

# Pets offer valuable support for owners with mental health problems

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Pets can help people manage their long-term mental health conditions, according to research published in the open access journal *BMC Psychiatry*.

The consistent presence and close physical proximity of their pets was described in this study as providing an immediate source of calm and therapeutic benefit for the pets' owners. The researchers suggest that pets should be considered a main source of support in the management of long-term mental health problems.

Lead author, Dr Helen Brooks from University of Manchester said, "The people we spoke to through the course of this study felt their pet played a range of positive roles such as helping them to manage stigma associated with their mental health by providing acceptance without judgement. Pets were also considered particularly useful during times of crisis. In this way, pets provided a unique form of validation through unconditional support, which they were often not receiving from other family or social relationships. Despite the identified benefits of pet ownership, pets were neither considered nor incorporated into the individual care plans for any of the people in our study."

Dr Brooks added: "These insights provide the mental health community with possible areas to target intervention and potential ways in which to better involve people in their own [mental health service](#) provision through open discussion of what works best for them."

The researchers interviewed 54 [participants](#), aged 18 and above, who were under the care of community-based mental health services and had been diagnosed with a severe mental illness. Participants were asked to rate the importance of members of their personal network including friends, family, health professionals, pets, hobbies, places, activities and objects, by placing them in a diagram of three concentric circles. Anything placed in the central circle was considered most important; the middle circle was of secondary importance and the outer circle was for those considered of lesser importance.

Pets played an important role in the social networks of people managing a long-term [mental health](#) problem, as 60% placed their pet in the central most important circle and 20% placed their pet in the second circle. The participants stated that one reason for this was that their pet helped by distracting them from symptoms and upsetting experiences such as hearing voices or suicidal thoughts. Participants from the study were quoted as saying:

"I felt in a sense that my cat was my familiar in that he understood or was an extension of my thoughts."

"When I'm feeling really low they [pets] are wonderful because they won't leave my side for two days."

"You just want to sink into a pit and just sort of retreat from the entire world, they force me, the cats force me to sort of still be involved with the world."

"I'm not thinking of the voices, I'm just thinking of the birds singing."

The interviews supported existing evidence that some participants feel distanced from healthcare and uninvolved in discussions about services. Taking more creative approaches to care planning, such as incorporating

discussions about pets, may be one way of helping to better involve participants because of the value, meaning and engagement that individuals have with their companion animals.

**More information:** Helen Brooks et al. Ontological security and connectivity provided by pets: a study in the self-management of the everyday lives of people diagnosed with a long-term mental health condition, *BMC Psychiatry* (2016). [DOI: 10.1186/s12888-016-1111-3](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-016-1111-3)

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