

For better or worse, your dog's behaviors can impact your quality of life

May 9 2023, by Renata Roma



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

I became interested in research about dogs because of my close connection with my first pet Pantro, a friendly and energetic cocker spaniel. Pantro was the perfect fit for me, for being great company for long walks while also being calm and independent when left alone. However, his behavioral issues were challenging on several occasions.

I have spent over a decade researching the unique connection that dog owners have with our beloved pets. As a researcher in the human-animal interactions field, I studied how other pet owners dealt with both positive and challenging dog behaviors.

Benefits and challenges

Dog ownership has several benefits for people's [psychological and physical health](#). However, relationships with [dogs](#) are complex and [can involve some conflicts](#). Undesired dog behaviors such as aggression and barking are [the leading reason people give up their dogs](#).

[Behavioral issues in dogs can cause distress](#) by requiring extra time for training, issues when exercising the pet and limitations related to where to go with the dog and increased stress.

More studies are needed to understand how to prevent the deterioration of the relationship shared with the dog when owners face undesired dog behaviors.

As a part of my Ph.D. studies and alongside the researchers Christine Tardif-Williams, Shannon Moore and Patricia Pendry, [I conducted three studies between 2018 to 2023](#). My goal was to further understand not only what factors improve the quality of the relationship between people and dogs, but also what happens when relationships with dogs become stressful.

Personality, attachment and well-being

In my first study, 401 participants aged between 17 and 25 years old completed a series of questionnaires about their [personality](#), their dog's personality and their attachment towards the dog. The participants also

responded to questions related to their well-being, such as their sense of connectedness and levels of stress. This was to assess the extent to which personality characteristics and attachment are linked to young adults' well-being.

I found that aspects related to young people's personality, as well as factors related to their attachment towards the dog are key to understand young people's well-being in the context of dog ownership. For instance, avoidant and anxious canine behavior were associated with poorer well-being among young people, which was not a surprise.

Such a finding supports [past studies](#) by highlighting that the quality of the emotional connections between dog owners and their dogs can have an impact on people's well-being. Therefore, living with a dog will not necessarily positively impact people's well-being, unless there is a positive emotional connection in the relationship shared with the dog.

The study's findings also emphasize links between young people's personality and their well-being, but not between the dog's personality and participants' well-being. Characteristics related to young people's personality seem to be more relevant than aspects related to their dog's personality to explain well-being among young dog owners.

Quality of life

The second study involved 131 participants and focused on dog owners' emotions when managing stressful and undesired dog behaviors. As expected, undesired behaviors displayed by dogs were associated with poorer sense of quality of life in the context of dog ownership. More specifically, stress and responsibility of dog ownership and poorer emotional quality of life were linked to situations such as dog aggression and excessive barking.

Coping with pet behavior

The third study involved interviews with seven dog owners between 17 and 26 years of age. Participants were asked about their perceptions, feelings and coping styles when the dog misbehaves to explore how young dog owners cope with challenging dog behaviors.

The interviews revealed that participants' coping styles and emotions vary, but overall, they were able to manage challenging and stressful situations with their dogs. The findings suggest a preference for [more proactive coping styles](#), mostly focused on positive reinforcement and work with trainers, when needed.

At the same time, participants discussed the importance of physical and emotional connections, as well as synchrony in the relationship shared with their dogs. Synchrony refers to mutual adjustments in the dog's and owner's behaviors that result in feelings of being "tuned" in to each other during daily interactions.

For example, participants described how their dogs adjust their behaviors to different family members by being more playful with some while being more respectful with family members that are perceived by the dog as more authoritative. A dog's ability to do so seems crucial to create a positive and harmonic interaction with different people living with the dog.

What this means

My research findings illuminate [some of the factors associated with both positive and challenging relationships](#) between young people and their dogs which might, in turn, support young people's well-being. The results also clarify the link between behavioral issues in dogs, [young people's](#)

quality of life in the context of dog ownership, and coping styles used by dog owners when their dogs misbehave.

This holistic view on dog ownership indicates that, as happens in relationships with other people, pet owners' connections with their dogs can also have ups and downs depending on their psychological state, their dogs' behaviors and the environment.

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Citation: For better or worse, your dog's behaviors can impact your quality of life (2023, May 9) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-05-worse-dog-behaviors-impact-quality.html>

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