

The Pet Transience During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic as a global health emergency has disrupted the lives of millions across the world. Given the increased isolation due to lockdowns and stay-at-home orders necessary to mitigate the spread of the virus, there has been an increased amount of animal adoptions. Although companion animals serve as effective stress mitigating or coping mechanisms, concerns about their abandonment remain in a post-COVID-19 world. This article highlights the relationships between animals and humans as well as the importance of maintaining healthy protective behaviors crucial to mental well-being during the pandemic.

(Keywords: COVID-19, animals, pets, non-human companionship, loneliness, isolation, mental health).

INTRODUCTION

Sharing our lives with pets not only makes us healthier in normal times but also allows them to serve as comfort companions during stressful times such as the Coronavirus pandemic. This non-human companion provides emotional support and endless love as well as decreases psychological arousal and stress, by eliciting physiological changes that make us feel better¹. These include increased dopamine and oxytocin levels in humans which are the “happy hormones” that cause us to experience positive emotions⁹. Additionally, lowered levels of epinephrine, norepinephrine play a role in the regulation of the sympathetic nervous system that is responsible for the body’s “fight or flight” responses, as well as reduced average arterial and systolic blood pressures⁷.

METHODS

This review examined literature from the basic sciences, clinical sciences, and databases, including PubMed/MEDLINE, EMBASE, and Google Scholar. As such, there were no limitations in place for the time, setting, or language for the search strategy. Included information was derived from primary research articles, and non-primary studies around human and animal adoption during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies concerning meta-analysis were excluded from this review. Studies focused on the feeling of loneliness, pet adoptions during the pandemic and their health effects, were included.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With global lockdowns and an international health crisis, pandemics naturally bring stress, fear, and anxiety into people’s lives. As such, there were a variety of differential responses of people globally from scurrying to purchasing toilet paper in the USA to abandoning pets in Wuhan; however, in Canada, quite the opposite occurred³. There was a surge in pet adoptions. Many animals from shelters had a place to call home, and consequently, the mental health of those who stepped up to care for these animals improved. In this way, companion animals may provide effective stress mitigating strategies that play a role in maintaining healthy protective behaviors crucial to keeping strong during the pandemic. Furthermore, one of the first studies supporting the health benefits of pets by Friedmann et al., in 1980 indicated that one year after heart patients were discharged from a coronary care unit, pet owners were more likely to be alive than nonowners¹¹.

By reducing stress and improving overall mental health, companion animals contributed to their owner's survival and as such play an important role in human development. For this reason, health professionals have incorporated animals into therapeutic work with ADHD children or with patients at mental institutions, simply because of the ameliorative nature of these interactions¹¹.

Additionally, with the separation of families halfway across the globe, pets were often the only companion many resorted to as a source of comfort to loneliness. As a result, companion animal breeders saw an increasing breeding demand for domestic animals. Without these pets, millions would have been isolated. The pets' presence as physical beings within reach made the absence of human touch a little less onerous. For instance, Dr. O'Dair, a family physician, always wanted to adopt a pet but never found the time⁴. As she began visiting patients via telehealth platforms at home, her desire to adopt a dog seemed more plausible. Following through with her goal, she adds "I don't know what I would do without the company of my dog, she has kept me going".⁴ With the companion animal, O'Dair felt capable navigating the radical lifestyle changes caused by the pandemic.

Like O'Dair, the disruption of routines led to a new way of living and a pet's presence gave purpose; purpose to care for an animal, be it feeding, walking, or otherwise playing with them on a walk outside. Evidently, pet ownership requires a long-term commitment as interactions with domestic animals naturally strengthen over time.

Not everyone is able to afford the adoption of animals and although it is a great investment, it is a hefty one⁴. With many laid off, caring for themselves alongside a pet is more challenging³. Physicians and professionals who are able to work from home remain unaffected financially. However, individuals living off their emergency savings, on the contrary, are counting on every penny towards their survival and sustenance that caring for an animal is out of budget.

As a solution to the cost associated with raising an animal, scientists have discussed the role of artificial pets and if they can ever replace real ones⁵. In Florida, The Department of Elder Affairs provided artificial pets, therapeutic robots acting as replicas of real furry animals, to senior adults. The motivation behind the experiment was for these robots to act as companion animals who

would aid the elderly dealing with their emotions dealing with the end of life⁵. Therapeutic robotic pets have also solved the more tedious duties involved with caring for an animal and its hygiene, but are these robots any different than a toy?

Besides a pet's innate companionship, it's the emotional connection that humans seek. From a lifeless robot enacting as a domestic animal, the joy of a real animal is inexplicable in comparison. Love that comes with pets is not the same as an artificial creation of love, making the differences strikingly evident. Therefore, pets encourage people to be healthy, ward off the loneliness and mental health struggles exacerbated by the pandemic. At times, a dog or cat's presence is the only difference between an isolated person and despair.

Non-human companions complement our well-being and therefore, when developing programs supporting isolated citizens, or hospitalized children, we need to remember the value these animals bring¹. Moving forward, the government needs to consider food security not just for humans but also for their non-human counterparts to prevent the possibility of a tsunami of pet abandonment due to an inability to afford food or care as was the case in Wuhan. Volunteer Li Heng of the Furry Angels Haven opened arms to 67 dogs and 40 cats in her small apartment when abandonment skyrocketed. Acting out of her instinct and concern, she did her best to preserve the safety and well-being of these animals⁸.

The adoption of chronically ill animals during the pandemic has been heartwarming. Several with more free time on their hands and sufficient financial resources have stepped up to care and serve animals in need, especially of the vulnerable, the sick or older pets that may have not found a home otherwise. The response by community members to support local shelters has been enormous in some cases, as many as 400 applications per dog¹². In Toronto, Redemption Paws, a rescue group saw 600 dogs adopted or fostered in 2020.¹² The little compassion and care ultimately reminds us of our humanity, and life's ephemerality.

With life shifting post-COVID-19, animal caretakers will have to assess their changes. Fortunately, reputable shelters have weighed in applicants' schedules post-COVID to ensure

animals are provided with stability, and long-term support. Many match their adopters' lifestyles to stay with their owners as they return to a post-pandemic schedule.

CONCLUSION

A problem on the rise is that of increased aggression from pets due to prolonged lockdowns and unusually long hours with owners⁶. Dogs for example are biting and barking, and owners are on the verge of giving them up again⁶. Others state that dogs have become anxious about people out on walks and thus are showing fearful behavior to humans who are not their owner. Moreover, many puppies adopted were not trained to deal with strangers and are still not accustomed to people⁶. With more than one dog in households, these animals will act aggressively to each other, fighting for their owners' attention. With children wanting to play with puppies they will lack proper sleep or rest, and this will cause them to be uneasy and difficult to deal with. The new staple attire of face masks also has older dogs wary as the lack of facial expressions visible to these species have them doubtful of others⁶. Another concern is the separation anxiety many pets will face once owners head back to work.

While adopting and caring for pets during a pandemic is challenging, if given considerable thought, support, it is very rewarding both for the animal and humans in contact.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Peer, L.S., L. Lombo, J. Singh, and A. Mardon. 2021. "The Pet Transience During the COVID-19 Pandemic". *Pacific Journal of Science and Technology*. 22(1): 203-206.

