

Qualitative Exploration of the Dog Acquisition Process during the COVID-19 Pandemic:  
Impact on Owners' Loneliness and Isolation

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## Introduction and Review of Research

In early 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. The declaration redefined what social interactions would look like and changed how people worked and communicated with friends and family. As social isolation measures continued past the first year, humans increasingly turned to animal companionship (Hoy-Gerlach et-al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2021).

Articles in the popular press highlighted the challenges of acquiring a dog during the pandemic: The cover story for the July 19, 2021, *New York Magazine* focused on how adopting a dog in New York City had become “more competitive than getting into college” (Starke, 2021). Nevertheless, pet ownership increased during the pandemic (Strzelewicz, 2020). A study conducted in February 2022 by the American Pet Products Association (APPA) found that 14 percent of respondents in the United States reported acquiring a new pet during the pandemic (APPA, 2022).

This study sought to explore the motivations for committing to an animal during an uncertain period such as a global pandemic. It focused on dogs because, as Hens (2009) argued, dogs have evolved to exist within human communities and culture and as such occupy a special position with humans. This does not mean that cats are not companions, but rather dog companionship is accompanied by additional responsibilities and potential challenges which may require more time spent together engaged in activities (Philpotts, et al., 2019). The answers to the questions posed by this study may help community health social workers along with veterinary social workers find ways to best assist

humans and dogs to remain safely together in the community now that U.S. residents have returned to pre-pandemic levels of social contact.

Scholarship has focused on various consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, with social isolation attracting attention because of physical and social distancing. Social isolation and loneliness during COVID-19 were the topics of an early systematic review (Buecker & Horstmann, 2022). Loneliness has been defined as aversive feelings when the quality or quantity of one's social relationships is perceived as dissatisfying (Beutel et al., 2017; Peplau & Perlman, 1981). It is an affective response to a discrepancy between one's desired state of social contact and one's achieved level of social contact (Peplau & Perlman, 1979). Loneliness has been associated with negative consequences to physical and mental health (Beutel et al., 2017; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Social isolation is related to loneliness but thought to be a different construct. That is, social isolation refers to objective lack of or limited social contact with others and is marked by a person having few social ties or infrequent contact (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). The pandemic introduced a condition into these related but independent relationships by restricting the number of social contacts irrespective of the individual's desire for them. By default, most people had to limit the number of in-person, face-to-face contacts.

There is robust literature on human loneliness and isolation, particularly as a determinant of poor physical and mental health, as well as of greater mortality (Beller & Wagner, 2018). There is also a growing body of research about human-animal interaction (HAI) and its physical and mental health benefits. Taking care of animals requires walking (dogs) and obtaining and preparing food, all activities which stimulate social

interactions and routines (Author, 2019). Muraco et al. (2018) found that interacting with a companion animal is also associated with increased social support, emotional support, and companionship among older pet owners in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community, particularly for those who lack social networks. In an experimental design study prior to COVID-19, companion dog ownership significantly reduced loneliness among community dog owners (Powell et al., 2019).

Specific to COVID-19, a recent systematic review (Kretzler et al., 2022) found that only a portion of studies detected an association between pet ownership and reduced isolation; however, some studies have found stronger relationships. Several global COVID/HAI studies to date suggest that owning a dog during the pandemic had positive impacts. In South Korea, Lee et al. (2022) reported that dog walking increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, and those who walked their dogs frequently were less bored and lonely. Similarly, in a study of loneliness in older adults and the impact of dogs, social connectedness promoted dog walking, an activity that provided a safe physical space to socially connect with others (Carr et al., 2021). Oliva and Johnston (2020) came to similar conclusions about the role of dogs in encouraging routine and socialization through walking. Xin et al. (2021) studied the impact of pet ownership in Wuhan, China, and found that pets provided positive subjective well-being for their owners. Applebaum and colleagues (2021) focused on pet owners aged 65 and older and reported mixed findings: Although pets fulfilled some social and emotional needs for older adults living through the pandemic, challenges that all older pet owners face were exacerbated by the global public health emergency.

However, other studies have not supported the positive impacts of animal ownership on mental health during the pandemic. An Australian study comparing pet owners with non-owners found that pet ownership was associated with poorer quality of life but not with resilience or feelings of loneliness, suggesting that pets may contribute to burden among owners and poorer quality of life under challenging circumstances (Phillipou et al., 2021). Another study from Australia suggests that pet attachment during the pandemic may have negatively impacted mental health, as owners felt more vulnerable when they had little control over the outcomes (Bennetts et al., 2022).

Attachment and relationships seem to have a mixed impact on human well-being. A longitudinal study of the impact of pet ownership during the different phases of the pandemic (Ogata et al., 2023) found decreased levels of stress for dog owners, but when confounders were controlled, the greatest impacts on loneliness and stress were explained by the relationship between the owner and the pet, suggesting that it is not just the presence of an animal but the relationship that is the factor. Finally, a cross-sectional study conducted in Canada to assess the association between pet ownership and quality of life during the COVID-19 pandemic found no association between pet ownership and mental health or well-being indicators (Denis-Robichaud et al., 2022).

The mixed findings regarding the impact of pet ownership during the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that there is still more to learn about the mechanisms of pet ownership and feelings of social isolation and loneliness during periods of external stress. Many of the previous studies used quantitative, cross-sectional designs (except for Ogata et al., 2023, which was a longitudinal study). Moreover, they included owners of dogs and cats,

yet there is some evidence to suggest that the relationships between humans and dogs are experienced differently than relationships between humans and other small mammals (Hens, 2009). The cited research also focused on households that already had a pet before the pandemic, rather than those that sought a dog during the pandemic. Finally, all the studies cited were from disciplines such as medicine and psychology. Social work uses a person-in-the-environment lens utilizing micro, mezzo, and macro perspectives when examining an issue such as social isolation or loneliness (Rodgers, 2019). Moreover, social isolation has been identified as one of the Grand Challenges in Social Work, an effort led by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare to think and act on our most compelling global issues (Brown et al., 2016; Lubben et al., 2015). Yet the HAI aspect is not identified in policy recommendations from the Grand Challenges, and it is not clear whether that is due to mixed findings from studies on HAI and isolation or an absence of human-animal research focus in social work (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2020). Regardless of the reasons, a qualitative examination of choices to bring living beings into the home during a period of great community and global uncertainty can benefit from a social work lens and may help to better elucidate some of the conflicting findings from other HAI studies conducted during COVID-19 and add to policy recommendations for the Grand Challenge of social isolation.

The questions guiding the current study were: If people were seeking companionship during the pandemic, what did pet dog companionship feel like to humans? Was it a desire to create a social relationship with a dog during this specific time, or was adopting a dog a replacement for human contact during a period of enforced isolation? How did

people acquire their dogs during the pandemic? Did having a dog optimize happiness, or did supporting another living creature during a pandemic become a source of stress? If so, in what ways? In what ways did having a dog affect people's quarantine experience—positively or negatively.

Because the research on how pets impacted well-being during COVID-19 is inconclusive, the current researchers used inductive thematic analysis and did not begin with theoretical constructs/frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Allowing the interviewees' own words to create the story of dog adoption and its consequences on well-being during the pandemic without a priori categories or theory to structure coding and theme-building was deemed to be the best analytic approach for this study.

## **Methods**

### *Recruitment and Data Collection*

This study conducted in-depth individual interviews with adults in western Pennsylvania who adopted dogs during the pandemic period. The primary inclusion criterion was obtaining a dog through any source from the period starting in March 2020 when social isolation measures were enacted. A larger study funded by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) was recruiting dog adopters but had additional and specific inclusion criteria about social class and what sources that the dogs were obtained from. Ten individuals who were recruited for the ASPCA study but did not fit its screening criteria were then recruited for this study and nine agreed to participate. Interviews were conducted between May 2022 and August 2022.

Participants for the ASPCA study were recruited through a variety of methods: flyers, advertising through a research recruitment program called “UNIVERSITY + Me,” local animal shelters, food pantries, community block parties, high-rises for older adults, and word of mouth. When people were screened out of the ASPCA study they were asked if they would be willing to be considered for another study, and those who were willing were then screened by the principal investigator (PI), who obtained their phone numbers and names, confirmed when they acquired their dogs and how, explained the study, obtained verbal consent, and scheduled telephone interviews. All the interviews were conducted by an undergraduate pre-medical student. The PI trained the student in the interview process and supervised by reviewing the interviews and transcripts. The interviews lasted 40 to 80 minutes, were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed, and then reviewed by the PI. All participants received a \$20 gift card to thank them for their participation. This study was reviewed and approved by the (University) protection of the human subject’s institutional review board. It was funded through the American Society for the Protection of Children and Animals (ASPCA) and the (University) Honors College Community-Engaged Research Project. Basic demographic information was also collected at the end of the interview (see Table 1). Participants were primarily white and female. However, there was a large range in age from ages 23 to 70. Similarly, there was a broad range in income and education, with some with lower levels of education making under \$25,000 a year to others with four year degrees reporting higher incomes. There was a variety of dog breeds from mixed breeds to purebreds.



### *Insert Table 1*

#### *Analysis Process*

After the interviews, the PI and student reviewed the notes and recordings, which were then sent for professional transcription and reviewed again by the PI for accuracy. In the first step, the student read the transcripts multiple times to find consistent information and then labeled the themes with code names. The PI also reviewed the transcripts separately and in conjunction with the student reviewed each transcript and codes and labeling of chunks of text with the codes. The codes were given final names, and then the interviews were loaded into NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2020) for coding management. After this process, the student and the PI once again checked the coded chunks of information, created subcodes, and amended the coding structure in NVivo to reflect this. Codes were also checked against information that did not fit easily into the structure to see whether this was discordant or different, requiring additional coding. This iterative process of reading and coding created a framework and finally a narrative about dog adoption during the pandemic.

#### *Thematic Coding Framework*

The primary thread throughout the interviews was labeled as **motivation to adopt a dog**. This broad category was organized into subcodes: adopting due to a lifelong desire/not specific to the pandemic isolation, wanting a companion during isolation, being a lifelong pet lover and owner, rescuing a pet in need, experiencing immediate love at first sight, adopting for health benefits, or adopting for the sake of another pet's

happiness. Consistent with prior research, **challenges of the adoption** process and after adoption were consistent throughout the interviews and were defined as any challenge acquiring a dog or adjusting to having a dog in the home. Some content was specific to characteristics of the pet, such as size and behavioral issues (jumping on people, food snatching or guarding, barking). Other challenges pre-adoption was hesitancy about taking on the responsibility of a pet and financial challenges to support it during a pandemic. A consistent theme, not specific to the pandemic, involved challenges of navigating housing/apartment rules that restricted the presence of a pet, number of pets, or breed. An unanticipated challenge was the return to normal employment hours over the course of the pandemic period and how this was managed for both the humans and dogs. Working remotely or being away from home minimally was a motivator for those who had wanted a dog, but then they worried about the adjustment period while they were at work. The pandemic provided the opportunity to spend time with a dog, but when the pandemic isolation measures eased and people returned to work, it also meant leaving the animal, who had grown used to the human's availability during the day.

Another broad theme about caring for dogs was **veterinary care**, which had a subcode of experiences with seeking medical care for animals during the pandemic (also related to other codes of challenges). Finally, another subtheme was how social distancing restrictions affected people's dog experiences.

## Findings

### *Where They Found Their Dogs and Motivation to Adopt a Dog*

Acquiring a dog took several paths and was influenced by income as well as the pandemic. Individuals with an annual income less than \$25,000 (in U.S. dollars) obtained their dogs from friends due to an unexpected litter or a rehoming. Another method of acquiring a dog was through shelters and rescue organizations, although the number of dogs available was less than typically seen prior to the pandemic. Finally, a few obtained their dogs from breeders, although this too was challenging due to increased demand during the pandemic.

The motivation for getting a dog at that moment in time was influenced by many factors—not just the pandemic and social isolation. People who grew up with dogs their whole lives wanted a dog to make their lives more complete. When one participant was asked whether she thought having four dogs would be too much responsibility to handle, she said no, as her dad bred and trained hunting dogs, so she always had more than two or three dogs in her life at any one point. Other people who lived without pets prior to the pandemic had a lifelong desire to care for an animal and stayed committed to the goal; the pandemic gave them an opportunity to bond with the animal while working at home, something not possible before the pandemic. One interviewee said that the transition to working from home meant that her schedule was more flexible, and it would be doable for her to take care of a new puppy. That dog owner was able to make sure that her pet was getting enough “care and exercise,” whereas if she was commuting five days a week

and working 10-hour shifts, “paying people to provide some degree of that care probably would’ve given [her] a bit of a second thought.”

Interestingly, three of the interviewees were motivated to adopt not for themselves but from a place of concern that the dog might face a worse fate in a shelter during the pandemic. For example, one owner had just lost her dog and was determined not to get another pet because of the grief that she experienced. Soon afterward, her best friend died, and the friend’s husband had to move into subsidized housing and could not bring the family dog to his new home. The participant was concerned that if the dog was surrendered to a shelter that it would be considered unadoptable and then euthanized, due to breed and behavior. Thus, even though the participant did not want to adopt another dog, she did so out of concern for the dog, not out of a desire for a canine companion. In time, their relationship did develop: Her dog became her best friend during a period which could have been very isolating. As she was recalling her experiences with her newly adopted dog, she said that the dog “held the light with the loss” of the dog that she had prior. In other words, the participant continued to cherish and remember her previous dog with her new dog. The interviewee’s dog supported her through her grief by increasing her feelings of social support and reducing her loneliness.

Although this interviewee unintentionally found companionship through her dog during the pandemic, others actively sought out a dog for company and companionship. One interviewee said that she got her dog because it would keep her “entertained and ... busy.” Her family members thought that getting a dog would be a good idea because she lived alone, and a dog would keep her company. Eventually, she and her dog developed

an unbreakable bond and shared an “unconditional love.” For instance, when the participant was in the hospital following surgery, she frequently wondered about the safety and well-being of her dog even though she was at home and safe with her owner’s close friend. The participant’s friend said that her dog refused to leave her owner’s bed and could not be enticed with food or treats on the first day of separation. As a result, the dog sitter found ways for her to talk to the dog on the phone. This participant also discussed how her husband is in a late stage of COPD, and she is grateful to have her pets, her “little friends”, to keep her company if anything happened to her husband.

The conditions of the pandemic also seemed to promote dog adoption as emotional support for people who were particularly isolated prior to the anti-contagion measures. One participant was advised by her psychiatrist to adopt an emotional support animal as her husband was bedridden and she did not have much companionship. She had also had surgery, which limited her ability to leave the house and be in the company of others. She adopted two dogs, who provided her emotional support in different ways. She said that each dog supplied something “totally different... it’s something that one of them just can’t supply.” One dog was always by her side providing emotional support and companionship, and the other dog provided company and kept her active.

#### *Dogs as Wellness Promoters: Health and Happiness*

The presence of a dog was particularly supportive when people were sick with COVID-19. When one of the participants became ill, he had “horrible body aches and ... was screwed up for a couple of months and ... didn’t go out.” However, his dog kept him

company during his prolonged recovery. When he was in his recliner, his dog would “jump up and want to be with me, and we would just sleep together.” This act of co-sleeping brought great comfort to him during a physically difficult time.

Consistent with findings from earlier COVID-19/HAI research, participants who adopted dogs found that walking their dogs helped to reduce social isolation during the pandemic and reduced feelings of loneliness. Dogs connected the people walking them, those who may not have connected in another way. One interviewee said that neighbors “know each other mainly through our dogs.” Eight of 10 of the interviewees mentioned that their dogs improved their social connections during the pandemic. In some cases, this created superficial acquaintances with people whose names they didn’t remember. But for other people, dogs fostered lasting friendships with supportive people.

One participant said that her dog gave her the means to befriend several neighbors who had been kind to her since her surgery. They asked whether she needed anything from the grocery store or if she would just like some company. This suggests that in the presence of a dog, people may be viewed as more approachable. Early in the pandemic trajectory, the virus was highly contagious and potentially life-threatening, and this made social interactions fraught (Humphrey et al., 2022). Having a way of remaining six feet apart but having a connection (dogs) was a critical social connector during a time when the usual forms of connecting were prohibited, because social connectedness during the pandemic was found to be an important buffer against negative well-being outcomes (Humphrey et al., 2022).

Walking improved social connectivity, but it also improved physical health as increased free time with dogs gave people the motivation to exercise through walking. One participant said that his dog was “kind of saving my life here.” He was once 284 pounds, but now he is 260 pounds because rather than “coming home [from work] and vegetating on a recliner,” he went on long walks with his dog multiple times a week, contributing to his weight loss and physical health.

Finally, the adopted dog’s role in promoting feelings of happiness during a period of uncertainty and sadness was a common theme in all 10 interviews. For example, one owner said that her dog brings such a “playful” presence that now her family members can’t imagine life without her. Another interviewee said that her dog made her happy and gave her a reason to shower and do something productive with her day. One interviewee said that she used to just sit in her house most of the time and that’s where she would “get a little depressed.” However, her dog inspires her to get out of the house by pulling on her pantleg, which the owner admits was good for her emotional and physical wellbeing.

#### *Challenges: Dog-Specific and Pandemic-Related*

Challenges acquiring a dog were both specific to the dog and related to the conditions caused by isolation measures. For example, chewing, barking, having periods of very high energy, “counter surfing” for food, and “zoomies” were typical dog challenges. Specific to the pandemic were unsocialized behaviors with strangers. For example, dogs couldn’t go to obedience training during the height of the pandemic, and fewer people came into the home. Therefore, when isolation measures were lifted, dogs and owners

had to learn how to greet new people, which could be problematic and even dangerous. One participant's Labrador Retriever jumped on an older person due to his eagerness to meet a new person during the pandemic, which resulted in a fall and a fractured hip. The participant said that her dog was just "so excited to meet a new person that he ran right up to her and jumped on her." The dog remained with the family but became the "anywhere my grandma isn't" dog. For owners with higher incomes, the absence of puppy and dog obedience classes meant that they had to do research on dog behavior on their own and try to determine credible sources of advice and find places to go when isolation measures were in place. For those who could not afford classes prior to the pandemic, they too had to be creative in dealing with dog behaviors that were problematic.

However the participants found ways to deal with problematic behaviors. They managed the transition back to workspaces without dogs. One owner said that her transition back to work was deliberately gradual. She initially had one day back in the office, then two days a week, then three. When her dog is not in her presence, the participant misses her a lot, but she checks the cameras at her dog daycare to see what she is up to. Moreover, when another participant was told to go back to work, she had a hard time leaving her dog, because she had been spending every day with him. She was additionally worried that he was just "miserable and crying the whole time, and that was pretty hard." The participant set up a dog camera so that she could check up on her pet while she was at work, which helped to calm her worries. Thus, the issue was not so much the dog behavior but the human's sadness at being separated from the dog during the workday. One other aspect that both owners and dogs had to manage upon the return



to work was reduced hours of walking and fewer “potty” breaks for dogs, if the dog was not going to daycare or using a dog walking service.

The pandemic resulted in job losses or reduced hours and less pay for about half of those interviewed. Moreover, due to the closing of free services through shelters and free or low-cost veterinary clinics, veterinary costs became a major contributor to expenses for some low-income individuals. Supply chain shortages also impacted access to pet food and increased costs for all of those interviewed. When people were expected to go back to their places of work, arrangements suddenly had to be made to care for dogs, and dog daycare and walking services were not an expense that all could assume—if they could find the resources. Therefore, many interviewees had to crate train their dogs to be by themselves for long periods of time. Other interviewees sent their dogs to daycare a few days a week.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study is that it was retrospective. The study was conducted from June 2022 to August 2022, and participants were asked to think back to 2020 when they first decided to acquire a dog. Thus, the information obtained from the interviews may not be as accurate or representative as interviews conducted at the start of the dog acquisition process. Another limitation of this study was that it is sample size. Even though no new information was heard by the last interview, it is a small group. As with all qualitative research, this group was not intended to be representative of all individuals who acquired animals at the start of the pandemic. Because the interviews were with primarily white, female, working-class or middle-class individuals living near or in a

major metropolitan area, the generalizability of the findings is limited. For example, individuals living in rural areas were not part of the sample, and rural dog owners may have had different experiences. Finally, interviews were conducted on the phone, which made it impossible for the researchers to discern participants' body language and difficult to interpret tone of voice.

### **Discussion**

Most of the people who were interviewed adopted a dog during the pandemic so they would not be alone, and they would have companionship—with a few notable exceptions in which the adopter was not seeking companionship but was afraid that pandemic conditions in shelters would be detrimental to a dog. Lower-income adopters found their dogs through community sources, friends, and family members. Others who had higher income sought out breeders. All the participants viewed their dogs as members of their families. Dogs helped their owners feel emotionally supported by spending quality time with them and through physical acts of closeness such as snuggling, sleeping with them, licking, and general excitement to see their owners. One participant treated her dogs as her children, even though she had a daughter and grandchildren. She said her dogs were sometimes better sources of company because they are by her side, supporting her through day-to-day tasks. Additionally, during the pandemic, having a dog helped reduce people's loneliness by providing distractions. Several participants said their dogs encouraged them to be more active by giving them a sense of routine, structure, and a reason to be productive. Dogs also acted as social connectors by helping owners meet new people on walks or errands, creating opportunities to engage in face-to-face

distanced encounters while walking or at dog parks. These findings are consistent with previous research which posited that dogs are a form of social capital for humans (e.g., Graham & Glover, 2014; Koohsari et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2005). The findings are also consistent with other studies of dogs and owners that reported positive impacts during the pandemic (Buecker & Horstmann, 2022). Although there were some negative aspects which were financial and attachment-related when humans returned to work, overall, these findings support the literature that pets could be a contributor to positive well-being during stressful periods. Although the majority sought out a pet to help ease the isolation, even those who were motivated by “saving” a dog developed a deep attachment to the animal, and a recognition that the addition of a dog to their lives reduced some of the stresses of the pandemic. Additionally, although the motivation may have been “dog as a substitute” for human connection, most of the dogs increased social connectedness to other humans through simple acts such as walking a dog or playing in a park.

Even when owners struggled with challenging dog behaviors or the cost of owning a dog, they did not consider rehoming the dog. Owners who faced challenges related to food or vet cost found workarounds to keep their animals, consistent with other studies of low-income pet ownership (Author, 2020). All the participants reported some degree of loneliness, although not all were socially isolated (some lived with partners or other family members). They all confirmed that the presence of a dog reduced loneliness through having another living thing in the home, one that could be amusing or distracting or require them to engage in purposeful activities and connect to people via dog walking. For several older adults living alone or those physically limited due to pain or chronic

disability, a dog provided both emotional and at times physical comfort. Acquiring a dog could have been challenging due increased demand for pets, but lower-income participants found their animals through friends or family networks. Most had grown up with or had dogs before, and all wanted a dog prior to the pandemic, but circumstances of working and traveling created barriers to having a dog. All would have gotten a dog at some point, but the pandemic provided structure and time to add a dog to the household. Thus, these were not impulsive decisions, but the pandemic, and sometimes the circumstances, provided an opportunity to acquire a dog. Overall, every participant reported a decrease in feelings of loneliness. In some cases, but not all, participants increased the number of people they connected with, usually through the dog.

In summation, these findings were consistent with the social support and social catalyst hypotheses that human well-being is improved by social support provided by an animal and that social connections co-occur from having an animal (Barcelos et al., 2023; Wells, 2009). Social support is not limited to same-species connections: mere presence, nonjudgmental gaze, physical affection, and physical comfort were all mentioned by the participants as ways in which their pets eased their loneliness.

### **Social Work Implications**

Social workers have an important part to play in fostering Human Animal Interactions (HAI)—and not just during pandemics. For social workers practicing in communities, clinics, and hospital settings, simply including questions about pets in the home is an easy method of determining whether they are a source of companionship and social support

and whether the support is critical to the client. This study found that some owners struggled with and worried about ongoing food and veterinary care costs but adjusted household finances and made arrangements to keep their dogs. Finding short-term foster care for pets when their owners are hospitalized or experiencing homelessness or assisting low-income owners in finding pet food and reduced-cost veterinary care, is an important aspect of keeping pets and humans together ( Author, 2020), and this falls within the role of social work practice. Social workers can use national resources and guides such as the Purina Purple Leash program for domestic abuse survivors and pets (<https://www.purina.com/purple-leash>), the Humane Society of the United States (<https://secured.humanesociety.org/>), and the Humane Society's Pets for Life program (<https://humanepro.org/programs/pets-for-life>), as well as regional resources provided by local rescues and shelters (e.g., "Guide for Aging in Place with Pets in Allegheny County" created by the Hartford Scholars in the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work (<https://www.socialwork.pitt.edu/researchtraining/aging-initiatives-programs/guide-aging-place-pets-allegheny-county>)). Veterinary social workers who work in shelters and veterinary practices are also a source of information and community referrals, particularly when owners are facing difficult financial or medical decisions about their animals.

Social workers are concerned about loneliness and social isolation, and this concern is manifested in "Eradicate Social Isolation" as one of the 12 Grand Challenges for Social Work (Lubben et al., 2015). The pandemic and the lock-down presented an opportunity for the profession to better understand the role that pets—not therapy animals—play in

reducing feelings of loneliness and encouraging people to engage in human interaction through their dogs. Nonhumans are not included in how social work conceptualizes “social groups” in the Grand Challenges document, yet this study strongly suggests that dogs were sought and obtained to be critical social players in the participants’ lives. If social work is to truly eradicate the negative impacts of social isolation on mental and physical health, then assessing for sources of nonhuman interaction, finding ways to incorporate pets into social work practice, and supporting this inclusion all fall in the role of social work best practices. The pandemic and the measures taken to reduce the spread of COVID-19 have demonstrated how important nonhuman support is for human beings (Morgan et al., 2020). The authors hope that in the future, more social work research on isolation and mental health will consider all sources of support, including the furry kind.

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