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The Role of Companion Animals in the Lives of University Students During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Research Results Summary for The Role of Companion Animals in the Lives of University Students During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Cindy Ly

The coronavirus 2019 pandemic introduced many new daily stressors. A population heavily impacted by these new stressors was university students. Prior to the pandemic, university students were already a highly stressed population, so the additional stressors incurred by the pandemic might have acted as another layer of stress for them. The need to maintain physical distance might have also prevented university students from receiving social support to cope with their stress. However, university students might have been able to receive social support from their pets because they may have been living in the same household with them. The goal of the study was to understand how university students were experiencing stress and how they coped with stress during the pandemic, as well as the roles their pets had in their lives during the coronavirus pandemic and to see if pets were an effective source of social support to cope with stress.

The results from the study showed university students experienced high stress due to everyday stressors. Particularly, participants were experiencing stress from their daily life activities, the pandemic, school, and work. The stress was often due to a lack of control. Further, high stress was correlated with lower overall life satisfaction.

Coping strategies were used to help cope with stress, and the strategies were divided into effective coping strategies and ineffective coping strategies. Effective coping strategies were strategies that reduced stress, while ineffective coping strategies increased stress. Effective coping strategies tended to be daily activities, hobbies, self-care, and social support. Active coping strategies, positive reframing, and acceptance also helped reduce stress. These strategies often focused on gaining a sense of control, such as following pandemic protocols, learning something new, exercising, and practicing mindfulness. Further, social support from family was associated with lower stress. Social support from family and friends were linked to higher overall life satisfaction.

Ineffective coping strategies tended to also be from daily activities, hobbies, self-care, and social support, but they were more diverse amongst participants, thus showing some coping strategies were effective for some participants and ineffective for others. Ineffective coping strategies often prevented participants from gaining a sense of control, such as ignoring the pandemic, watching TV, and oversleeping. Additionally, self-distraction, behavioural disengagement, self-blame, venting, and social support from pets were linked to greater stress.

The relationships participants had with their pets also changed due to the pandemic. Participants reported spending more time with their pets and becoming closer to their pets because they were more often home. Pets were found to provide emotional social support and physical social support, but pets were not linked to lower stress. Instead, pets were associated with greater stress. Additionally, pets were often described as a mental break and a distraction from everyday stress.

There were aspects of owning a pet that was associated with greater stress, such as getting access to pet items and vet and grooming services. Again, the access was due to a lack of control. Participants did not have control over pet stores and pet services being open and items being in-stock. Another stressor found was separation anxiety that pets developed because the pets became accustomed to the participants being home with them. Participants reported that they foresaw separation anxiety as a stressor during post-pandemic life, whereby it will be pets having difficulty adjusting to post-pandemic life.

The research findings show the resilience university students were exhibiting during a global pandemic and the important roles pets played during the pandemic. Although pets were not found to be correlated with lower stress, the strong bond participants established with their pets was strong enough to lead to separation anxiety, which highlights the complex relationships people have with animals.

Keywords: stress, stress appraisal, coping, companion animals, pets, university students, social support, coronavirus pandemic