

Pets do not significantly benefit the emotional health of owners with severe mental illness, study shows

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A new study published in the CABI journal *Human-Animal Interactions* suggests that companion animals—including dogs, cats, fish and

birds—do not significantly benefit the emotional health of owners with severe mental illness.

Results showed that owning an animal was not significantly associated with the well-being, depression, anxiety or loneliness scores for owners with a range of severe mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder or psychosis.

The researchers, who followed up on an earlier survey conducted in 2021 within the same cohort to assess animal ownership and mental health during COVID-19, say their findings counteracts the commonly held view that animals are beneficial for all owners' mental health.

Dr. Emily Shoemith, lead author and Research Fellow, Dr. Elena Ratschen, Reader and Human-Animal Interaction research theme lead, and a team of scientists from the University of York surveyed 170 UK participants. Of these, 81 owned at least one animal and most perceived there to be a strong human-animal bond with their closest companion animal.

They aimed to explore, in the first study of its kind, the connection between owning an animal and mental health in individuals living with [severe mental illness](#) and whether the perceived strength of the bond between owner and animal was associated with mental health and species of the animal owned.

In the 2021 study, Dr. Shoemith and her colleagues found that animal ownership was associated with a self-reported decline in mental health which may have been due to pandemic restrictions and the challenges of looking after their animal in lockdown.

The current data was collected following the removal of COVID-19 rules and although there was a marginal increase in well-being

scores—suggesting the pandemic context may have influenced the findings—it was not possible to compare depression and anxiety scores, as these were not collected in the 2021 study.

Dr. Shoemith said, "In the absence of COVID-19 restrictions, a possible explanation for our current findings could be that the added responsibility of animal ownership may still exacerbate other potential stressors experienced by people living with severe mental [illness](#). This includes the cost of food, veterinary bills and uncertainty over housing.

"Our findings may also imply that animal ownership and the perceived strength of the human-animal bond is not sufficient to benefit participants well-being, but we also need to consider the animal's temperament and characteristics."

Dr. Shoemith said that this may explain why trained therapy animals, unlike [companion animals](#), often enhance well-being for individuals diagnosed with mental health illnesses, as they are typically selected and taught to be friendly, obedient and have a relaxed personality trait.

"It is vital for future research to further explore the mediating factors influencing the complex relationship between humans and animals to further our knowledge of the more specific requirements of those living with severe mental illness who own animals," Dr. Ratschen added.

Despite their findings, the researchers nevertheless found near "ceiling levels" of attachment to their animals. For instance, over 95% reported that their animal provided them with companionship, a source of consistency in their life, and made them feel loved.

The researchers argue that these results may suggest that animal ownership offers similar benefits to those living with severe mental illness as those in the general population. As such, companion animals

may be a vital part of the social network of people who have been diagnosed with a severe mental illness.

Dr. Ratschen said, "Future research would also benefit from recruiting a larger sample size and comparing a wider variation of species identified as the animal the participant felt closest to.

"However, it is not surprising that dogs and cats were the most frequently reported animals owned by this sample, and is consistent with the numbers reported in previous [mental health](#) populations and the general population."

The scientists stress that their findings, together with prior research, suggest that the commonly held belief that animals are beneficial for well-being may not be entirely true for all members of all sub-populations in all contexts.

More information: Shoesmith et al. The influence of animal ownership on mental health for people with severe mental illness: Findings from a UK population cohort study, *Human-Animal Interactions* (2023). [DOI: 10.1079/hai.2023.0027](https://doi.org/10.1079/hai.2023.0027)

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