

It's often said that dogs are a man's best friend. That statement couldn't be truer in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, except for one important difference. Dogs aren't the only ones that have the potential to serve as their owners' best friends during the pandemic. Cats, horses, birds and many other kinds of animals can offer their owners emotional support during stressful times, said [Megan Mueller](#), assistant professor at Tufts University's Institute for Human-Animal Interaction.

Since the pandemic forced much of the United States into lockdown in mid-March, people have turned to their pets as a source of companionship and emotional support, Mueller said. Not only have peoples' longtime pets offered this solace, pets adopted during the pandemic have especially played an important role in coping with Covid-19 lockdowns, Mueller said.

"People are more socially isolated now because they're not able to see other humans for the most part, especially when things were really locked down," Mueller said. "People are turning to their pets for that type of support that they would normally get from another human."

Given the great benefits Mueller said pets offer to humans, animal shelters across the country have seen an unprecedented increase in demand for adoptable pets, said Lindsay Hamrick, director of policy at the [Humane Society of the United States](#). She said that shelters across the country saw a significant surge in the number of animals being adopted or placed into foster care, with the height of the demand being one week in April, when animals being placed into foster care saw a 700% increase nationwide compared to the same week in April 2019.

Denise LaBuda, grant specialist at [Hopeful Tails Animal Rescue](#), echoed Hamrick's statistics. She said that Hopeful Tails, a foster-based dog rescue in Joliet, Ill., experienced an increase in adoptions and fosters at the start of the pandemic. However, she said the rescue also faced difficulty continuing adoption events at the rescue and partner locations, such as PetSmart, due to Covid-19 restrictions. Instead, Hopeful Tails relied on volunteers and their loyal following on social media to spread awareness about available pets, LaBuda said.

This new method of promoting available pets proved successful for Hopeful Tails, LaBuda said. She noted that while the rescue saw an increase in adoptions and fosters of all types of dogs, the pandemic gave them an opportunity to adopt out adult dogs who had been at the rescue for longer periods of time. "We actually saw an increase in adult dogs who have been with us for quite a while simply because COVID prevented us from continuing to temporarily rescue dogs that were pregnant and adopting out their new puppies," LaBuda said.



Maximus is a nine-and-a-half-month-old Catahoula Leopard Dog currently available for adoption at Hopeful Tails.

Photo courtesy of Hopeful Tails Animal Rescue

Many of the people adopting these dogs were millennials, LaBuda said. She explained that the pandemic heightened an already growing trend in millennials adopting pets, noting “Millennials are having less children these days and choosing pets instead.”



Ella is the Caponi's now 10-month-old kitten they adopted at the beginning of the pandemic.

Photo courtesy of Amanda Caponi

Amanda Caponi is one millennial who expanded her pet family during the pandemic. She and her husband adopted a three-month-old kitten in March whom she says has been a source of comfort during these stressful times. “Our pets and especially having the new kitten took our mind off everything going on,” Caponi said.

Along with the rise in millennials adopting pets during the pandemic, Hamrick said that shelters nationwide saw a significant increase in adoptions by families with working parents and children. She hypothesized that families were especially receptive to adopting during the pandemic because they were spending more time together at home and for the first time had time to train a new pet.

Hamrick also theorized that adoptions have surged because pets help people cope with stressful times like the pandemic. “We know that animals are super helpful in reducing anxiety and generally helping people cope with stressful times. So, it’s possible a lot of people reported feeling a little bit better about the pandemic because they were able to foster a shelter animal or have a pet in their home for the first time,” Hamrick said.

Mueller offered a scientific explanation to Hamrick’s hypothesis about pets’ healing effect on their owners. She said specific research hasn’t been completed yet about how people have benefited from owning pets during the pandemic, but in general, studies have shown that pets offer an important source of emotional support and attachment for their owners. “People are really attached to their pets and turn to them as a source of emotional support,” Mueller said. “Especially during stressful times, there’s been some research on anxiety, stress, and how pets might be a way that people cope with anxiety and stress.”

She added that research has shown that pets can also have health benefits for their owners, such as improving cardiac health and possibly even boosting the immune system, both of which could be beneficial in lessening the effects of illnesses like Covid-19.

Mueller also offered a scientific explanation to the trend Hamrick and the Humane Society of the United States saw in families with children adopting during the pandemic. Because many children are taking classes online this year, they aren’t experiencing the same level of socialization as they normally would. Mueller said pets could potentially fill the void left by the

lack of in-person education for children. "Interacting with a pet could be a way that kids could still socialize with someone other than their parents and the absence of being able to socialize with peers," she said.

However, while Mueller said there are great benefits for humans who interact with pets during stressful times, animals sometimes struggle to adapt to the changes in their environment. She said that depending on the pet, some may feel stressed due to the increased activity of having their owners at home more than usual. Mueller also said now that many people are returning to work outside of the house, pets can experience separation anxiety since they have gotten used to having their owners around so often.

Mueller added that it can be extremely stressful for newly adopted pets to transition into a new home, even more so if they are surrendered by their new owners shortly after being adopted. LaBuda said Hopeful Tails has seen this trend, with pets adopted during the pandemic being surrendered due to their owners' financial troubles, non-pet-friendly housing and other unforeseen circumstances. "It literally hurts our hearts to see this, especially seeing the confusion and sadness from these pets," LaBuda said.

Educating pet owners and providing resources to the community are extremely important to prevent these types of surrenders, LaBuda said. Hamrick said that shelters across the country were able to expand community programs like free pet food pantries and low-cost shot clinics after the initial surge in demand for pets at the beginning of the pandemic.

She said that many shelters are currently seeing a lower-than-average adoption rate due to so few animals being left in shelters after the surge in the spring. "Most of the animal shelters have really shifted their focus away from taking care of animals in the building to being able to help anybody in the community keep their pets. The main things that are effective for that are to have free pet food pantries, to have free, accessible veterinary care for pets, and to have behavioral support programs," Hamrick said.

Hopeful Tails is one of the shelters Hamrick speaks of that has used the pandemic as a way to shift their focus to helping pets in their community. LaBuda said that the rescue has expanded community programs like pet food drives and low-cost shot clinics, both of which the rescue is offering in November. She said for Hopeful Tails to continue to hold these events, though, they need as much community support as possible, whether it be in the form of a financial

Hopeful Tails
Animal Rescue



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Hopeful Tails and animal shelters around the country are using the pandemic as a time to expand their community programs.

Photo courtesy of Hopeful Tails Animal Rescue

contribution, donation of an item on their ["wish list,"](#) such as dog food or newspaper, or otherwise.

Hopeful Tails said community support is especially important in the time of the pandemic since many shelters have lost key fundraising opportunities and partnerships due to Covid. LaBuda said Hopeful Tails has lost over \$25,000 since the beginning of the pandemic because of lost partnerships with companies like Subaru and PetSmart. To make up for these lost fundraising monies, LaBuda said Hopeful Tails has turned to the community for financial support. Yet, the rescue recognizes not everyone is able to contribute financially to their cause. She said a simple follow on one of their [social media accounts](#) is a great way to support Hopeful Tails without having to spend any money.

Hamrick said that along with donating and supporting shelters on social media, people can also support their [local animal rescues](#) by fostering a pet or volunteering. She says she hopes the greater support for animal shelters will continue once the pandemic subsides so that shelters can continue to expand programs for their communities. "Our hope is that over time, animal shelters will not be buildings full of homeless pets," Hamrick said. "They will be community centers that really provide resources to people in the community who have pets."

The cat's out of the bag. Hamrick said the pandemic has made people aware of pets' unique ability to act as a source of comfort and companionship through stressful times. Whether it's a newly adopted cat or a dog someone's had for 10 years, Mueller said all kinds of pets can offer intangible benefits and help prevent their owners from being dogged by Covid-19 lockdown loneliness.

Audio transcript

NATURAL SOUND: Dog barking (Audio courtesy of Hopeful Tails Animal Rescue)

NARRATION: That's Maximus, a nine-and-a-half-month-old catahoula leopard dog up for adoption at Hopeful Tails Animal Rescue in Joliet, Illinois. He's currently living in a foster home waiting to be adopted by his forever family. Right now, Maximus is one of the only dogs Hopeful Tails has available for adoption, but at the beginning of the pandemic, animal shelters across the country were overwhelmed by demand.

NARRATION: When lockdown orders were put in place back in March, many people turned to pets for comfort and companionship. On top of the pets people already had, many people decided to adopt or foster a pet to fill the void left by the lack of contact with other humans.

NARRATION: This led to animal shelters nationwide seeing a huge increase in demand. The Humane Society of the United States' Director of Policy, Lindsay Hamrick, says this demand was completely unprecedented.

SOT: "There was one week in April where foster care nationally jumped about 700% compared to the same week, the previous year. So there was a huge amount of support from the public to try to get animals out of the shelters."

NARRATION: Hopeful Tails says the majority of people who have been adopting its dogs during the pandemic are millennials.

NATURAL SOUND: Dog playing with new owner (Courtesy of Denise LaBuda)

NARRATION: That's one millennial playing with the dog he adopted from Hopeful Tails this spring. The shelter says millennials have recently been adopting pets instead of having children. The pandemic is only heightening this rising trend.

NARRATION: Amanda Caponi is another millennial who has taken advantage of the time she has been spending at home and used it to expand her pet family. She and her husband Paul already had three dogs and two cats prior to the pandemic. But in March, the couple's pet family got even bigger when they adopted a kitten.

NATURAL SOUND: Cat meowing/playing (Audio courtesy of Amanda Caponi)

NARRATION: Ella is the Caponi's now 10-month-old kitten. Caponi says she's been a constant companion to her and her husband during the pandemic.

SOT: "Paul and I both were working at home at the beginning of the pandemic, so it was an adjustment for us. I'd say our pets and especially having the new kitten took our mind off everything going on."

NARRATION: There's a scientific explanation to the feeling of comfort Caponi says she feels around her pets. Megan Mueller is an assistant professor at Tufts University's Institute for Human-Animal Interaction. She says research shows that pets are a source of emotional support and attachment for their owners, especially during stressful times.

SOT: “It makes sense that people are more socially isolated now because they're not able to see other humans for the most part, especially when things were really locked down. So it may be that people are turning to their pets for that type of support that they would normally get from another human.”

NARRATION: Although there are a lot of benefits for humans to have pets around during the pandemic, Mueller says animals sometimes feel stress when their environment suddenly changes. She says this is especially true when an animal is adopted and then returned to the rescue after a short period of time.

NARRATION: Hopeful Tails has seen a lot of these surrenders during the pandemic. The shelter says some owners don't fully understand the responsibility that comes with owning a pet or don't have the means to support one.

NARRATION: To prevent these surrenders, Hopeful Tails and other shelters offer programs like pet food pantries or low-cost vaccine clinics to help make sure owners can support their animals under any circumstances.

NATURAL SOUND: Pouring food at pet food pantry event (courtesy of Denise LaBuda)

NARRATION: That's the sound of some of Hopeful Tails' volunteers preparing for one of the shelter's monthly pet food pantry events.

NARRATION: Hamrick says shelters nationwide have been able to expand these community programs during the pandemic. This is possible because rescues emptied their shelters after the initial surge in adoptions in the spring. Hamrick says they now have many fewer animals under their roofs, so they can turn their attention to the community.

SOT: “Our hope is that over time, animal shelters will not be buildings full of homeless pets. They will be community centers that really provide resources to people in the community who have pets.”

NARRATION: But shelters can't continue holding these events unless they get help from their community. Shelters like Hopeful Tails have lost important fundraising opportunities due to the pandemic, so they're now relying even more on their community. Hopeful Tails says anything from a monetary donation, an item on their wish list, or even just a follow on their social media page helps support local shelters

NARRATION: Now that people have seen the benefits of owning pets, animal shelters nationwide are hoping even more animals will be able to find their forever homes and become their owners' new best friends.