



## PAWS AND CLAWS: PETS PROMOTE WELLBEING

**Shalaka Sharad Shah\*, Shruti Goyal and Aparna Shankar**

Department of Psychological Sciences, FLAME University, Pune, Maharashtra, India

### YOUNG REVIEWERS:



ALINA

AGE: 11



EDDIE

AGE: 9



ELLIE

AGE: 12



JACK

AGE: 10



SAM

AGE: 11

Psychologists are often interested in understanding more about the relationships between people and their pets, and how having pets may help pet owners. Research suggests that pets help us stay healthy, both physically and mentally. Having a pet has been found to offer multiple health benefits to children, adults, and older people. Across various studies, pet owners mention several benefits of having a pet, such as emotional support, mood-boosting effects, companionship, and stress management. Based on theories in psychology that help to explain why we form bonds with others and how others help us, we try to understand the connections we form with our pets. In this article, we describe the science explaining how pets promote people's wellbeing.

### WHY STUDY PEOPLE AND THEIR PETS?

Today, around half of households all over the world have pets, with dogs and cats being the most popular choices. Social media is rife with pictures of pets, videos of their antics, and tips on how to look after them. These days, many people regard their pets as part of their

family and treat them as such. However, it was not always this way. Pet ownership has sharply increased over the past few decades. **One report** shows that pet ownership in China increased by 113% from 2014–2018, and China is expected to have the highest level of pet ownership by 2024. The recent COVID-19 pandemic also led to a large increase in the number of people adopting pets—over two million people in the UK adopted pets during this time, and over one million pets were adopted in Australia alone, possibly to help deal with feelings of loneliness or the stress people experienced during the pandemic. A study conducted with people who were quarantined with their dogs during the COVID-19 pandemic found that 76% of participants felt less stressed and less lonely after adopting a pet [1]. In fact, Shalaka, one of the authors of this article, had a similar experience with adopting a pet during the pandemic and seeing the positive impact that a little cat had on the whole family.

Owners may choose specific pets because they had the same kind of pet before, or because they enjoy certain activities with their pets. For instance, maybe you had a dog when you were a child, so you prefer dogs. Or maybe you love to chat with your pet, so you choose to have a parrot! In circumstances when an owner is less able to care for a pet, smaller animals that may require less exercise or that have a less demanding care routine can be very rewarding companions. Visually impaired individuals may choose a light-colored pet, as light-colored animals are more easily visible than those with darker coats [2]. **Psychologists** are often interested in understanding how pets can benefit us and why. In the rest of this article, we will attempt to answer some of these questions.

## PSYCHOLOGIST

A trained mental health professional who studies the human mind and emotions to understand why we feel, think, or act in a certain way.

## WELLBEING

A state of being comfortable, happy, healthy. Wellbeing can be achieved through the ability to function efficiently leading to overall satisfaction.

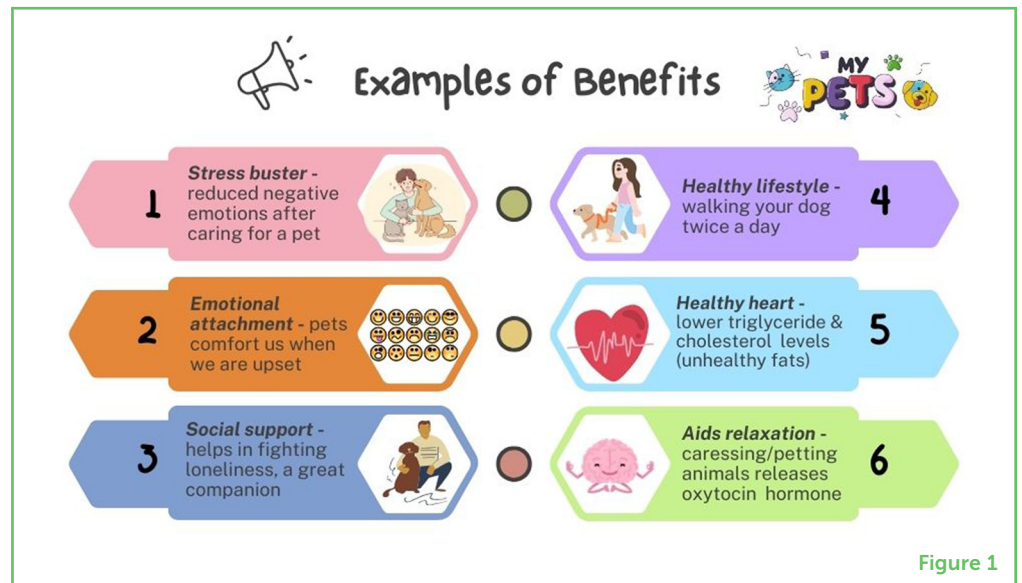
## DO PETS HELP WITH MENTAL HEALTH?

If you have ever wondered whether pets can help with their owners' mental health, the answer seems to be yes! All people experience both positive emotions (happiness, love, and hope) and negative emotions (sadness and worry). Spending time and playing with pets helps people cope with negative emotions. Pets can reduce stress levels and alleviate anxiety (feelings of extreme worry). For example, playing with your dog for a little while can help you feel much more relaxed about your upcoming exams, or can take your mind off a fight you had with your friend. Pets are also helpful for people dealing with depression (extreme unhappiness and feelings of emptiness), and they promote a sense of playfulness. **Figure 1** shows several benefits of having a pet.

For people with mental health problems, pets are often a great source of strength, and, in many cases, they even help people manage their conditions [3]. Some studies also show that having a pet is associated with lower levels of loneliness and isolation [4]. Research suggests that dogs can contribute to people's mental **wellbeing**, although other

**Figure 1**

Pets can have many important benefits for both the physical and mental health of their owners.



## HORMONES

The chemicals made by certain glands in the body. Hormones circulate in the bloodstream and control how cells and organs work.

## OXYTOCIN

A hormone released by the brain that helps in bonding with others, for example between a mother and a child. It is often called the “love hormone”.

## TRIGLYCERIDES

A type of fat circulating in blood. Triglycerides are formed when the body converts unused calories from the food intake. A high level may increase the risk of heart disease.

## CHOLESTEROL

A waxy, fat-like substance found in cells. It is made in the liver and is important for the body to make cell walls, tissues, and formation of Vitamin D.

animals can do this, too [5]. People who do not have any interaction with pets seem to be less happy than people who have consistent interactions with pets [6]. Pets have also been shown to keep older people happy [7].

However, it is important to note, that there may also be a negative side to the closeness that people feel toward their pets. Often, people who are very close to and highly dependent on their pets may feel more unhappy and lonely compared with people who do not have pets. This is especially true in cases where their pets are sick or when people experience separation from their pets [3].

## DO PETS HELP WITH PHYSICAL HEALTH?

Research indicates that pets help with physical health, too. Similar to babies, pets demand certain fixed routines and activities. Regular activities could include playing with your pet, feeding them at a specific time, caressing/petting them every time you come home from school, or just watching your favorite cartoon with them. These routines help you stay healthy by increasing the release of certain **hormones** that relax you, such as **oxytocin**. Caring for a pet can inspire healthy lifestyle changes, such as getting more exercise. For example, taking your dog for a daily walk benefits your health as well as your pet’s health. People with pets are much more likely to be active than people who do not have pets.

Having a pet can also help with heart health. For people with heart problems, pet ownership may even lower the risk of further heart-related issues. Pet owners are also less likely to suffer from depression, they have lower blood pressure during stressful situations, and they have lower **triglyceride** and **cholesterol** levels, all of which

helps to improve heart health. In general, people with pets tend to make fewer visits to the doctor [8]. Research also suggests that the recovery rate from illnesses is higher among people with pets, mainly dogs [9, 10], and that pet owners live longer [9].

## PETS MAKE US FEEL BETTER BECAUSE WE FEEL ATTACHED TO THEM

There is a theory in psychology, called **attachment theory**, that aims to understand the bonds that people have with each other. According to attachment theory, we are all born with the potential to connect with others, as newborns attach to their mothers. Attachment theory particularly talks about how feeling safe and supported by a person helps build our attachment to them. Consider how dogs can make us feel safe by guarding our homes or not letting strangers come close to us. Pets are also available for us when we need their support. Research confirms that dogs serve as a good social support for children who are dealing with stress [11]. Pet owners feel that the attachment they feel to their pets is as close as the attachments they experience with other humans. Pet owners often feel that their pets are always there when they need them, and that their pets comfort them when they are upset.

Pets also have a high sensitivity to emotions. If people scold their pets or get angry at them, pets can express anger, agitation, and sorrow in their own way. This sharing of similar emotions between humans and animals leads to emotional attachment. Physical touch plays a very important role in attachment, too. Imagine if, after a tiring school day or a hectic sports session, your cat or dog sits on your lap, and you happily stroke your pet. Chances are that both of you feel loved and relaxed. Such healthy attachment patterns help people to deal with stress in their lives.

## PETS MAKE US FEEL BETTER BECAUSE THEY ARE FRIENDS OR COMPANIONS

Several studies show that social support (having people around us who provide us with empathy, care, and help) makes dealing with stressful events a lot easier and smoother, which helps our wellbeing [12]. This is called **social support theory**. Pets provide emotional support during life changes or other stressful situations. The support our pets provide is special because it comes without any conditions or judgment. Pets can also help us grow our circle of friends and create new social relationships. For example, pets can help us strike up conversations and get to know new people, leading to friendships that can ultimately provide social support. Think about taking your pet to the park and stopping to talk with other pet owners or people who share your love for animals. As these friendships grow, you could develop a new circle

### ATTACHMENT THEORY

A theory in psychology that focuses on relationships and bonds between people, with a special focus on child-parent relationships.

### SOCIAL SUPPORT THEORY

A theory in psychology that focuses on how the people in our lives help us deal with difficult, stressful times, making us feel cared for and helping us to handle tough situations.

of people who are there for you and whom you can also support during difficult times.

As you can see, attachment theory and social support theory can help us understand how we develop long-term bonds with our pets. These bonds can lead to many benefits for our mental and physical health. As more people choose pets as a source of comfort, love, and care, the importance of understanding how pets keep their owners more mentally and physically healthy will likely continue to grow!

## REFERENCES

1. Bussolari C., Currin-McCulloch J., Packman W., Kogan L., and Erdman P. 2021. I couldn't have asked for a better quarantine partner! Experiences with companion dogs during Covid-19. *Animals* 11:330. doi: 10.3390/ani11020330
2. McBride, E. A. 2005. "Appropriate pet selection: which owner, which animal?" in *Older People and Pets: A Comprehensive Guide*, eds. J. Dono, and E. Ormerod (Society for Companion Animal Studies). p. 34–49.
3. Scoresby, K. J., Strand, E. B., Ng, Z., Brown, K. C., Stiliz, C. R., Strobel, K., Barroso, C. S., et al. 2021. Pet ownership and quality of life: a systematic review of the literature. *Veter. Sci.* 8:332. doi: 10.3390/vetsci8120332
4. Kretzler, B., König, H. H., and Hajek, A. 2022. Pet ownership, loneliness, and social isolation: a systematic review. *Soc. Psychiat. Psychiatr. Epidemiol.* 57:1935–57. doi: 10.1007/s00127-022-02332-9
5. Wells, D. L. 2007. Domestic dogs and human health: an overview. *Br. J. Health Psychol.* 12:145–56. doi: 10.1348/135910706X103284
6. Katcher, A. H. 1981. "Interactions between people and their pets: form and function", in *Interrelation Between People and Their Pets*, ed. B. Fogle (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas).
7. Connell, M. S., and Lago, D. J. 1983. "Favorable attitudes toward pets and happiness among the elderly", in *The Pet Connection*, eds. R. K. Anderson, B. L. Hart, and L. A. Hart (South St. Paul, MN: Globe Publishing Company).
8. Arhant-Sudhir, K., Arhant-Sudhir, R., and Sudhir, K. 2011. Pet ownership and cardiovascular risk reduction: supporting evidence, conflicting data, and underlying mechanisms. *Clin. Exper. Pharmacol. Physiol.* 38:734–8. doi: 10.1111/j.1440-1681.2011.05583.x
9. Friedmann, E., Katcher, A. H., Lynch, J. J., and Thomas, S. A. 1980. Animal companions and one-year survival of patients after discharge from a coronary care unit. *Public Health Rep.* 95:307–12.
10. Levinson, B. M. 1972. *Pets and Human Development*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
11. Beetz, A., Julius, H., Turner, D., and Kotrschal, K. 2012. Effects of social support by a dog on stress modulation in male children with insecure attachment. *Front. Psychol.* 3:352. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2012.00352
12. Cohen, S., and Wills. T. A. 1985. Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychol. Bull.* 98:310. doi: 10.1037//0033-2909.98.2.310

**SUBMITTED:** 19 October 2023; **ACCEPTED:** 22 May 2024;  
**PUBLISHED ONLINE:** 04 June 2024.

**EDITOR:** Fanli Jia, Seton Hall University, United States

**SCIENCE MENTORS:** Jianing Tang and Meredith Clifford

**CITATION:** Shah SS, Goyal S and Shankar A (2024) Paws and Claws: Pets Promote Wellbeing. *Front. Young Minds* 12:1324183. doi: 10.3389/frym.2024.1324183

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

**COPYRIGHT** © 2024 Shah, Goyal and Shankar. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC BY\)](#). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

## YOUNG REVIEWERS

### ALINA, AGE: 11

I was born in California but raised in Wuhan, a city situated in the heart of China. My interests include playing the piano, painting, and dancing. I enjoy reading books on various topics, such as "Princess in Black", "Bad Guys", "Gabai Granny", and more.



### EDDIE, AGE: 9

Eddie loves dancing and making beautiful works of art. She has been homeschooling for 4 years. In her spare time she likes to spend time with her friends and sing karaoke.



### ELLIE, AGE: 12

Ellie is in 6th grade, is a defensive star on her basketball team, and often gets lost in a great book series. She loves to love on her mini goldendoodle and play kickball. She is a self-proclaimed carnivore and enjoys spending time with her family, especially her three little brothers.



### JACK, AGE: 10

Jack is a 4th grader with a curious mind and active body. He loves math and science, plays basketball and soccer. He is often found bouncing around on his pogo stick (no hands!) or playing the piano (both hands!). His origami collection is massive and he can not stop reading fantasy series while eating grasshopper (mint cookie) ice cream.





### **SAM, AGE: 11**

Sam enjoys wrestling and CrossFit. He has been homeschooling for 6 years. In his spare time he likes to spend time outdoors with his friends and ride dirtbikes.

## **AUTHORS**



### **SHALAKA SHARAD SHAH**

Shalaka Shah is an assistant professor in psychology at FLAME University. Shalaka earned a doctorate in work-life balance and career success from Ludwig Maximilians University (LMU), Germany. She is a licensed competency development coach. Shalaka has two master's degrees in counseling psychology from India and in psychology of excellence in business & education from LMU. Her primary research interests lie in the area of work-life interface, competence development in organizations, and leadership, whereas community mental health, migration, pets, and personality are her secondary research interests.

\*[shalaka.shah@flame.edu.in](mailto:shalaka.shah@flame.edu.in)



### **SHRUTI GOYAL**

Shruti Goyal is an assistant professor in psychology at FLAME University. She holds a doctorate in cognitive science from IIT, Gandhinagar. She has specifically studied description-experience gap and gain-loss asymmetry during her doctoral work. She received her master's degree in cognitive science and her bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Allahabad. Her research interests include decision-making, behavioral economics, neuromarketing, and learning.



### **APARNA SHANKAR**

Aparna Shankar is a professor of psychology at FLAME University. Aparna holds a doctorate in health psychology from the University of Leeds. Her doctoral thesis examined psychosocial predictors of the maintenance of health behaviors. She also holds an M.Sc. in applied statistics with medical applications from Birkbeck, University of London. Aparna works on health and wellbeing in older adults, with a particular emphasis on the role of social relationships, using data from aging cohorts. Her other research interests include the patterning of health behaviors, the role of the environment on health, and inequalities in access to care.