

Pets help AIDS survivors through two pandemics

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During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people turned to their pets to help them feel less lonely and isolated. Researchers at the University of California, Davis, wanted to learn what role pets played in

helping those who had already survived one pandemic, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and were now dealing with another. Respondents were recruited from networks serving long-term HIV/AIDS survivors.

"The underlying question in our minds has always been: What role do pets play for people who are so isolated and suffering so much stigma?" said Professor Lynette Hart with the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine. She led a study that examined whether long-term HIV/AIDS survivors fared better during the AIDS or COVID [pandemic](#) and if pets helped reduce their feelings of isolation, sadness and stigma.

Dog owners felt less alone, isolated

The study, published in the journal *Animals*, found that HIV/AIDS survivors felt far more grief, isolation and stigma during the AIDS pandemic than during COVID. It also found that older men, despite experiencing adversity during the AIDS pandemic, were able to cope better during COVID. This was especially the case if they had a dog.

"I don't think dogs are magically making them better, but dogs are making a difference," said Hart. "The older HIV/AIDS survivors may also have more coping strategies, and dogs are part of that. They take their dogs on walks and meet people in their neighborhood and remain more socially connected."

Hart said while [dog owners](#) felt less alone and isolated during both pandemics, cat owners felt especially alone, isolated and unsupported even though they were universal in saying their cat comforted them.

She said supportive pet care service organizations that keep people with special needs and their [companion animals](#) together could focus particularly on providing cat owners greater support.

Many HIV/AIDS survivors lack family support

The researchers conducted a [national survey](#) of mostly older male HIV/AIDS survivors. These long-term survivors are defined as people who developed HIV before 1996. More than 1.2 million people live with AIDS in the U.S., and 300,000 of them became infected before 1996. HIV/AIDS survivors are also 30% more likely to become infected with COVID than the general population.

Long-term survivors reported that they felt their experiences living through the AIDS pandemic were more challenging than their experiences during COVID; the AIDS pandemic had major impacts for decades, and the COVID pandemic for only one to two years. Very few of these HIV/AIDS survivors received [family support](#) in either pandemic; however, these respondents were connected online with other long-term survivors. Hart said that may partially explain these somewhat surprising results, with older men, especially those with dogs, doing so well.

"I think it's important to know that long-term survivors of AIDS are resilient and to get to that point, they had to be. A lot of them would say that animals were a big part of that," said study co-author Ken Gorczyca, founding veterinarian for Pets Are Wonderful Support, or PAWS.

"Having an animal companion gave many a sense of purpose in life, to take care of them, especially at a time in the 1980s and '90s when AIDS was so bad and there was virtually no support from government or many times from your family."

Gorczyca added that experiencing a second pandemic brought many long-term survivors "PTSD feelings," but the power of animal companionship was now well documented. He said many social and animal support agencies and the government stepped up immediately to keep providing support services.

More information: Lynette A. Hart et al, Companion Animals' Roles for AIDS Survivors, Mostly Aging Males, during HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 Pandemics, *Animals* (2022). [DOI: 10.3390/ani12111449](https://doi.org/10.3390/ani12111449)

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