

The Role of Pets in the Mental Health Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The psychological and social challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic have prompted many people to seek social support in a variety of ways. Aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic will likely contribute to widespread emotional distress, anxiety, and loneliness. During a time of uncertainty, limited access to social networks and falling into the routine of working from home, people may turn to their pets for social support and comfort. Pets may play an important role in wellness in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *Pandemic; Mental health; Pets; Attachment theory; Social support*

The corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has created unprecedented situations. The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a world-wide pandemic in March of 2020 [1]. The Covid-19 pandemic has alarming implications for individuals' mental health as well as emotional and social functioning [2]. The psychological and social implications of the pandemic relate to significant challenges, uncertainty, and disruption in the lives of many people on a global scale.

Consequences of the pandemic include mandatory stay-at-home orders, loved ones falling ill to the virus, and financial insecurity due to unemployment or furloughs. Many aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic will likely contribute to widespread emotional distress and increased risk for psychiatric illness [2]. As individuals have experienced uncertainty unlike any other time in their lives, responses to this unprecedented period will occur in various ways.

Routines of work and social life have been limited or ceased altogether for many individuals who aim to comply with public health guidelines. Drawing from sources for social support is one way of maintaining mental well-being as individuals may

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seek to increase interaction with their social support networks. However, due to social distancing requirements, access to social support networks has been impeded for many. As people have begun to settle into a routine of social distancing and working from home, millions of pets are collectively by their sides [3]. With limited access to social interaction with humans, individuals have turned to their beloved pets to fill this role. Pets may play an important role in providing sources of social support, companionship, and comfort during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several theories have emerged to explain why humans are inclined turn to their pets for social support and companionship. Biophilia hypothesis maintains that humans are innately drawn to interact and care for other living beings [4]. Given that humans have progressively moved away from the natural world whereby animals are abundant, they increasingly seek human-animal interactions in many ways [5,6]. As individuals around the globe experience social withdrawal due to the global pandemic, this evolutionary perspective has implications in understanding one's immediate environment.

Attachment theory represents the roles of developmental, emotional, and cognitive aspects as they relate to social relationships. Attachment theory suggests that the bonds that humans with others foster a sense of security and psychological well-being [7]. The benefits accrued from emotional bonds with pets may promote a sense of psychological well-being in ways beyond those from human-to-human relationships.

Extending beyond relationships between humans, attachment theory has been utilized to understand the emotional bond that develops between humans and pets. Pets can meet attachment needs beyond those from human companions in many ways [8,9]. Healthy attachment with animals can potentially provide support to individuals during socially isolative and uncertain times, such as those emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic [10]. A recent study revealed that the sense of closeness shared between individuals and their pet dogs offer nonjudgmental support and unconditional love [11]. These findings may be especially important when bonds and interactions between humans are not accessible or available in times like the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to providing nonjudgmental support and unconditional love, other studies indicate that pets may also play a role in mitigating symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress [12], loneliness, and depression [13]. A study indicated that posttraumatic stress symptoms tend to be exacerbated by an individual's intolerance of uncertainty [14]. Individuals may perceive that their pets as helping them manage their uncertainty because caring for one's pet entails a consistent routine during a time in which very little is consistent or predictable. In turn, the perceived predictability derived from a regular caretaking routine may stave off one's sense of uncertainty [10], thus instilling a sense of security during uncertain times.

Given that pets can offer sources of security and comfort, they may be particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic for individuals that are emotionally, socially, or financially impacted. Human-animal interactions may serve as a source of contact comfort given that touch (i.e., petting) helps regulate emotions and serves as a powerful antidote to stress [15,16]. Beck noted that the human-animal interactions within the human-animal bond are perceived as affectionate and friendly among both parties [17]. Moreover, the cared for pet may also greatly benefit from the nurturance and affection provided by the caretaker. In a time in which direct contact with other people is extremely limited, the direct contact from pets may provide comfort.

In distressful times, pets may help individuals manage uncertainty and mitigate stress, anxiety, and loneliness. The COVID-19 pandemic indeed brings significant uncertainty and challenges to many. Social distance guidelines limit access to people's social networks. Pets may play an important role in human wellness in this unprecedented time. Caring for one's pet may provide a sense of consistency for both parties during a time in which very little is consistent or predictable. Research on people on the ways in which people share their lives and their homes with pets in the context of the global pandemic is warranted.

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