

A STUDY OF THE INFLUENCE OF PET OWNERSHIP ON MENTAL HEALTH ACROSS THREE FAMILY GENERATIONS

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Abstract

Pet ownership has well been linked with emotional-mental strength, enhanced psychological wellness, and improved social behavior. This literature review dives into the impact of fellow animals on mental health across many generations within families, bringing findings from global studies and upcoming Indian research. Over the world, pet ownership is often linked to reduced levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness, mainly with dogs especially noticeable for their therapeutic emotional bonds. Impact on multiple generations is clear, with grandparents, parents, and children enjoying visible emotional benefits from pet companionship. The review highlights the role of pets during stressful periods, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and underscores the emotional resilience fostered by pet companionship. This review supports that the immersion of pets into family life can act as a sustainably doable, culturally adaptable mental health strategy, assuring deeper understanding in both national and global settings.

Keywords: Pet Ownership, Mental Health, Intergenerational Wellness, Family Bonding, Indian Context.

Introduction

In the past 10 years, the bond between humans and companion animals has grown into a meaningful string of psychological, sociological, and medical study. Plenty of studies have always shown that pet ownership contributes positively to mental health, offering benefits such as reduced stress, lower depression and anxiety levels, and better social support and emotional wellness (Brooks et al., 2018; Shoesmith et al., 2025). Especially in times of social isolation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, pets have proven to be true emotional anchors for people across various age groups and social settings (Bennetts et al., 2023).

Much of the available research, however, focuses on the effects of owning and adopting pets on individuals — particularly the elderly, kids, or those with particular mental health conditions — in Western contexts like the United States, Europe, and Australia (Hill et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2025). A more serious observation of how having pet affects mental health across generations — vis-à-vis. grandparents, parents, and children in the same family — is little.

Research Methodology

a. Literature Search Strategy

For the purpose of this study, a literature review on the impact of pet ownership on human mental health across generations was performed. Various sources such as PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate were used to access relevant articles.

Only English-language studies were considered while searching for relevant studies published between 2010 and 2025, focusing specifically on psychological and emotional outcomes linked to pet ownership.

Studies on therapeutic animal-assisted interventions were included, but those solely addressing physical health (e.g., obesity, heart health) without psychological aspects were excluded.

b. Screening Process

The initial search yielded a large number of articles, which were then evaluated for relevance to the study's objectives.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Studies exploring the emotional and psychological effects of pets.
- Studies addressing the intergenerational family perspectives.
- Studies from India and global contexts to enable comparative analysis.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Studies solely focused on physical fitness outcomes.
- Veterinary studies lacking human psychological components.
- Non-peer-reviewed articles and pre-prints with inadequate methodological rigor.

After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 16 studies (14 global and 2 India based) were selected for review and analysis.

c. Data Etraction

Data was systematically extracted from the selected articles based on the following criteria:

- Year of publication
- Region or country of the study
- Study design and methodology
- Pet species studied (e.g., dogs, cats, birds)
- Psychological parameters measured (e.g., anxiety reduction, loneliness alleviation, family bonding).

d. Research Gap

There remains a dearth of studies directly assessing **multi-generational psychological impacts of pets** within Indian families. The majority of Indian research focuses on economical trends or individual health benefits, with limited detail on familial emotional dynamics.

Little attention has been paid to whether specific pets (e.g., dogs versus cats) produce differing outcomes across age groups, or how factors such as urbanization, traditional family values, and socioeconomic status may mediate these relationships.

Review of Literature

Pet Ownership/Adoption and Mental Health Outcomes in People

An increasing score of global research highlights the role pets play in advancing emotional and mental wellness among humans. Studies by Brooks et al. (2018) and Shoesmith et al. (2025) highlight that having the companionship of pets can alleviate symptoms of anxiety, depression, and loneliness, especially among people experiencing mental health challenges. These pets act as sources of tremendous support, emotional comfort, and nonjudgmental friendship, often serving as informal 'therapists' during periods of psychological distress.

Wilson, Ballantyne, and Hawkins (2025) demonstrated how pets, particularly cats, support the social skills development and psychological health of autistic children, offering them not only affection but also a stable and predictable form of interaction. Similarly, Hill et al. (2020) found that pet ownership among older adults contributed to decreased feelings of loneliness and more sense of purpose during retirement years.

Impact on Family Systems and Emotional Bonds

Although present literature focuses on individuals more, studies indicate that the emotional environment of families can be directly influenced by pets. A study done by Bennetts et al. (2023) found that during the pandemic in Australia, pets fostered emotional connections, strengthening family unity and interaction, acting as a shared hub for engagement, dialogue, and mutual support, enhancing familial strength. A study done by Bibbo, Curl, and Johnson in 2019 investigated how bonding with pets develops emotional security throughout different phases of life, irrespective of the family being nuclear or extended.

Generational Variations in Pet Bonding

Global studies indicate that pets play different roles across generations within families:

- Older adults often find pets to be sources of companionship, helping to combat isolation (Hill et al., 2020).
- Parents view pets as integral family members, incorporating them into their caregiving responsibilities (Brooks et al., 2018).
- Children see pets as playmates and emotional confidants, supporting their social and emotional growth (Wilson et al., 2025).

In India, generational differences in pet bonding are less pronounced, possibly due to traditional family hierarchies where pet-related decisions are often made by parents.

Psychological Mechanisms: How Pets Influence Mental Health

Pets enhance emotional well-being through several mechanisms:

Companionship: Animals act as faithful friends, assisting in reducing feelings of loneliness (Beetz et al., 2012).

Biopsychological Effects: Tactile engagements, such as petting or playing with pets, increase oxytocin production while lowering cortisol levels (Li et al., 2025).

Behavioral Benefits: Having a pet promotes organized schedules, physical activity, and outdoor time, which indirectly enhances mental well-being (Scoresby et al., 2021).

Cross-Cultural Perspective: Global vs. Indian Studies

Literature worldwide strongly advocates the concept of pet ownership, which enhances overall emotional well-being, combats loneliness, and makes for an excellent support system, especially during difficult times like the COVID-19 pandemic (Bennetts et al., 2023; Shoesmith et al., 2025). These advantages were consistently noted across different age groups and cultural backgrounds.

On the other hand, Indian studies are still emerging on the concept of pet ownership and its relation to mental health. Studies such as Roy, Sinha, and Joshi (2024) and Nikolaevich and Sergeevna (2024) show that while pets also contribute to well-being and improved mental health in Indian owners, some factors such as larger joint families, religious beliefs about animals and comparatively lower pet ownership rates create slightly different scenarios in the Indian context. Unlike Western contexts, where pets often substitute for human connections, in India, pets tend to complement existing strong family ties, enriching relationships rather than replacing them.

Species-specific Effects

Dogs have consistently proved to be major contributors to mental well-being because of their high levels of attachment and responsiveness (Hogg & Allen, 2022; Roy et al., 2024).

Cats also offer emotional comfort albeit slightly lesser than dogs (Farasatzadeh, 2025).

The Covid-19 pandemic signified the extent of our emotional reliance on pets. Worldwide, research (Bennetts et al., 2023; Shoesmith et al., 2025) shows that households who own pets experienced;

- Lower levels of isolation,
- More consistent daily routines,
- Greater emotional stability.

Roy et al. (2024) discovered similar trends in India, with pets also having a significant role in fostering a sense of responsibility and empathy in children during lockdown period.

Emotional Resilience and Mental Health Sustainability

Globally, pets have been known to:

- Promote daily scheduled routines and a sense of motivation,
- Increase social connections,
- Bring down signs of depression, anxiety, and loneliness,
- Promote intergenerational emotional bonds via. shared activities and duties.

Thus, adopting or owning a pet appears not only as a way of life but as a preventative and therapeutic mental health measure at many levels, societal and family.

Findings

1. Considerable number of studies show that pet ownership substantially reduces signs of depression, anxiety, and loneliness across various cultural surroundings.
2. Pets bring emotional connections within families, promoting positive experiences, shared schedules, and emotional assurance.
3. Emotional connections with pets vary by age group. The elderly often experience having pets as therapeutic friends, parents experience them as caregivers, and kids as friends.
4. Across most cases, dogs have come out as the most emotionally supportive pets, exhibiting higher levels of companionship, loyalty, and socially engaging compared to other species.
5. In India, pet ownership is exponentially growing in numbers, especially in urban centers. There are emotional benefits to global trends but also highlight cultural details such as the role of joint families and religious perceptions.
6. Pets have been providing emotional support since the COVID-19 pandemic, more so helping families share emotional strength and psychological stability.
7. The type of pet (dog, cat, bird) and the cultural/family context influence the degree and type of mental health benefits experienced.

Recommendations

1. There is an urgent need for **longitudinal studies** that traces the psychological effect of pet ownership across generations within families over long periods.
2. Further research should work on culturally specific studies, example in countries like India, where family structures, religious understandings, and social temperaments towards pets differ greatly from Western models. Customized interventions and policies must support these unique cultural dynamics.
3. Although dogs have been mainly studied for their emotional support roles, future studies should also dive into the mental health benefits provided by other species such as birds, rabbits, and exotic pets.

4. Professionals from the medical and mental health field of work should be motivated to think about companion animals as accessory aid in therapeutic interference, specially for individuals experiencing chronic loneliness, PTSD, depression, and anxiety.
5. Educational programs that are aimed at the promotion of responsible pet ownership, understanding emotional benefits, and teaching empathy towards animals should be conducted, particularly in urban regions where pet adoption is increasing rapidly.
6. Local governments and municipal corporations should introduce pet-friendly infrastructure, housing policies, and public spaces that make the integration of pets into family and community life easier.
7. Inspiring pet adoption from shelters rather than commercial purchase can address two objectives simultaneously — providing emotional support to families and addressing the problem of abandoned and stray animals.

Conclusion

This review states that owning pets greatly contributes to better mental health and emotional toughness across all generations. Over the world, pets — especially dogs — have been able to reduce anxiety, depression, and loneliness, while nourishing family bonds. Indian studies, although in the nascent stage, tell us a lot about similar trends, guided by distinct cultural and familial structures.

However, research in India is still limited, particularly with respect to intergenerational impacts. There is a need for culturally focused contextual, sustained studies to better understand the long-term emotional benefits of pets within Indian families.

Overall, pets have emerged as not just companions but as key players to sustainable mental wellness tactics. Promotion of pet immersion into family life, supported by research and policy and government assistance, could offer lasting psychological benefits across societies.

Summary

Pets consistently enhance emotional well-being, but multi-generational studies remain scarce. The potential for pets to strengthen family bonds is evident, yet more culturally specific research is needed. India offers a rich, understudied context for exploring the intergenerational emotional benefits of pet ownership.

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