

College students find comfort in their pets during hard times

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A new study suggests that college students may handle stressful situations better if they have a pet. Research has already shown that pets can improve the quality of life for people who are aging or those who are chronically ill. But researchers at Ohio State University recently found that many college students may also benefit from owning a cat or a dog.

A survey of students at a large university and other adults in the area found that nearly a quarter of college students surveyed believed their pets helped them get through difficult times in life. Students who chose to live with at least one dog, one cat, or a combination of the two were less likely to report feeling lonely and depressed; something they directly attributed to their beloved pet.

These findings highlight how even younger, healthier young adults can benefit from living with our four-legged friends, said Sara Staats, lead author of the study and professor emeritus of psychology at Ohio State's Newark Campus.

"We might not think of college students as being lonely, but a lot of freshman and sophomores are in an early transition from living at home to living in dorms or off-campus. College is a very stressful environment for them and sometimes they can feel isolated or overwhelmed with the change," she said.

"We found that a lot of young adults are choosing to have an animal companion for important reasons. Many feel their pets will help get

them through these difficult and stressful situations, and many more say that without their pet, they would feel lonely."

The study was based on survey responses from nearly 350 college students at a Midwestern commuter campus and nearby community members. Only those people who currently or previously owned a cat, a dog, or a combination of the two were included in the present study. People who were 18 to 87 years of age were all surveyed to study the differences between adults and students.

Participants were asked to indicate their current level of health, the type of pet(s) owned, and whether they believed a pet affected their overall health. They were then asked to identify their top reasons for owning a pet in both multiple-choice and open-ended surveys. The results were recently published in the journal *Society and Animals*.

The results showed that most adults and college students chose to own a pet for similar reasons. Although the results were based on self-reports, many of those surveyed believed their pet contributed to their overall health in a number of ways.

Nearly a quarter of all college students and adults reported that their pet was useful in keeping them active. This answer was more common for those who owned dogs, but those who had feline friends also reported their cat helped keep them active.

Likewise, 18 percent of college students and 13 percent of adults said their pet was important to helping them cope during difficult times. This belief was far more likely among those who were single rather than married, but it was listed by both groups in both open-ended and multiple choice questions.

But the results showed that avoiding loneliness was the top reason given

by both students and adults. Nearly identical percentages of married and single persons gave this response, but students and those over 50 years of age were far more likely to list this as their top reason.

While previous work has demonstrated that the elderly benefit from animal companionship, this study is the one of the first to suggest that animal companions help those younger than 30 years of age, Staats said.

"Most of the studies on pet ownership focus directly on those adults and older generations who have heart problems or special needs. But there hasn't been much recognition of that fact that young, healthy college students also derive benefits from pet ownership such as hedge against loneliness and improved ability to cope," she said.

While the reasons for keeping a pet may be similar among adults and college students, the lifestyles differences between the two may provide clues as to why students rely on their pets more often, Staats said.

Many people in their late twenties to mid-forties have established circles of friends. Adults usually live in areas with friends, colleagues, and family nearby, making their lives more stable than those beginning to build their lives. Many more adults are married or have started raising a family, and have years of experience learning how to cope with difficult situations.

Many first and second-year students, however, are in the beginning stages of building a new network of friends. College students living far from home may find it harder to deal with difficult situations because they are thrown into a new environment and expected to find their way, often for the first time in their lives.

As a result, many students may find themselves feeling isolated and withdrawn from their environment.

"Many students said that their pets fulfill a significant role that is missing in their lives. The pets are not a substitute for human social interaction and support, but they do provide important interaction for these kids who might otherwise feel isolated from their current environment," Staats said.

"I wouldn't advise everyone to go out and buy a puppy. But I think this research clearly shows that many students can benefit both psychologically and socially from living with an animal companion."

Staats conducted the study with undergraduate psychology students Heidi Wallace and Tara Anderson.

Source: Ohio State University

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