

Unspoken Therapy: Dogs' Contribution to Their Owners' Well-being, Coping Mechanism, and Newfound Meaning in Life

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Introduction: Pet dog ownership offers inspiring stories of love, companionship, and happiness. Dog owners navigating solitary lives are challenged mentally, emotionally, and psychologically, which negatively affects their well-being. Thankfully, a faithful, loving, and spirited companion is present, helping them navigate life with greater ease and resilience while rediscovering life's meaning and purpose. By exploring the lives of empty nesters, unmarried and married couples without children, the researcher, a dog owner and mental health advocate, has gained fresh perspectives, inspirations and a much deeper appreciation for dogs. Motivated by a strong desire to highlight dogs' therapeutic benefits and address mental health concerns, the researcher embarked on this study exploring new ways to promote well-being, develop coping mechanisms, and overcome existential crises. This paper reveals the dynamic struggles of solitary living while unveiling the beauty behind unspoken therapy by a four-legged therapist.

Methodology: This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, exploring the lived experiences of dog owners leading solitary lives with their pets. Data were gathered through unstructured interviews using open-ended questions during personal interactions. Using Lichtman's 3Cs data analysis, significant statements were extracted from specific details towards overarching themes, aiming to capture the deeper meaning of their experiences.

Results: This study explored the experiences of dog owners leading solitary lives with their pets, unveiling dogs' therapeutic benefits on their well-being. When facing challenges, their pets help them cope effectively and rediscover the purpose of their existence. This phenomenon highlights the wonderful coexistence between humans and animals, demonstrating God's supernatural wisdom when He created all living creatures.

Conclusion: People leading solitary lives often face mental health challenges that affect their well-being. Thankfully, the presence of dogs serves as a positive coping strategy that helps alleviate mental health conditions. Given the therapeutic benefits of dogs, it is essential to implement therapeutic interventions that incorporate them.

Practical Value: The findings of this study demonstrate dogs' therapeutic benefits for individuals leading isolated lives. By highlighting their experiences, this research proposes effective coping strategies to alleviate mental health conditions by incorporating dog-assisted interventions in various therapeutic settings. This initiative aims to establish dog-assisted therapy programs in academic institutions, hospitals, private organizations, communities, and wellness and rehabilitation centers.

Directions for Future Research: A considerable gap in related studies suggests further investigation into dogs' therapeutic benefits on well-being. This study serves as a foundational step for future investigations, incorporating dog-assisted interventions across various therapeutic settings. Future studies could expand to a broader audience, including university students, patients in healthcare systems, employees in BPO companies, and pet dog owner communities, exploring different areas where dogs' presence could be beneficial. Quantitative studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of dogs' therapeutic benefits, reinforcing dog-assisted therapy as a reliable intervention in therapies and counselling.

Keywords: well-being, mental health, dogs' therapeutic benefits, coping mechanism, dog-assisted therapy, phenomenological, Philippines

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