

Summary of Results: Pets' Effectiveness in Managing Pain and Improving Wellbeing in Adult Community Members

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'Helpfulness' of Human-Animal Interaction as a Pain Management Strategy

Most pet owners reported using interactions with their pet as a pain management strategy. Pets were rated as being moderately helpful by participants who used Human-Animal Interaction at least once during the past week to manage their pain, with all other coping strategies similarly rated as slightly or moderately helpful. Furthermore, higher pain levels were experienced by pet owners who did not use Human-Animal Interaction compared to those who did use Human-Animal Interaction as a pain management strategy.

Comparing Pet-owners and Non-pet Owners: Pain, Anxiety, Stress and Depression

Quantitative findings suggested that pet owners and non-pet owners experienced equivalent levels of pain, anxiety and stress to non-pet owners. However, pet owners experienced more depressive symptoms than non-pet owners. Although the statistical findings of this study suggested that pet ownership is not related to participants' pain levels, the qualitative data suggests otherwise. All interviewees reported that their pets were helpful in managing their pain. However, when explaining how their pets were helpful, most participants indicated that their pets improved their experiences of living with chronic pain rather than the pain levels themselves.

The Influence of Pet Characteristics: Species and Personality

When investigating the species of companion animal, specifically cats and dogs, dog ownership was related to more depressive symptoms than non-dog ownership. However, dog owners who rated their dogs' personality as more friendly had lower levels of depression than dog owners who rated their dogs' personality as less friendly. Furthermore, participants who owned more disobedient dogs reported greater stress than participants who owned less disobedient dogs.

The importance of pet characteristics was also illustrated qualitatively. Pets that were said to be affectionate and comforting and pets that keep within close proximity to their owners were reportedly helpful. Furthermore, the quality of the human-animal relationship and its effect on participants' wellbeing appeared to be influenced by having a pet that was the right match with its owner.

How and Why Pets Help Participants Manage Their Pain

Qualitative findings suggested that interviewees' human-animal relationships are beneficial for pain management. The reasons for this include that having physical contact with their pet is helpful, that their pet provides them with emotional and social support, their pet acts as a distraction from pain and increases interviewees' mobility, and that their pet provides interviewees with a sense of purpose in life.

Conclusion

Overall, this research implies that people experiencing chronic pain in the community who wish to own a pet to aid in pain management should select their pet carefully, instead of assuming that any human-animal relationship will be effective. Future research would benefit from further exploring the idea of compatible relationships between household pets and their owners to investigate whether this enhances a pet's ability to improve human health.