Caring for Sick Pets Linked to Increased Depression and Anxiety

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Caregiver burden, or the stress of caring for someone with a chronic or terminal illness, is linked to depression, social isolation and poor quality of life. But tending to a sick pet might trigger the same troubles, suggest new findings published in Veterinary Record, reports Medical News Today.

For the study, researchers from Kent State University in Ohio recruited 600 dog or cat owners. Subsequently, scientists whittled the group down to 119 participants with pets diagnosed with a chronic or terminal illness. Then they matched these individuals with 119 people with healthy pets. (Researchers also matched each group for age, sex and type of pet owned before assessing folks for their level of stress, anxiety and depression and their quality of life.)

Findings revealed that those with sick pets were more likely to have elevated levels of stress and to exhibit signs of anxiety or depression. These pet owners suffered from a poorer quality of life. Additionally, researchers noted that veterinarians also experienced stress from caregiving.

“If burdened [pet owners] have difficulty separating their own distress from medically necessary and appropriate veterinary attention, service overutilization may occur, […] contributing to longer hours for the veterinarian,” wrote the study’s authors.

Scientists disclosed several limitations of the inquiry, including that the participants were primarily highly educated wealthy people. But experts said this initial research opens the door for future studies on the impact of veterinary caregiving on clients, as well as how their emotional distress might affect the well-being of veterinarians.

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