

Do pets help with loneliness?

Background

Social connection is often described as the experience of feeling close and connected to other human beings (Seppala et al., [2013](#); Card et al., [2022](#)). However, human beings also interact with and form meaningful relationships with non-humans, including companion animals. For example, in 2021, more than half of Canadian households had a dog, cat, or both (Blair, [2024](#)). Given the high prevalence of pet ownership and our connection to them, it is important to understand to what extent pet ownership can help individuals cope with or prevent loneliness.

Purpose

The purpose of this evidence brief is study the social benefits of companion animals. In doing so, we focus on the impact of pet ownership on loneliness. However, as a major limitation, we acknowledge that most measures of loneliness focus on human-to-human relationships and therefore may be insensitive to the positive benefits of animal-human relationships (Antonacopoulos, [2017](#); Gilbey et al., [2020](#)).

Evidence from Existing Studies

To varying extents, individuals exhibit significant attachments to their pets (Meehan et al., [2017](#); Smolkovic et al., [2012](#); Sable, [1995](#); Voith, [1985](#)). As such, despite varying methodological quality of the research in this area (Islam & Towell, [2013](#); Gilbey & Tani, [2015](#); Chur-Hansen, [2010](#)), multiple studies over decades have found a positive relationship between pet ownership and social wellbeing, including reductions in loneliness (Gerhardt et al., [2023](#); Gan et al., [2020](#); Carr et al., [2020](#); Oliva et al., [2020](#); Powell et al., [2019](#); Cloutier & Peetz, [2016](#); Pikhartova et al., [2014](#); Black, [2012](#); Krause-Parello, [2012](#); Wood et al., [2007](#); Rew, [2007](#); Zasloff & Kidd, [1994](#); Calvert, [1989](#)). Some evidence also suggests that the effect of pet ownership was especially important throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Kretzler et al., [2022](#)).

Of course, some studies have failed to find an effect of pet ownership on social wellbeing (Eshbaugh et al., [2011](#); Gilbey, [2003](#), [2006](#), [2007](#); Jessen et al., [1996](#)) – highlighting the likelihood that the benefits of pet ownership are contingent on specific individual or circumstantial factors – including the type of pet and the quality and nature of the human-animal relationship (Hardie et al., [2023](#); Janssens et al., [2020](#); McConnel et al., [2019](#); Bao & Schreer, [2016](#); Kanat-Mayman et al., [2016](#); Paul et al., [2014](#); Antonacopoulos & Pychyl, [2008](#); Albert & Bulcroft, [1988](#)). Indeed, it is plausible that some individuals derive significantly greater benefits from their pets if they have a strong positive connection to their pet, while those who do not feel a connection to their pet or spend time interacting with it might not experience these benefits. Supporting the likelihood that the benefits of pet ownership are contingent on moderating factors, some studies suggest that the benefits of pet ownership appear to be either limited to or particularly strong for individuals who are living alone (Stanley et al., [2014](#)) or have low social

support (Antonacopoulos et al., [2010](#)), and for some demographic groups, such as women (Pikhartova et al., [2014](#); Hajek & Konig, [2020](#)).

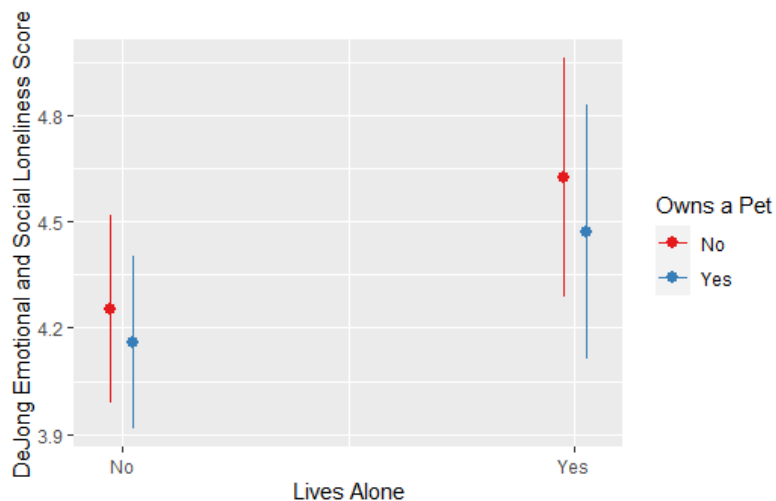
Studies have also explored the various pros and cons of pet ownership, highlighting increased physical activity (due to dog walks and playtime), companionship and social support, and enhanced interaction with other people as key benefits of pet ownership (Ikeuchi et al., [2021](#); McConnel et al., [2011](#); Prosser et al., [2008](#); McNicholas et al., [2005](#); Wood et al., [2005](#), [2015](#); Wells, [2004](#)). Conversely, potential harms of pet ownership include increased risk for falls, difficulty taking care of a pet, and grief at the loss of a pet (Buller & Ballantyne, [2020](#); Obradovic et al., [2019](#); Brooks et al., [2018](#); Meier & Maurer, [2012](#); Peacock et al., [2012](#); Zilcha-Mano et al., [2011](#); Steward et al., [1985](#)).

In addition to the benefits of pet ownership, studies have also shown that interventions utilizing the introduction of pets into care settings can be beneficial (Orr et al., [2023](#); Jain et al., [2020](#); Vrbancac et al., [2013](#); Banks & Banks, [2002](#)). Studies have shown similar results for the introduction of animatronic or robotic pets (Tkatch et al., [2021](#); Abbott et al., [2019](#); Banks et al., [2008](#)). Taken together these findings highlight the social benefits of non-human interaction.

Analyses from The Canadian Alliance for Social Connection and Health

Using data from the 2021 Canadian Social Connection Survey, we examined the association between pet ownership and DeJong Emotional and Social Loneliness Scores. Results indicated that owning any pet, was associated with lower levels of loneliness ($B = -0.213$, $SE = 0.071$, $p = 0.003$). In examining differences across different species, dog ownership was associated with lower loneliness ($B = -0.235$, $SE = 0.063$, $p < 0.001$) and ferret ownership was associated with higher loneliness ($B = 0.350$, $SE = 0.158$, $p = 0.027$). Ownership of cats ($B = -0.097$, $SE = 0.065$, $p = 0.137$), birds ($B = 0.014$, $SE = 0.116$, $p = 0.906$), fish ($B = -0.101$, $SE = 0.085$, $p = 0.234$), and other pets ($B = -0.081$, $SE = 0.080$, $p = 0.308$) were not differentially associated with loneliness. All models controlled for the effects of age, gender, ethnicity, and household income. However, upon controlling for household size, the effect of owning a pet became non-significant (See Interaction Plot in **Figure 1**). As well, in a model that restricted inclusion to only people who lived alone, the effect of owning a pet was non-significant.

Figure 1. Effect of Owning a Pet on Loneliness, by Living Arrangement



Discussion

Overall the research suggests a plausible relationship between pet ownership and experiencing less social isolation and loneliness, in the general population, but perhaps more importantly for those at high risk for social isolation. The mechanism underlying the relationship may be direct, whereby the pet plays a direct role in their owner's social support network, or indirect, whereby pets act as social catalysts for owners' engagement with other humans. The effect may be moderated by pet type, relationship quality, or other factors. In order to better understand the loneliness-reducing benefits of pet ownership, further high-quality studies are required to strengthen the evidence, with important consideration for study design, confounders, underreporting, moderating effects, and different measurements of pet connection other than pet ownership. In particular, longitudinal and experimental designs are needed.

Further research on this topic is important given that there are a wide variety of potential policy implications if pet ownership is found to be beneficial. These implications include pet-friendly housing and apartments (e.g., for populations at high risk for social isolation such as seniors living in residences); the incorporation of pet-friendly components within the built environment (e.g., green spaces and parks for dog walkers and other community members to intermingle); financial support and subsidies for pet ownership (e.g., for populations at high risk for social isolation who need extra support, like low-income individuals); funding for non-profit organizations that seek ways to support individuals struggling with continuing to live with their pet (e.g., organizations that support older adults with mobility issues who need volunteer dog walkers, or those that fundraise dog/cat food for low-income people struggling to feed their pets); the introduction of pet-friendly institutions (e.g., restaurants and stores, work offices, universities, and community centers) to create more social inclusion and engagement amongst team members; and the implementation of Pet and Companion Animal Social Prescriptions for older adults (e.g., addressing the important impact pet interactions may have on older adults' perceived connectedness and belonging, and subsequently their overall health and well-being).

Conclusion

Based on the available evidence, we recommend continued research into the benefits of pet ownership. That said, it is clear that many individuals have high quality attachments with their pets and that these relationships are important to individuals and may buffer against loneliness by providing lonely individuals with an important source of attachment and facilitating opportunities for increased social interaction with other humans.

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