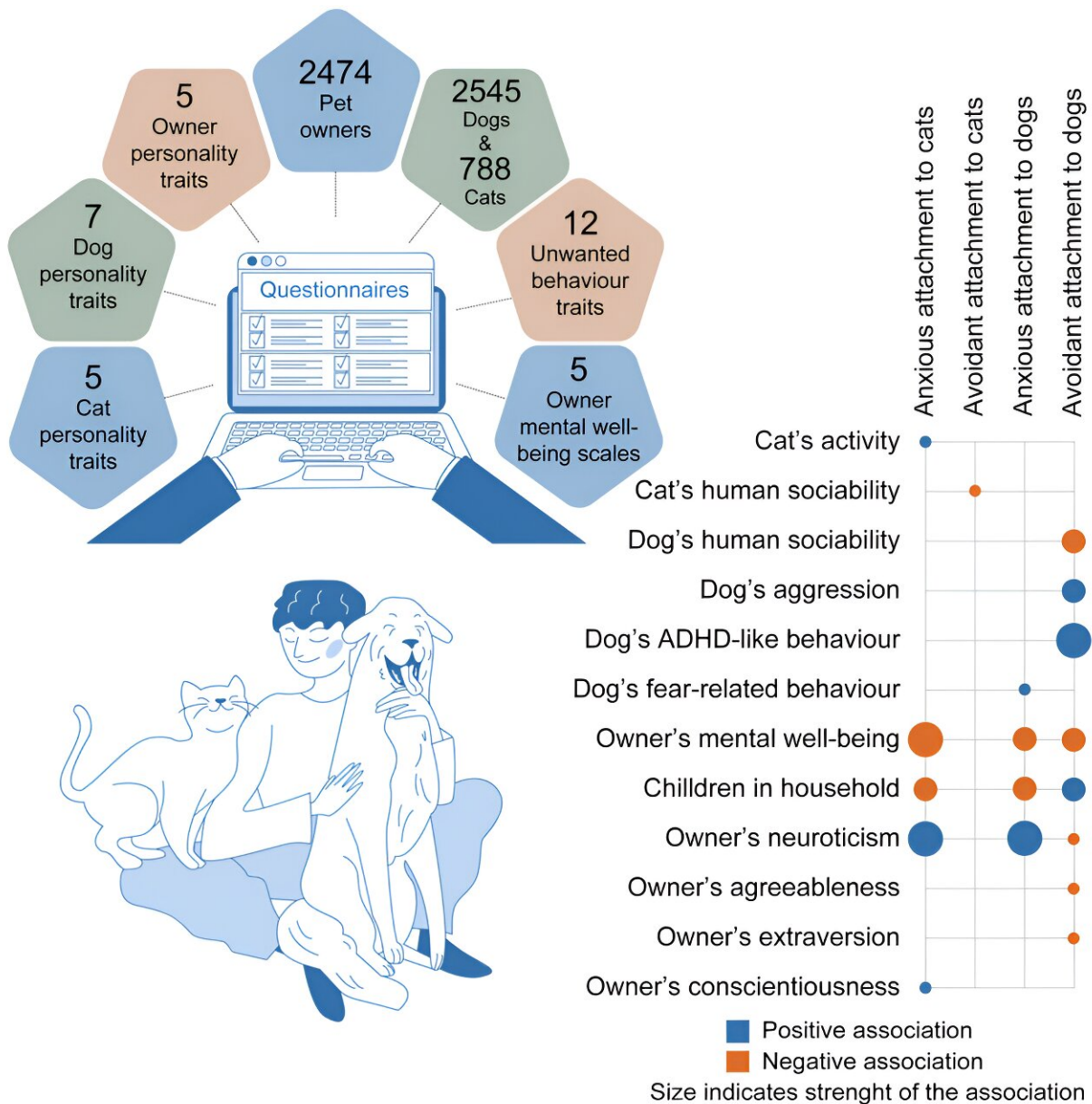


# Owner personality and mental well-being associated with human–pet attachment

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University of Helsinki researchers have collected data about the personality traits of thousands of dogs, cats and their owners to explore owner–pet attachment. The data encompass about 2,500 pet owners and 3,300 pets. The work is [published](#) in the journal *iScience*.

Relationships between humans and pets, like those between humans, can be described by examining two dimensions of insecure attachment: anxious and avoidant. Individual differences can be observed between these two attachment styles in terms of respective needs for proximity and independence. An anxiously attached pet owner has a heightened need for proximity and is concerned about losing their pet. In contrast, an avoidantly attached pet owner craves a high degree of independence and fears the loss of personal autonomy.

In addition to investigating the role of owner personality in attachment style, this was the first time the researchers considered the [personality traits](#) of the objects of attachment, that is, pets. The significance of mental well-being was examined for owners and pets alike. For the former, the researchers examined symptoms of anxiety and depression, stress, and satisfaction with life. The mental well-being of cats and dogs was studied by exploring unwanted behavior traits, which reflect phenomena similar to human mental well-being challenges.

## **Mental well-being of both parties visible in type of attachment bond**

The study found that cat and [dog owners](#) with lower mental well-being scores were more anxiously attached to their pets. In dog owners, such

scores were also associated with an avoidant attachment style. The poor "mental well-being" of dogs, that is, unwanted behavior, was associated with both attachment styles: aggression and ADHD-like behavior with avoidantly attached owners, and fear-behavior with anxiously attached owners.

"Avoidantly attached owners perhaps offer insufficient security for their dog in threatening situations, which may provoke fear and [aggressive behavior](#)," says Doctoral Researcher Aada Ståhl. Such owners may also participate in fewer shared activities with their dog, which is in turn associated with impulsiveness in dogs. Moreover, it is possible that the direction of causality is the opposite, in other words, that unwanted behavior in a dog may contribute to insecure attachment, heightening the owner's need for independence or proximity.

## **Dog and cat personality plays role in insecure attachment**

The personality traits of cat and dog owners and their pets were associated with both insecure attachment styles. Owner neuroticism, in particular, was associated with an anxious attachment style.

"The personality trait of neuroticism is characterized by instability in expressing emotions, reflecting insecurity, anxiety and threat detection. This may explain the association, given that attachment anxiety reflects sensitivity to experiencing negative emotions in the context of the relationship," Ståhl points out.

In addition, the owners of the most active cats and, on the other hand, the most conscientious cat owners were more anxiously attached. Among dog owners, the more neurotic, agreeable and extroverted owners were less avoidantly attached to their dogs. In general, the more human-

sociable dogs and cats had fewer avoidantly attached owners.

"In other words, the tendency of the pet to seek proximity and interaction in a relationship was associated with a similar tendency in the owner," notes Ståhl.

## **Deeper understanding of pet–owner connection helps promote well-being of both**

The attachment bond between owner and pet considerably impacts the life they share. Previous research has shown, for example, that attachment style affects the type of care the owner provides to their pet.

"What made this project unique was that it involved [dogs](#), [cats](#) and owners alike. We need deeper understanding of the connections between [owners](#) and pets and the associated factors so that we can, for example, help people make better decisions when obtaining a pet. It's important to acknowledge that obtaining a pet while experiencing poor mental well-being may not necessarily meet the expectations of improving it.

"On the other hand, the results suggest that interventions targeting dog problem behavior might benefit if the focus was on not only changing pet behavior, but also taking into account factors of owner attachment style," explains Professor Hannes Lohi.

**More information:** Aada Ståhl et al, Pet and owner personality and mental wellbeing associate with attachment to cats and dogs, *iScience* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.isci.2023.108423](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2023.108423)

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