. This population of elderly females can be at risk of experiencing loneliness, which can manifest into physical illness. However, developing an attachment to pets may help alleviate loneliness for this population of women (Krause–Parello, 2008). Those with higher levels of attachment to their companion animals tend to be female, live with less significant others in the home, own a dog, have higher quantities of pets, and/or own their pet for a longer period of time (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Bagley & Gonsman, 2005; Lewis, Krägeloh, & Shepherd, 2009). In another study, Peacock, Chur-Hansen, & Winefield (2012) found that the strongest predictors of attachment levels to pets were marital status, sex, and age. Specifically, unmarried, female, and younger participants reported having highest attachment levels. However it was concluded that high attachment levels may not necessarily be beneficial, and could potentially lead to poor health such as greater psychological distress.

### **Mixed Results of Pet Ownership on Wellness**

Most of the research evidence supports the positive influence of pet ownership on wellness. On the contrary, there has also been opposing evidence that pet ownership, depending on the age group and sex, may have minimal positive effect or even negative effects on pet owners (Peacock et. al., 2012). For instance, although the presence of a pet has been found to reduce loneliness, one research study found that pet owners may not necessarily be less lonely

than non-pet owners, regardless of the specific type of pet (Beck, 2005). In addition, household pet data collected from adolescent boys found that, despite high rates of pet ownership among this age group, quality time spent caring for or playing with pets does not clearly associate with adolescent physical health or well-being (Mathers, Canterford, Olds, Waters, & Wake, 2010). Lewis and colleagues (2009) studied undergraduate students and concluded that there were no significant differences between pet owners and non-pet owners in physical, psychological, and social quality of life. Therefore, it is important to continue to research this topic.

Based on this previous research, the current study investigated the relationship of attachment and three aspects of well-being for individuals that seek and receive emotional support from their pets. The four hypotheses predicted that pet owners who seek and receive emotional support from their pets would report greater pet attachment, greater physical, social, and psychological well-being.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants consisted of 165 men and 498 women ages 18 years old and older. Thirty-seven percent of the participants indicated that their age fell between 18 and 25 years old, 9% were between 26 and 35, and 16% were between 36 and 45. The rest of the participants were older. The participants listed their racial background as being 78.4% Caucasian/White, 9.9% African American/Black, 2.2% Asian, 2.7% Hispanic, 0.2% Native American, and 5.7% other and/or multi-racial. Of all participants, 60% were pet owners (see Table 1 for the Pet Ownership Frequency Table), 76.7% reported that they were currently in a relationship, and 62.3% of all participants did not have children.

### **Measures**

**Physical and mental health.** The physical and mental health questions were written by the authors of this study. Participants were asked the questions, “Do you currently feel mentally healthy?” and “Do you currently feel physically healthy?” The responses on the scale ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

**Pet attachment.** The authors of this study created the pet attachment question. Participants indicated how attached they were to their pet(s) if they owned one; “Do you get attached to pets that you have or have had?” The responses on the scale ranged from *not attached* to *very attached*.

**Self-care.** The Self-care Scale was written by the authors of this study. One item from each of the two subscales included emotional self-care (5 items) and relational and social self-care (5 items). Participants answered whether they “Engage[d] with [their] pets in shared activities or by petting/sitting with them” and whether they “[Sought] and receive[d] emotional support from [their] pets” Participants indicated how often they engaged in daily habits and beliefs with responses ranging from *not at all* to *multiple times each day*.

## **Procedure**

Twelve research assistants recruited individuals using e-mail and social media using snowball sampling. The participants were asked to take an hour long online survey that included around 150 questions using SurveyMonkey. To be considered for the study, individuals had to speak English, be a resident in the United States, be 18 years or older, and be able to take the survey online. Participants were asked to complete surveys about mental, physical, emotional, and social health, attachment to their pets, and overall well-being. The surveys also asked about demographic information including age, gender, and pet ownership. Participation was voluntary, but those who agreed to participate were entered into a drawing to possibly win one of six \$50

Amazon gift cards.

### Results

The data was analyzed using ANOVA testing on SPSS. The first hypothesis predicted that pet owners who seek and receive emotional support from their pets would report greater pet attachment. Pet attachment was associated with seeking and receiving emotional support,  $F(5,347) = 7.16, p = .001, \eta^2 = .09$ . Pet owners who seek and receive emotional support from their pets multiple times each day reported having the highest attachment levels. See Table 2 for the means and standard deviations of pet attachment. The second hypothesis predicted that pet owners who seek and receive emotional support from their pets would report greater physical well-being. Pet owners who seek emotional support from their pets did not report greater well-being,  $F(5,347) = .19, p = .97$ . The third hypothesis predicted that pet owners would report greater social well-being if they seek and receive emotional support from their pets. Pet owners that seek and receive emotional support from their pets do benefit from greater social well-being,  $F(5,347) = 18.74, p = .001, \eta^2 = .21$ . Pet owners who seek and receive emotional support from their pets multiple times each day reported receiving the greatest social self-care. See Table 3 for the means and standard deviations for social well-being. The last hypothesis predicted that pet owners who seek and receive emotional support from their pets would report greater psychological well-being. Results were not significant; pet owners that seek and receive emotional support from their pets did not report greater psychological well-being,  $F(5,343) = .58, p = .72$ . Therefore, the sample of pet owners used in this study reported only greater attachment and social well-being when they sought emotional support from their pets.

### Discussion

In this study we predicted that pet owners who seek and receive emotional support from

pets would report increased well-being and attachment to their pets. The first hypothesis predicted that pet owners who seek and receive emotional support from their pets would report greater pet attachment. The hypothesis was supported; pet attachment was associated with seeking and receiving emotional support. These results coincide with prior research that reported young adults with an attachment to their dogs consider their animal companion to be a source of safe haven (Kurdek, 2009b), just as a child would with his or her mother. Moreover, respondents of Bagley and Gonsman's (2005) study who fell between young adult and middle adulthood age (i.e., 18 – 54 years old) showed increased attachment as age increased. This is relevant to the current study as most participants who fell in between this age range did show attachment to their pets; more than half of our participants were under the age of 35. The majority of respondents of this study were also female. This could explain why attachment levels were significant for this sample of pet owners because females tend to report higher attachment levels than males do (Lewis et. al., 2009).

The second hypothesis predicted that pet owners who seek and receive emotional support from their pets would report greater physical well-being. However, this hypothesis was not supported. These results did not match with those of prior research. One reason for this may be the difference with timeframes in which the questions were asked. There is an abundant amount of research that supports having pets and how they can benefit the physical well-being of pet owners in the long run (Wells, 2011), with specifically preventing and facilitating the healing process of a long-term illness (Wells, 2009). The question in this current study asked participants whether they currently felt physically healthy, but not generally healthy, and did not ask about the long term physical well-being of participants that previous literature did

The third hypothesis predicted that pet owners who seek and receive emotional support

from their pets would report greater social well-being. This hypothesis was supported; pet owners who seek and receive emotional support from their pets reported benefiting from greater social well-being. Many pet owners reported engaging in social self-care by interacting with their pets within the last seven days of completing the survey. Interacting with pets can reduce loneliness (Sable, 1995). In fact, if high attachment levels were reported by respondents, high amounts of social well-being was also reported. Pet dogs and cats provide positive feelings such as joy and laughter that make people feel less alone; they have a component of attachment that promotes well-being (Sable, 2013).

The last hypothesis predicted that pet owners who seek and receive emotional support from their pets would report greater psychological well-being. Results were not significant; pet owners did not report feeling mentally healthy at the time when the survey was taken. This coincides with results of past research, depending on the study. For instance, according to Hecht and colleagues (2001), pet ownership influenced the psychological well-being of male more than female respondents. Pet ownership was related to self-esteem and locus of control for male respondents of the study. Furthermore, men who owned pets scored higher on average on the self-esteem scale than males who did not own pets. This result is logical as 75% of the participants in the present study were female. On the other hand, McConnell and others' study (2011) reported psychological benefits of having an animal companion, such as having healthier personalities. The effects of pet ownership have mixed results.

Based on the mixed results of past research, it may be important for one to consider his or her gender and age group before deciding to own an animal companion. Deciding what kind of pet to own may be an important factor as well. Although we did not study the differences in well-being between dog and cat owners in the current study, past research reports higher social

and physical well-being among dog owners than cat owners (Wells, 2009). On the other hand, owning a fish or even a robotic pet can foster similar results (Crawford, Worsham, & Swinehart, 2006; Melson, Kahn, Beck, & Friedman, 2009) as owning an animal companion, which one can interact with or physically touch.

Our results are important because they may be an indication of a bigger picture; having an animal presence within the household besides human cohabitants can create a healthier environment for all. Since past research indicated that animal companions have an effect on the well-being of habitants within the household and even a community (Wood et. al., 2007; Beck, 2005), these results indicate that animals provide positive feelings that human relationships may not always consistently provide (Beck & Madresh, 2008). Furthermore, these results are applicable because many Americans are pet owners. It is important that pet owners care for their pets as much as their pets care for them in order to fully achieve a positive and mutually beneficial relationship.

Lastly, both the current study and prior studies demonstrate that having an animal companion can help well-being (Wells, 2009). This is beneficial to women, the majority of the sample, as they are more likely to live alone (Krause-Parello, 2008). Many older women especially tend to live alone after the loss of a loved one, after the initiation of the *empty nest stage* (i.e., in which all of the children have left the household), or after the relocation to an elderly home. Past research suggest that pets are beneficial for them as well (Krause, 2008).

The underrepresentation of ethnicities, male, elder, and unemployed participants is the first limitation of this study. Because the majority of the participants were white women, the largest age group of participants was 18–35 years old, and all the respondents were employed, results found in this study are less able to be generalized to the general population.

The utilization of questions to analyze the well-being of participants is the second weakness of this study. First, only one question was used to assess each variable used in our study. This may mean the questions did not fully assess our variables. Second, the phrasing of the question about pet ownership does not account for the effects of pet ownership over a person's lifetime. The questions also ask about the participant's current state of being instead of an overall state of being. We chose to limit the responses to the past seven days in order to prevent error in assuming one's feelings and emotions over a longer period of time; it is easier to remember one's state of being over the last week than the last month or year.

Furthermore, the using online surveys can prohibit participants from taking the survey without Internet accessibility. This may account for the underrepresentation of older adults in this study. However, using an online survey saved time and the cost of printing surveys and sending them via e-mail and the method was more environmentally friendly.

Including more walks of life besides dogs and cats as companion animals is a strength of this study. Most past research has studied cat and dog owners, but this study includes owners of aquatic, avian, and reptilian pets. This allows the results to be generalized to a larger group of pet owners other than owners of cats and dogs.

Another strength of this study was that the hypotheses were consistent with past research. Both current and past research confirmed that having an animal companion can generate attachment, and benefit the pet owner's social well-being. Furthermore, we gathered information from a sufficiently large sample of young adults to generalize to that population, especially since past research on this subject has used older populations. Even though this research confirmed what has been found in the past, this study adds a unique perspective to the literature because a large portion of the sample was young adults.

One idea for future research would be to study the happiness and purpose of unemployed pet owners. This potential study could compare the psychological well-being and sense of purpose of unemployed pet owners to that of unemployed non-pet owners. We would predict that unemployed pet owners would report higher rates of purpose within the household and therefore indicate greater psychological well-being than unemployed non-pet owners. Caring for a pet may provide the owner with responsibilities so that they have a sense of purpose. This study could add to the literature as both older populations and unemployed participants are underrepresented in the current research.

Another idea for future research would be to determine if physical well-being of pet owners coincide with physical care for their pets. We would predict that physical well-being of pet owners and care for their pets would be positively related. We also would predict that the physical well-being of pet owners and that of their pets differ by sex; male pet owners who provide physical care for their pets might report greater physical self-care than female pet owners. Females tend to be primary caregivers of the household while also balancing other life roles (Maume, Sebastian, & Bardo, 2010) and will therefore often have to sacrifice physical self-care to care for others, such as their pets. As a result we expect that self-reported physical self-care of female pet-owners would be lower than that of males.

The last idea for future research could include exploring the relationship of attachment levels of pet owners with their pets. We would predict that pet owners' attachment levels to their pets are comparable to that of their parents. This study would be interesting to conduct as past research has indicated that pet owners view their animal companions as a part of the family, and these owners sometimes have closer relationships to their pets than their siblings (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988). It would be interesting to see if attachment levels relate to attachment levels of

siblings. Therefore, we predict that pet owners who are the only child in the household would have higher attachment levels to their pets than pet owners with siblings.

The goal of this current study was to determine the effects of pet ownership on several aspects of well-being. We found that pets can provide social well-being and attachment to their owners. The findings were consistent with those of past studies, but more research should be done to determine whether “man’s best friend” may also be “man’s best health remedy.”

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Table 1

*Pet Owner Frequency Table*

		Do you have pets?	Dogs	Cats	Rabbits/ ferrets	Rodent pets	Avian pets	Reptile pets	Aquatic pets	Arthropod pets	Other
N	Valid	669	265	203	7	20	9	19	50	6	670
	Missing	1	405	467	663	650	661	651	620	664	0

Table 2

*Pet Attachment*

Do you seek and receive emotional support from your pets?	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Not at All	4.57	1.68	93
Once During the Week	4.89	1.41	38
A Few Times During the Week	5.60	1.30	63
Several Times During the Week	6.25	.92	44
Most Days During the Week	6.54	.97	61
Multiple Times During Each Day	6.83	.56	60

Table 3

*Social Self-Care*

Do you seek and receive emotional support from your pets?	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Not at All	4.20	.92	93
Once During the Week	4.49	.65	37
A Few Times During the Week	4.69	.66	64
Several Times During the Week	4.80	.46	44
Most Days During the Week	4.90	.30	61
Multiple Times During Each Day	4.93	.25	60