

# Challenges of animal ownership during the pandemic should be considered

February 9 2021

---



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Animal owners frequently report concerns and worries relating to caring for their animal during the pandemic, new research suggests.

The study, by the University of York, also revealed owners had increased their appreciation of their animals during the first [lockdown](#) phase. The notion that people "could not live without" their animals and that they were a "godsend" or a "lifeline" in the pandemic was frequently expressed.

The study has been investigating the role of animals as sources of emotional and physical support during the pandemic. More than 40 per cent of UK households are estimated to own at least one animal.

There was consensus among participants that [companion animals](#) constituted a reliable source of support, providing unconditional love, affection and companionship. Animals were frequently perceived as being able to enhance mood, reduce stress, and help people to cope generally with the COVID-19 lockdown phase. However, the study also showed that animal ownership may result in significant concerns that might have outweighed the benefits in some cases.

Dr. Elena Ratschen from the Department of Health Sciences said: "The findings complement and extend previous insights into the impact of human-animal interaction with both companion and non-companion animals."

Dr. Emily Shoemith also from the Department of Health Sciences added: "What was interesting was many owners perceived their animal as helping them cope with the first lockdown phase, offering an important source of emotional support. However, concerns and worries relating to caring for their animal during this time were frequently reported and were likely to have exacerbated feelings of stress for the owner."

Nearly 6,000 people across the UK took part in the research which asked participants a series of questions during the first lockdown, including outcomes related to mental health, wellbeing and loneliness; the human-

animal bond and human-animal interactions.

The final item of the survey invited free-text responses, allowing participants to describe any experiences of their human-animal relationships during the first lockdown phase. Four main themes were identified, including: the positive impact of animal ownership during the Covid-19 lockdown phase, concerns relating to animal ownership, grief and loss of an animal during the Covid-19 lockdown, and the impact of engaging with non-companion animals.

Some participants said that their animals helped them cope with mental health conditions. One respondent said her dog helped "keep my anxiety levels down by talking to her when I'm out and breaking my focus on anything negative. I am terrified of catching COVID-19 but having the dog keeps me mentally and physically better in the current environment."

Another respondent described how different animal species provided emotional support in different ways: "All my animals have helped keep me motivated, calm and happy during this time, not just the one I am closest to. Different species have different qualities: the dog is a close companion, but reptiles are interesting and calming to watch and guinea pigs are entertaining. General pet care tasks give purpose and structure to my day."

Other people reported that their animals were able to provide unique emotional support as a result of their ability to respond to their owners in an intuitive manner, especially in times of distress. One participant said: "My whippet has really picked up on this, he stays by my side constantly and feeds and mirrors my emotions. He is hyper vigilant to my needs giving lots of attention and affection."

Many participants also commented that animal ownership encouraged

and promoted physical activity, especially for owners of dogs and horses. One respondent said "My dogs means I go out every day for exercise. Without them, I don't think I'd go out at all during this time."

However, a number of participants expressed that despite the bond with their animal, this was not a replacement for human social contact, that had been considerably restricted during the lockdown phase. One person said: "My dogs and cats are not a replacement for human contact, which I am sorely missing. But they have been a welcome distraction and have given me something to focus on and stopped me from feeling so lonely."

Negative aspects to animal ownership during lockdown were also described by a number of participants. Owners expressed they were often worried or concerned about various elements of ownership, including the possibility of animals carrying the Covid-19 virus, access to veterinary care, caring for their [animals](#), and concerns about their animal experiencing separation-related problems upon their return to work. It was apparent that these concerns often exacerbated stress in participants due to the responsibilities and potential additional financial cost of animal ownership.

Arranging alternative care for an animal whilst the owner was working outside of the home was often cited as a concern of animal ownership. Many people, primarily dog owners, noted that animal care that was readily available prior to lockdown had since been restricted, and this had resulted in feelings of anxiety. Some participants suggested that it would be beneficial for animal care to be easily accessible for key workers in the context of increased working hours.

Due to financial uncertainty, participants expressed their concern over buying pet food and other necessities or worried about being able to provide healthcare if required and maintaining their animal's insurance. One respondent said "I worry for their health and wellbeing during these

times, with the concern over financial difficulties if work becomes scarcer. They are important members of our family."

There was also a general sense that interactions with wildlife and frequent contact with nature had a positive impact on mental health. Some participants suggested that seeing an animal in their natural environment provided opportunities for distraction from their inner feelings of distress due to the pandemic.

Provided by University of York

Citation: Challenges of animal ownership during the pandemic should be considered (2021, February 9) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-02-animal-ownership-pandemic.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.