



Companion animals as social supports: a pilot study

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Overview of presentation

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- Aims of pilot study
- Method
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Background



- Mixed conclusions about the psychological and physical health benefits of pet ownership in the elderly
- Dearth of rigorous qualitative research in the area

Resilience

- A person's capacity to withstand life stressors and not manifest psychological dysfunction, such as mental illness or persistent negative mood
- Social supports have been identified as contributory to psychological resilience

Aims of study

- Do pets, as social supports, enhance or decrease psychological resilience?
- Preliminary, pilot study, to explore:
 - ◆ This question
 - ◆ The feasibility of a qualitative approach

Participants



- Three women, all over 65 years of age
- Referred by their treating psychiatrist
- A convenience sample

“Iris”

- Living at home with husband and cat
- Husband “Vincent” present at interview
- Two children, one living interstate
- One hour interview conducted at their home
- Psychological health at interview was good

“Mabel”

- Living at home with husband and poodle
- Interviewed alone
- No children
- One hour interview conducted at their home
- Psychological health at interview was good

“Martha”

- Living at a Residential facility
- Interviewed alone
- No children, no current pet – recently relinquished
- Twenty minute interview at Residential facility
- Psychological health at interview was not good

Method

- All participants contacted by telephone
- After consenting, interview conducted
- “Can you tell me about your pet?”
- Prompts throughout open-ended interview
- Notes taken by interviewer
- Data transcribed
- Thematic analyses conducted

Results

- Fourteen themes emerged from the data
 - ◆ Positive emotional responses
 - ◆ Drawbacks to pet ownership

Positive – attachment

- The pet is literally “adored”
- “I was given a dog and I fell in love”
(Iris)
- “My husband and I adore her”
(Mabel)



Positive – alliance

- Pets are valued over people
- “I would rather an animal than a person, animals don’t talk back, they don’t argue, they won’t hurt you” (Iris)
- “I won’t go to visit my daughter interstate, because I won’t leave the cat” (Iris)



Positive – companionship

- The pet as a source of company
- “Dogs are good for companionship”
(Martha)
- “If I didn’t have a husband, I would have two or three pets” (Iris)

Positive – pet as child

- Two of the three women were childless
- All three women viewed their pet as a child
- “She is like the child we didn’t have”
(Mabel)
- “Having a dog is like having a child”
(Martha)

Positive – dominance

- The pet as a dominant force within the household was seen as positive
- “He doesn’t like the cooler on in the house . . . He doesn’t like the noise” (Iris)
- “The dog runs this home” (Mabel)

Positive – sense of purpose

- The pet gives purpose to daily living
- “I worried about them when they got sick, had to have them vaccinated, just like a child” (Martha)
- “I took her to obedience classes . . . It made me have to go out” (Mabel)

Positive – Pride

- Pride was expressed in the pet's intelligence
- “He is a very clever cat. He understands exactly what you say. He knows” (Iris)
- “She is intelligent, it is incredible” (Mabel)



Positive – psychological benefits

- The pet was seen as good for mental health
- “Pets keep your mind off your own problems, you have to focus on someone else” (Iris)
- “They are good for your health mentally, psychologically” (Martha)

Positive – physical benefits

- The pet was also seen as good physically
- “We do a lot more walking” (Mabel)
- “He loved the ball, I would throw it and throw it” (Martha)



Positive – therapeutic effects

- Pets in hospitals and nursing homes
- “It is so important, they should have animals in nursing homes” (Iris)
- “So many people have to give up pets when they go to a nursing home. It is heartbreaking to see their eyes when they look at [my dog]” (Mabel)

Drawbacks – anxiety



- About the pet's welfare
- To the extent of not leaving the pet alone
- “The trouble is that you can't take the pet with you places. Like you want to visit friends or family, but they tell you to leave the cat at home” (Iris)
- “The dog comes with us everywhere” (Mabel)

Drawbacks – bereavement

- The death of a pet caused significant grief
- “When the dog died, we grieved for a month. We didn’t eat or sleep properly. I think it was probably more like six months. We both lost weight. The first month was bad. We were distraught, we walked the streets, 8 to 10 miles per day. We would come home to an empty house, we would burst into tears. . . . I couldn’t have suffered more if a child of mine had died” (Iris)

Drawbacks – veterinarians

- The cost of veterinary care and transport
- “Terrible trouble getting to the vet, I can’t drive” (Iris)
- “We have had some big bills” (Iris)



Drawbacks – distress

- Animal cruelty in the mass media
- “I can’t cope seeing animals being slaughtered on the TV, I can’t cope. I am very sensitive with animals” (Mabel)
- “I cannot bear cruelty to animals. If it is on the TV, I have to turn it off” (Iris)



Conclusions

- Clear that attachment a fundamental theme
- Central to most other themes, and can be related to all of them



Conclusions

- Attachment requires systematic investigation
- Can people become too attached to pets?
- Is resilience:
 - ◆ Enhanced at an attachment “mid-point”
 - ◆ No benefit if attachment is low
 - ◆ Threatened if attachment is very high?

Clinical implications

- All clients, including the elderly, should be asked about their companion animals during history taking
- The role of the animal as a social support should be explored and respected
- The grief process if the person is separated from their pet, through institutionalisation or death of the pet, must be acknowledged and addressed

Limitations of this research

- Preliminary, pilot data
- Whilst participants had previous psychiatric history, this did not appear to be salient
- Three interviews only – did not reach saturation

Strengths of research

- A qualitative approach was appropriate
- Participants enjoyed the process
- Results are consistent with literature
- Data gave rise to new research question

Future research

- We are currently in the process of conducting interviews in the wider community
- We are seeking funding for our research into the psychological and physical health benefits of pet ownership in the elderly

Future research



- We have designed a quantitative study which addresses a number of methodological flaws apparent in previous research
- We have a number of research questions which suit a qualitative approach

Future research



- We are very keen to hear expressions of interest from:
 - ◆ Potential funding bodies
 - ◆ Potential Honours, Masters or Doctoral students

Interested?

- Please see me afterwards

- Or contact us on:

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