



# FURRY FRIENDS. HEALTHIER LIVES.

ORANGE PAPER

THE BENEFITS OF PETS TO OLDER ADULTS' WELL-BEING



# INTRODUCTION

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The bond between humans and animals has been documented for more than 32,000 years, as recorded in early portrayals of human-animal interactions that showcase a lasting and mutually beneficial relationship (Wang et al., 2013). Humans and animals have historically worked together, provided mutual protection and companionship, and coexisted in living spaces, underscoring this meaningful connection. Today, this enduring relationship remains as relevant as ever, with approximately 66% of US households (86.9 million homes) embracing pet ownership, with dogs (58 million households), cats (40 million households), and freshwater fish (9 million households) being the most popular (APPA, 2024). Among adults aged 50 and better, just over half own a pet (Mueller et al., 2018). A breakdown of pet ownership by generation includes 25% of Generation X, 24% of baby boomers, and 2% of the Silent Generation (APPA, 2024; Megna & Bailie, 2024).

Across all ages, human-animal interactions contribute to physical and mental health, but this social connection offers unique benefits to older adults. For instance, pets often provide companionship, purpose, and even emotional support that family members or caregivers may not consistently fulfill, helping to ease

loneliness, promote physical activity, and reduce stress, to name a few benefits (e.g., McNicholas, 2014). By enriching daily life and supporting well-being, pets may play a crucial role in helping older adults navigate challenging life experiences. This age-old connection, now woven into the fabric of modern society, highlights not just a personal choice, but a meaningful way to enhance well-being and quality of life as we age (Enders-Slegers & Hediger, 2019).

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The whole glorious history of animals with people is about joy and connection. It's about loving this creature and letting this creature love you.

- Jon Katz

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# WELLNESS BENEFITS OF PET OWNERSHIP

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Pets have a remarkable ability to enrich people's lives by giving them a sense of purpose through nurturing and caregiving, offering unconditional acceptance, instilling a feeling of being valued and essential, and reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation (McNicholas, 2014; Powell, 1998). These benefits can be particularly impactful for older

adults, as research consistently demonstrates the positive influence of pets on health and well-being. Research shows that pet ownership and human-animal interactions can significantly enhance older adults' physical, psychological, and social well-being, as detailed below.



# PHYSICAL HEALTH

Numerous studies have shown that pets can positively impact physical health (e.g., Friedmann et al., 2020; Gee & Muller 2019). Pet ownership has been linked to lower blood pressure, improved heart health, reduced stress levels, and enhanced physical functioning (Gee & Muller 2019). The strongest evidence for pet ownership benefits relates to reduced risk of fatal cardiovascular events and improvement in heart health. This connection is partly due to the increased motivation to engage in healthy and active behaviors and increased physical activity associated with having a pet, particularly dogs. For example, dog walking has been linked to lower BMI, fewer limitations in daily activities, fewer doctor visits, and more frequent moderate to vigorous exercise (Curl et al., 2017).

Moreover, individuals with stronger bonds to their pets are more likely to walk their dogs regularly and spend more time doing so, further contributing to physical health and well-being. While dog ownership promotes physical activity, studies have found that cat ownership does not have the same impact (Rijken, 2011). The exercise gained from pet-related activities may also enhance cognitive functioning in older adults, adding another layer of benefit to pet ownership (Enders-Slegars & Hediger, 2019). Beyond physical activity, pets can significantly enhance the functional health of older adults by providing daily structure and routine through tasks such as feeding and walking pets (e.g., Obradovic et al., 2019).



# PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Evidence suggests that pets can enrich older adults' daily lives and contribute to their psychological well-being; however, research findings on this topic are mixed. Pets often motivate older adults to take better care of themselves, driven by concerns about what would happen to their pets if they were unable to care for them. This sense of responsibility instills a sense of purpose and meaning by motivating older adults to take intentional actions to care for their pets.

**Figure 1. Dog Walking Benefits**



Proactive behaviors such as getting out of bed, going outside, and staying active, even when facing pain or fatigue, require deliberate effort for older adults to overcome challenges and engage with life (Janevic et al., 2020). These actions, driven by pet ownership, foster regular movement and participation in outdoor activities that enhance belonging, security, and purpose, helping older adults maintain autonomy, resilience, and overall well-being (Toohey et al., 2017).

Some studies suggest that pet ownership can reduce depression, while others report higher levels of depression among pet owners (Gee & Mueller, 2019). These variations appear

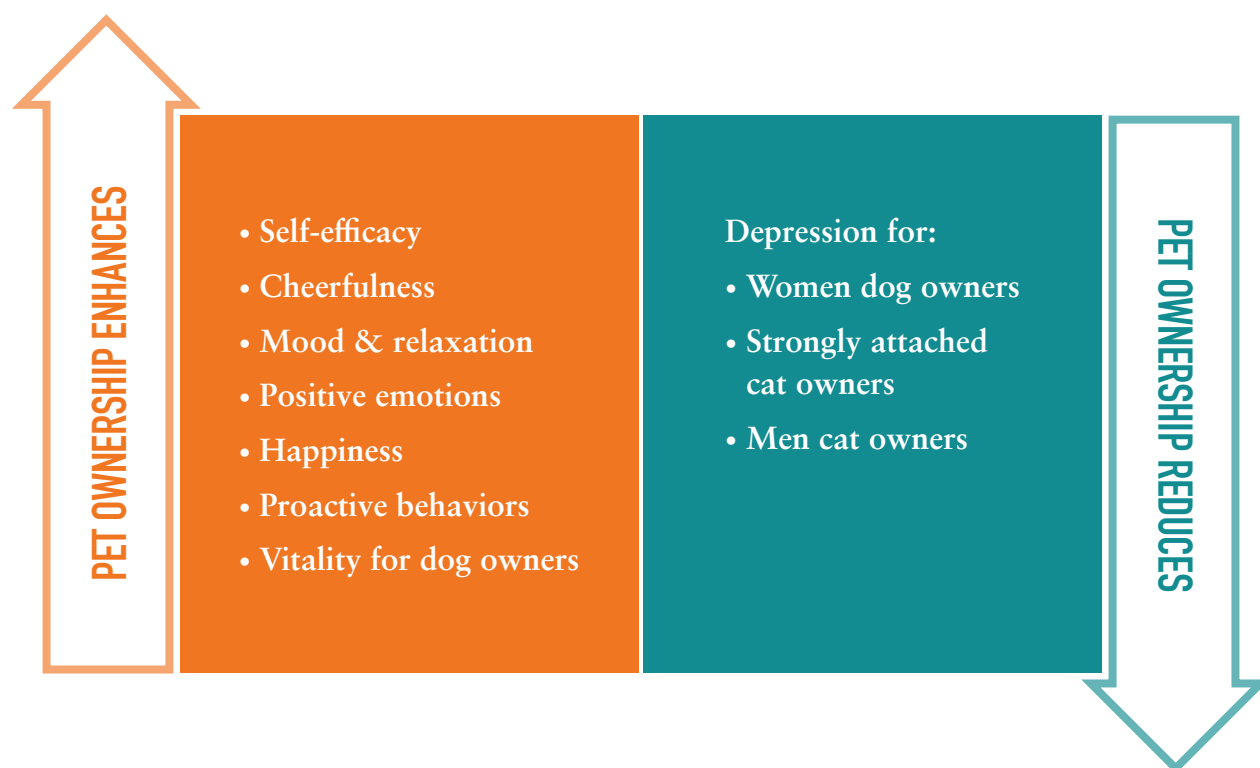
to be influenced by factors such as pet type, the owner's gender, and the strength of attachment to the pet. For example, older women who owned dogs reported lower levels of depression and higher overall health and vitality compared to cat owners (Guiluck et al., 2012). Conversely, another study found that older adults with stronger attachments to their cats had lower levels of depression than dog owners (Branson et al., 2017) and that men with cats experienced less depression than women with cats (Enmarker et al., 2014). These findings highlight the significance of the emotional bond between pet owners and their animals and its impact on psychological well-being.



Pet ownership has also been linked to other aspects of psychological well-being, such as greater self-efficacy, cheerfulness, enhanced mood and relaxation, and reduced levels of stress (e.g., Obradovic et al., 2019; Raina et al., 1999). However, these findings are inconsistent; for example, happiness and anxiety are not reliably linked to pet ownership (Batty et al., 2017; Bennet et al., 2015; Friedmann et al., 2020; Gee & Mueller et al., 2019). Owning pets can present challenges for older adults, such as financial concerns and physical limitations, which may diminish the potential benefits

of pet ownership (Anderson et al., 2013). Interestingly, some studies have shown that even without owning pets, older adults who spend time with animals or participate in pet-related activities report more positive emotions and greater happiness (Friedmann et al., 2020; Kalenkoski & Korankye, 2022). These individuals often found these activities more meaningful than non-pet-related ones. This underscores the importance of simply interacting with animals, regardless of pet ownership, in enhancing older adults' psychological well-being.

**Figure 2. Psychological Well-Being Benefits of Pet Ownership**



# SOCIAL WELL-BEING

Pet ownership offers various social benefits, particularly for older adults. Studies show that pets contribute to reduced loneliness and greater life satisfaction, especially for those with stronger bonds to their pets, suggesting that animals play a supportive role in enhancing the quality of life for older adults (Raina et al., 1999). This support may include emotional comfort, particularly for those facing isolation or bereavement (McNicholas, 2014).

Additionally, pets can foster social integration by encouraging interactions, sparking conversations, and helping build community connections (Enders-Slegers & Hediger, 2019).

Dog owners, in particular, tend to be less socially isolated than those without pets or with cats, as activities like dog walking and visits to dog parks create more opportunities to engage with others (Hajek & Konig, 2020). Fostering a cat has also been shown to decrease loneliness in some older adults (Sanderson et al., 2024). However, while pets offer companionship, they do not always prevent feelings of loneliness (Pikhartova et al., 2014). The impact of pet ownership on loneliness can vary depending on an individual's life circumstances and the strength of their bond with their pet.

**Figure 3. Pets & Social Benefits**

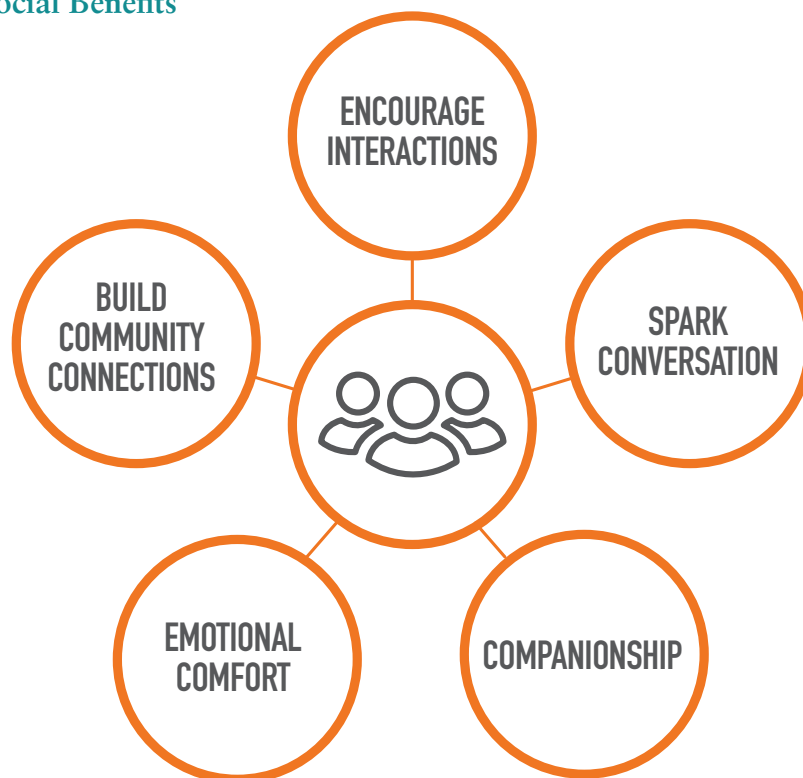
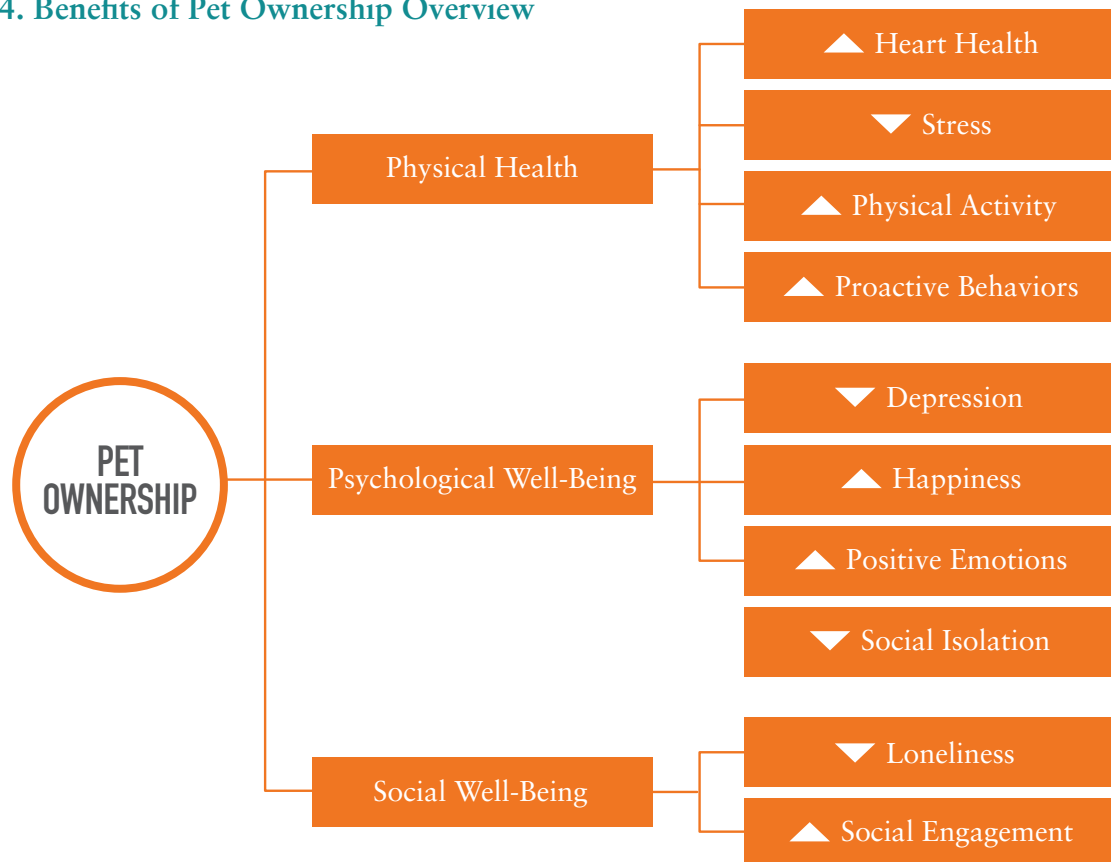


Figure 4. Benefits of Pet Ownership Overview





# PETS: A KEY TO HAPPINESS AND CONNECTION IN LATER LIFE

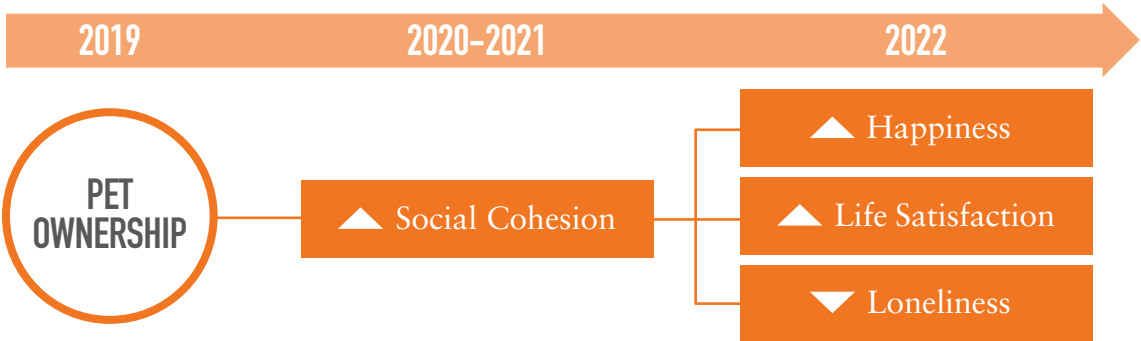
Imagine this: you're walking your dog through a local park, and suddenly, you find yourself in a friendly conversation with a fellow dog owner. Or you're at home, sharing a serene moment with your cat, feeling a sense of calm and companionship. These simple yet profound interactions highlight the impact pets can have, particularly for older adults.

Mather Institute conducted a five-year study, the Age Well Study, to examine changes in health and wellness among residents of Life Plan Communities (also known as continuing care retirement communities, CCRCs). Using this data, Mather Institute explored how pet ownership influences happiness, life satisfaction, and loneliness in older adults, emphasizing the role of social cohesion. Social cohesion—essentially how connected and supported individuals feel within their community—plays an important role in accessing resources, support networks, and

overall well-being. These analyses included 2,863 Life Plan Community residents, with an average age of 82. Among these residents, 17.1% were pet owners.

The study revealed that older adults who owned pets reported feeling more socially connected in the two years following the first survey. This boost in social ties translated to increased happiness and life satisfaction, coupled with reduced feelings of loneliness after three years. Dog owners reaped the most significant benefits, likely due to the social opportunities that come with walking a dog. The active lifestyle associated with dog ownership played a key role in fostering these positive outcomes. These findings were especially notable since the study was partially conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 5. Pet Ownership Helps Older Adults Feel Happier and More Connected



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Pets bring joy, companionship, and purpose, but require planning for their care. Before choosing a pet, older adults should consider the physical demands, financial responsibilities, and logistics of adopting an animal.

The good news is that it's not necessary to own a pet to reap many of the benefits outlined in this report: people can get the same emotional and social benefits by volunteering at shelters, visiting a dog park, and playing with or cuddling pets belonging to friends, neighbors, and family members. All of these can promote successful aging and rewarding time spent with animals.



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