

# Hey, Prescription Nation! Pets Now 'Main' Script for Mental Health Issues



By *Jamie Wells, M.D.* — December 12, 2016



Mollie Joe Wells (aka the human bulldog)

There is an ever-growing body of evidence that reinforces the health benefits of animals. The cardiovascular and mental health ones are known and well-documented.

A [new study published in \*BMC Psychiatry\*](#) <sup>[1]</sup> sought to explore the role pets had in support, self-management and personal networks of those suffering from long-term significant mental illness (e.g. bipolar disorder, schizophrenia). It concluded “pets should be considered a main rather than a marginal source of support in the management of long-term mental health problems, and this has implications for the planning and delivery of mental health services.”

The qualitative research involved interviews of 54 individuals— over age 18, recruited from a randomized, controlled trial — diagnosed with severe disease (by a health professional) from two locations, the North West and in the South of England, under the care of community-based mental health services. They were asked to rate the importance of those in their personal network: family members, pets, friends, activities, items, health care team members and so forth. 60% identified their pet as the most important with 20% naming them of second-most importance.

Helen Brooks, lead author and researcher from University of Manchester, as per the press release stated, “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.”

The positive impact of pets ranged from offering routine, being an immediate calming influence and one that distracted the patient when hearing voices or unpleasant symptoms of their mental illness. Additionally, some participants reflected pride in the perception of others when observing their caring for their respective animals—made them feel less isolated and stigmatized. The unconditional love the pet provided demonstrated an innate understanding of the patient that lacked the conflict often present with family members and friends.

Further proclaimed positives included, in particular, the enhancement of recovery during acute illness and encouragement of activity. The work discusses the “social capital” accrued by pet ownership to and from the broader community. Since the majority reported difficulty with family and friend relationships and limited external networks, the animal-human dynamic was central to invoking ontological security (aka stable mental state spurred by continuity in activities of daily life and routine) due to consistency and close proximity. Other relationships didn’t often contribute to this in the participant’s world.

Those in the study revealed improved existing relationships and discovery of new ones as a result of the pet ownership. The connection and intimacy with the pet was often not mimicked in their human relationships or was simply more challenging. They described a “gulf of understanding” with those interactions that were not present with pets.

Pets introduced humor to their lives as well as intuition if they were unwell. Sometimes they were what got them out of bed in the morning or to exercise. The rapport was deemed simpler than with humans.

Brooks noted, “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.” It is also a priority should this be a recommendation for a patient that a plan of care for the animal be included should the patient require hospitalization—as this could be a source of anxiety.

Animal-assist therapy teams are frequently seen in hospitals, long-term care facilities and other varied communities warranting support. But, typically in short-term visits. Increasingly, they are being utilized by those enduring PTSD (aka post-traumatic stress disorder) as well as other chronic physical conditions.

As this research involved interviews and self-reporting with a small sample size, the qualitative nature of it is somewhat limited. However, it does serve to reinforce already known advantageous benefits of animals to health and well-being.

[I cannot support animals enough in advancing the general health and well-being of all ages with or without diagnosed medical conditions.](#) [2] Certainly, the ultimate decision is best made in the context of the entire clinical picture and knowledge of the specific person's set of circumstances.

However, the study that I would find of greatest interest would be one that reveals the reduced need for pharmaceuticals in mental health disorders like anxiety and depression (or more severe

illnesses for that matter) as a direct consequence of animal influence. That would be tremendously worthwhile as the drugs in this medical realm especially are often accompanied by consequential side effects.

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**Links**

[1] <https://bmcp psychiatry.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12888-016-1111-3>

[2] <http://acsh.org/news/2016/09/28/parenting-kids-human-and-canine-persuasion-same-yes-10223>