Author’s response to reviews

Title: The power of support from companion animals for people living with mental health problems: A systematic review and narrative synthesis of the evidence

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Author’s response to reviews:

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Sharon Lawn

BMC Psychiatry

Friday, 3 November 2017
Dear Sharon,

RE: The power of pet support for people living with a mental health problem: A systematic review and narrative synthesis of the evidence

Thank you for your email dated the 3rd of November 2017, for the helpful set of reviewers’ comments and the requested revisions. We have now revised the manuscript in line with the comments from the reviewers, which we feel has strengthened the manuscript. Please find below a point-by-point response to each point raised by the reviewers. Revisions are evident within the manuscript through the use of tracked changes and highlights as requested.

Editor Comments:

Reviewer 2:

I have no further comments. This is a well written paper about an important topic for which there is limited research.

Thank you for your comments.

Reviewer reports:

Lian Hill (Reviewer 1): I really enjoyed reading this article manuscript and think it gave a very good overview of what is in the literature in terms of the impact of pet ownership for those with diagnosed mental health conditions.

There are clear, well stated research questions, with a well documented methodology and analysis process. There are also some very relevant and interesting observations made within the discussion.

Thank you for your comments.

I have a few comments as listed below; I have organised this feedback by providing the line number which the comment is relevant to:

64 - comma missing after the word 'relationship’?

Comma now added after the word relationship.
96-97 - It would be interesting to read how these figures translate to the percentage of ownership within the population (i.e. 11.5 million dogs, 10 million cats; what percentage of the population own pets?)

The corresponding percentages of households owning cats and dogs have now been added to the manuscript as suggested.

99 - "...specifically to health..." - might be better to specify here "mental" health as there is quite a body of research looking at pets and health (i.e. with physiological outcomes).

The sentence has now been amended to specify mental health as suggested by reviewer 1.

103-105 - The statement here about there being no systematic review of the role and effects of the pet-human relationship is quite broad. There are a couple of other "systematic reviews" that have been conducted, despite some methodological issues with them or not exactly the same as this current study, this statement could be more specific about what is unique to this systematic review (Please see papers: Islam, A., & Towell, T. (2013). Cat and dog companionship and well being: A systematic review. International Journal of Applied Psychology, 3(6), 149-155; Beetz, A., Ulnas-Moberg, K., Julius, H., & Kotrschal, K. (2012). Psychosocial and psychophysiological effects of human-animal interactions: the possible role of oxytocin. Frontiers in Psychology, 3, 1-15).

We agree and have now specified within the manuscript that there have been no previous systematic reviews related to the role of companion animals for those with diagnosed mental health conditions.

128 - the section on "underlying theoretical framework" might be better placed within the Introduction (i.e. around the information presented in lines 77-82 discussing approaches to self-management/care) as it more so defines the theory as opposed to a description of the methodology used within the study.

We agree and have moved the underlying theoretical framework section to the introduction as suggested.
421 - Within this quote, (Ford) is referenced at the end, every other quotation a number is used, is it is not consistent with the format of other quotes. I think this could be an error?

Yes, this was an error. The word Ford has been replaced with the corresponding reference (e.g. 36).

429 - I think this should read "...sense of preparedness...", not "...sense a preparedness...")?

Yes, thank you. I have changed the text to read sense of preparedness.

527 - Extra ] at the end of the reference [38,39].

Extra ] removed from text.

609-610 - Similar to line 99 (and previous feedback provided about information provided in lines 103-105), if this is the case and there are no other systematic reviews, it might be good to make it clear that this a first attempt at a systematic review looking at benefits of pet ownership for those with a "diagnosed mental health disorder" (as stated in line 653).

This has been clarified within the text at the sections highlighted by reviewer 1.

709 - I think it would also be worth noting why there is a lack of randomised trials on this area of research.

We have now added to the manuscript (lines 761-763) that it is perhaps unsurprising that there is a lack of randomised trials in this area of research given the pragmatic difficulties associated with randomising individuals or families to pet or non-pet owners within any RCT.

722-723 - I think a comment about this reason for excluding a paper could be in the Methodology section, and present it as part of reasons for exclusion (as presented in PRISMA flowchart).

We have now moved this sentence to the methodology section and ensured that this is covered in the PRISMA flowchart (e.g. not related to the impact of pet ownership on diagnosed mental health conditions or mental health components of long-term physical conditions or the nature of the sample was not clear).
Other comments:

There was no discussion about the quality or rigor of the studies that were included in the analysis. It was stated within the 'Methodology' that 'Quality Assessment' was undertaken, and how this was done, but how the scores assigned to each paper was not clear aside from referring to the table. Possibly some of the information presented in the Discussion about quality (i.e. 645-646 discusses a little about the rigor of the quantitative studies) may be better placed within the Methodology? As well as the information presented in lines 707-708? Line 683 refers to the "...low quality of evidence identified within the review.", but how the evidence is of low quality and why this might be is not discussed elsewhere.

We have now added a paragraph to the methodology section as suggested under quality assessment outlining the quality scores derived for each included study and referring the readers the relevant additional files should they require further information on the outcomes of the assessments. We have also now included more detail in in the discussion section on potential reasons for the lack of RCTs.

I hope these revisions meet with your approval and I would like to thank the reviewers for their helpful contributions to the article. Should you have any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Brooks
Lecturer