

Hometown Nostalgia and Pet Ownership: An Analysis of Their Impact on Depression and Loneliness Symptoms in College Students

Introduction

In the year 2020 alone, more than 60% of college students at 373 campuses across the United States reported having one or more mental health issues, a drastic increase from 2013 (Lipson et al. 2022). A substantial amount of attention and resources are diverted towards alleviating this urgent issue. Considering the fact that mental health is one of the critical factors that influence the overall well-being and scholastic outcome of college students, investigating the factors that influence their well-being is of utmost importance. The transition to college life is often a time of significant change and adaptation, which can lead to a rise in mental health issues among students. This growing concern for the mental well-being of college students underscores the need for in-depth research to understand and address the factors contributing to their mental health challenges. To navigate this complex issue, it is crucial to explore the interplay between various factors such as pet ownership, extracurricular involvement, and their impact on social isolation and homesickness in college students.

This essay will delve into two pivotal research questions concerning the mental well-being of college students. The first question is that whether pet ownership can reduce social isolation and other mental health issues among college students. The second question hypothesizes that involvement in extracurricular activities is negatively associated with homesickness. By delving into existing research and academic literature, this essay aims to shed light on these factors and their influence

on the mental health of college students. Additionally, potential strategies after examining relevant research studies on the aforementioned hypotheses will be provided, which are that universities may carry out pet-friendly policies, establish cooperation between themselves and local animal shelters or services and encourage students to engage in extracurricular activities.

College life is a transformative phase marked by the pursuit of higher education, the development of independence, and the formation of new social connections. However, this transition can also bring about unique challenges that affect the mental health of students (Cleary, Walter, and Jackson 2011). The stress of academic responsibilities, the physical separation from home, and the demands of adapting to a new environment can lead to feelings of homesickness and loneliness in certain students (Thurber and Walton 2012).

One major challenge that college students often face is the experience of homesickness. This homesickness can be compounded by factors such as the distance from their hometown, a new and unfamiliar environment, and separation from the comfort of their family and home. Homesickness can manifest in various ways, including feelings of sadness, loneliness, and longing for familiar surroundings and people from one's hometown. These emotional struggles can significantly impact the overall mental health and well-being of college students (Thurber and Walton 2012).

Loneliness is another prevalent issue among college students (Diehl et al. 2018). The transition to college can sometimes lead to a sense of isolation, especially for students who are physically distant from their support system comprised of family

members and friends from the past, as well as those who have just come to the university where few acquaintances are known. The challenges of making new friends and adapting to a different social environment can result in a feeling of loneliness and other forms of emotional distress, which, if left unaddressed, may contribute to more severe mental health issues (Thurber and Walton 2012).

To date, universities and colleges have put effort into designing and implementing programs and services addressing the mental health challenges that many students face. These services and programs include but are not limited to on-campus counseling, 24/7 support hotline, and peer support programs. Among them, the on-campus therapy dog programs, a newly emerged program, have proven successful in addressing mental health challenges among college students (Peel, Nguyen, and Tannous 2023). The evidence equips us with a basic, underdeveloped understanding of how pet contributes to the alleviation of mental health issues among college students. Thus, to further this understanding, the following paragraphs will be dedicated to review two research evidence pertaining to the dynamics between pet ownership and mental health issues among college students.

Continuing our investigation into the relationship between pet ownership and social isolation, it is essential to delve deeper into the studies conducted by Barker et al. (2020) and Kretzler et al. (2022). Barker et al.'s (2020) research examines the intricate links between pet ownership and the emotional well-being of college students. Their findings highlight the potential impact of pets on alleviating social

isolation and internalizing symptoms, thereby offering insights into the broader context of college students' mental health.

Specifically, Barker et al.'s (2020) research involved surveys and assessments of college students over multiple years, aiming to understand the influence of pet ownership on their well-being. The study found that students who owned pets, particularly during their early college years, reported lower levels of social isolation and internalizing symptoms, which are often precursors to more severe mental health issues. This suggests that pet ownership could be a valuable source of support and companionship, especially during the crucial transition period into college life.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the positive effects of pet ownership are not solely limited to their companionship but also extend to the creation of a supportive and nurturing environment. College students who own pets often find solace in the unconditional love and companionship provided by their furry or feathered friends. This companionship can significantly mitigate feelings of isolation and loneliness, contributing to an overall sense of well-being (Barker et al. 2020).

A similar, promising effect of pet ownership on emotional distress is confirmed as well in the second study. Kretzler et al.'s (2022) systematic review provides a comprehensive analysis of existing studies exploring the connection between pet ownership and loneliness. This review synthesizes evidence from various sources and contributes to our understanding of how pets can serve as a source of companionship, potentially reducing feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Such insights could

have significant implications for the mental health of college students, particularly in a phase of life marked by newfound independence and responsibilities.

Furthermore, Kretzler et al.'s (2022) review reinforces the idea that pet ownership may serve as a mitigating factor for loneliness and social isolation, as it aggregates findings from multiple studies that report similar positive effects. This body of research suggests that pets can play a vital role in providing emotional support and reducing feelings of isolation, which can be especially beneficial during the challenging transition to college life.

Shifting our focus to the second research question, we aim to understand the relationship between extracurricular involvement and homesickness in college students. The study conducted by Wittrup and Hurd (2021) specifically addresses this connection. This research provides a valuable contribution to our understanding of how participating in extracurricular activities can impact students' feelings of homesickness and, subsequently, their mental health.

Wittrup and Hurd's (2021) study explores how active engagement in extracurricular activities can potentially act as a buffer against homesickness, thereby reducing depressive symptoms among college students. They hypothesize that students who actively participate in extracurricular activities are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and attachment to their college community, thus mitigating the effects of homesickness.

The study by Wittrup and Hurd (2021) involved surveys and interviews with underrepresented college students. It found that those who actively engaged in

extracurricular activities reported lower levels of homesickness and depressive symptoms compared to their peers who were less involved. This suggests that extracurricular activities not only provide an avenue for social connection and a sense of belonging but also play a crucial role in shaping students' emotional well-being during their college years.

Expanding upon the discussion of the two research questions (whether pet ownership attenuates social isolation and other mental health issues among college students; whether involvement in extracurricular activities reduces homesickness), it is evident that exploring the impact of pet ownership and extracurricular involvement on the mental well-being of college students is of paramount importance.

Unlike traditional mental health services offered on campus, which are sometimes avoided by certain students due to the stigma and sense of shame and guilt associated with having mental health issues, pet ownership and extracurricular activities can perhaps serve as alternatives to traditional counseling and therapy sessions because of their nature. To put it into perspective, owning a pet on campus does not label a student as someone who is going through mental health problems in any way, as opposed to what going to the counseling office does. Additionally, counselors and therapists may not be able to attend to students in the way that pets are able to. Similarly, participating in extracurricular activities enables students to disclose their feelings and emotions to their peers once a bond is formed. Some students may feel more comfortable expressing themselves to people of similar age and position, which, in turn, creates reciprocity among students possessing similar challenges in terms of

mental health. This is something that cannot be done in traditional campus mental health services because of ethics.

The foregoing findings can potentially lead to practical strategies aimed at enhancing the mental health of college students. For instance, universities and counseling services may consider promoting pet-friendly policies, establishing collaboration between themselves and local animal shelter and services, and encouraging student engagement in extracurricular activities. Such initiatives could contribute to mitigating feelings of loneliness, social isolation, and homesickness, ultimately fostering a more positive and supportive college experience.

In conclusion, this essay highlights the significance of addressing the mental well-being of college students and the interplay between factors including pet ownership and extracurricular involvement with social isolation and homesickness. The potential insights and practical strategies derived from these investigations have the potential to significantly improve the mental health of college students, making their academic journey more fulfilling and satisfying.

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