

COMPANION ANIMALS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH
OF PEOPLE OF OLD AGE

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Companion Animals and Their Influence on the Psychological Health of People of Old Age

Since prehistoric times, animals have been humans' faithful companions. At first, the interactions between people and animals were symbiotic, focusing mostly on gaining mutual benefits while hunting. However, the relationship gradually became more emotional. Today, pets create psychological comfort and companionship for their owners. Despite the seeming simplicity of this goal, it is multifaceted, concealing a specific level of mental comfort: the therapeutic value that companion animals have for the psychological health of their owners, and in particular for people of old age.

Today, having companion animals is a widespread practice. According to existing surveys, about two-thirds of American households have pets.¹ Often, people determine their attitude to animal companions as quasi-familial ties, perceiving their pets as family members. The specific goals that pet owners pursue when they acquire animals include the creation of companionship and the need to care for living creatures.² In recent years, global society has accepted the idea that animals also have a high level of therapeutic influence, which is commonly known as the "pet effect". This phenomenon affects different levels of human well-being, relating both to physical and psychological health. This research explores how a sustainable companion relationship with a pet influences the psychological health of seniors.

Seniors are particularly susceptible to stress and other unfavorable mental factors, therefore, psychological health is an important determinant of their physical well-being. Existing studies show that pets improve the emotional and psychological well-being of seniors in several ways: by providing companionship, by helping to overcome loneliness, by enhancing their social

¹ Herzog, Harold. 2011. "The Impact of Pets on Human Health and Psychological Well-Being: Fact, Fiction, or Hypothesis?" *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20 (4): 236–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721411415220>, 236.

² Ibid., 236.

ties, and by creating affectionate bonds between owners and pets.³ It is possible to conditionally combine the first and the second factors within the same goal, which is overcoming the feeling of loneliness and abandonment. These adverse psychological conditions are often inherent in older people, causing melancholy, a negative attitude towards life and, consequently, the development of psychosomatic illnesses. The presence of a living being that manifests love and attachment to a person alleviates the feeling of loneliness, which naturally leads to the elimination of certain adverse psychosomatic effects.

The third aspect of the positive effect that pets have on the emotional comfort of older adults is the development of social ties. First of all, having a pet leads to the interaction with other animal owners, the exchange of experiences, and thematic communication. Companion animals give seniors an opportunity of feeling like members of a particular group: pet owners.⁴ This feeling promotes the creation of close bonds not only with animals, but also with other people. As a result, feelings of loneliness and stress decrease, which positively affects the psychological health of people, as well as their physical well-being. Moreover, there is such a category of pets as dogs. Unlike other animals, they also encourage their owners to exercise, conduct long walks, and spend time outdoors.⁵ These activities help seniors to avoid stress and improve the overall well-being of individuals. In such a way, owning companion animals positively affects the social connections of the elderly.

Finally, the last important guarantee of senior individuals' emotional and psychological

³ Reed, Tess. 2003. "The Psychological Impact of Companion Animals for Older Adults Who Reside Alone." Thesis, Perth. Edith Cowan University, 37.

⁴ Mishra, Vyvyan. 2014. "Measuring the Benefits. Companion Animals and the Health of Older Persons Full Report." Rep., 14.

⁵ Reed, Tess. 2003. "The Psychological Impact of Companion Animals for Older Adults Who Reside Alone." Thesis, Perth. Edith Cowan University, 37.

comfort is the creation of affectionate bonds between owners and the pets. The main consequence of such a connection is the lasting sense of being needed by someone and having a clear life purpose. Taking care of an animal turns into a thing a senior person can concentrate his or her efforts on and, thus, avoid non-action. In turn, research shows that non-action is one of the main factors causing psychological discomfort and stress.⁶ The sense of being busy that the care for a pet entails is directly related to positive emotions, affection, and love. Also, it makes older people adopt responsibility, because the lives of companion animals depend on their efforts, which helps to prevent laziness and stress even more effectively than having a hobby or a job.

Despite the results of available studies, the positive psychological impact of companion animals is not a uniform position of all scholars. The representatives of the Pew Research Center interviewed three thousand Americans and found no significant differences in the level of psychological health between owners and non-owners of pets.⁷ Another similar study took place in England. Researchers conducted a survey on the level of loneliness the members of the focus group felt, after which some of the participants purchased companion animals. Six months later, the researchers repeated the survey. The results revealed that the condition of people who had spent half a year with pets did not have a significant improvement.⁸

However, in both cases, the researchers relied only on interviews, and their conclusions regarding the well-being of the interviewed people came from self-reflection. The researchers conducted no additional psychological tests; therefore, they took into account only the holistic

⁶ Knaus, Bill. 2015. "On Stress, Anxiety, and Procrastination." *Psychology Today*. Sussex Publishers. October 31, 2015.

⁷ Herzog, Harold. 2011. "The Impact of Pets on Human Health and Psychological Well-Being: Fact, Fiction, or Hypothesis?" *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20 (4): 236–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721411415220>, 237.

⁸ Ibid., 237.

changes in individuals' perceived well-being. At the same time, the improvement of one's psychological state is not always visible, and in some cases, detailed work with the patient is necessary for the realization of positive dynamics. Taking this into account, the results of these studies are not entirely relevant counterarguments against the theory of the "pet effect."

Considering the above arguments, the positive effect of companion animals on seniors' psychological health is highly probable. Existing studies demonstrate that they improve the mental well-being of seniors in several key areas. First, bonding with pets helps seniors to avoid loneliness. Secondly, it positively affects socialization processes. Thirdly, older adults who take care of their pets have a sense of purpose and business, which makes them less prone to non-activity. In their totality, all these factors are a powerful tool for preventing stresses and, as a consequence, the psychosomatic illnesses that they can cause. Despite the existence of the individual studies refuting the idea that companion animals can have a positive psychological impact on seniors, they mainly focus on respondents' oral interviews and cannot adequately reflect the real mental dynamics of individuals. Therefore, the idea of the positive impact that companion animals have on the psychological health of seniors has a high probability level.

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