

# How do dogs help us adjust to social distancing and other COVID-19 challenges?

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Brian Hare, Ph.D. professor of evolutionary anthropology and director of Duke Canine Cognition Center, discussed how dogs help people to adjust to the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic.

## Could you tell us a bit about your research area?

I want to understand how different types of cognition evolve, including in our own species. Dogs have provided a powerful way to test ideas about how selection can shape psychology. We have applied what we learned to help working dogs. Like people, we have found individual dogs have different cognitive strengths that give them their unique personalities. Currently, we are raising service dog puppies to examine how different socialization experiences might enhance their cognitive abilities. Our goal is to increase the chances they will grow up to be successful working dogs.

**The pandemic has forced many people to stay at home. This means that people are spending**

**a lot more time with their animals. How do you think that this affects how people cope with the stress of the pandemic during this period? What do we know about the impact of animals on stress and anxiety during challenging times like we are currently experiencing?**

First, I love that my dog is here to help the kids and grown up kids cope. Our dog does this in so many ways: He gets us out on walks, makes us play and hug, is always happy to see us and finally makes us feel good just by needing us. We know that for many people, dogs can be a powerful way to reduce stress and anxiety. Overall, I think that most dogs do a great job in a similar way with most families. In extreme cases, a dog becomes even more. For some, a dog becomes one of the most important, if not most important, social relationship. This is common in older individuals who have the greatest need to physically distance themselves. Their dog is a place of security, solace and love. These dogs are essential citizens right now. Luckily, in most cases, the dogs are also winning big, since they would always prefer to be with their human family. Other pets are playing a similar role, too—although I am sure there is more than one cat in all of this that is ready for their humans to go back to work!

As a scientist, I also know the story is much more complicated because the relationship between a pet and human is an interaction. Like any relationship, expectations can be too high, mismatches are frequent, and even good relationships age as novelty turns to duty. While many pets, and especially dogs, are known for reducing stress and bringing joy, pets can increase stress, too. Sheltering in place can make charming behaviors unbearable problem behaviors (e.g., constant singing, barking, walking on keyboards). Take time to include your pet in the daily plan. Sharing responsibility for care has become more critical than ever. Seek veterinary advice about how to prevent or address new problems caused by

more time at home. Everyone may need a hug—even your pet.

### **Do you have any advice for people coping with the COVID-19 pandemic based on your research with animals?**

Many people are considering getting a dog or a new pet during this time. Being home offers a great opportunity to care for a new or young animal, but a new pet can be a blessing or curse depending on so many factors. One of the main difficulties physical distancing will present is how to properly socialize dog puppies during their critical developmental window between eight and 24 weeks. During this time, they need to experience as many places and people as possible to build up their confidence. This experience is critical to preventing fear and aggression as adults. They also need to spend [time](#) on their own so they do not develop separation anxiety. Many people may be able to come up with strategies to work around these problems, but another idea is to foster an adult dog instead of getting a new puppy. Fostering means you host a dog in your house from a rescue. Fostered [dogs](#) tend to have higher adoption rates and success once adopted because they have the chance to learn or remember all the appropriate skills they will need as part of a human family. Finally, avoid purchasing exotic pets or keeping local wildlife as pets—it may be illegal, and the pet trade threatens many species with extinction.

### **Where can people find additional information or resources?**

- [The Genius of Dogs](#)
- [NC State Behavioral Medicine Dept](#)
- [APS of Durham](#)
- [Orange County Shelters](#)
- ["Will it make good pet?" checklist from CLAWS.org](#)
- [North Carolina Wildlife Resource Commission](#)

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