

PAWSITIVE CONNECTION: WIDOWERS' LIFE EXPERIENCES ON THERAPEUTIC VALUE OF OWNING DOMESTIC PETS

ABSTRACT

The loss of a close friend, partner, or psychological support can have severe consequences, including trauma, worsened health, and increased mortality risk. Studying the therapeutic value of owning domestic pets for widowers is urgent, as it can lead to more effective interventions that promote well-being and improve psychological health outcomes.

Hence, this study aimed to unravel and explore the life experiences of the widowers and the therapeutic value of owning domestic pets. It employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, utilizing in-depth interviews to collect data from nine (9) widowers. The data was analyzed using a six-phase guide to thematic analysis to come up with themes that explored the experiences of widowers, how pets helped them in coping and their insights. The findings of the study revealed themes that represent the challenges experienced by widowers, namely; (1) desolating experience, and; (2) yearning for affection. On the other hand, it was also revealed that pets have aided widowers to cope with the mentioned challenges; (1) sense of security; (2) relief and delight through pet, and; (3) attachment and companionship. Their insights are, (1) ease loneliness and longing; (2) provide comfort and warmth; and (3) provide entertainment and happiness. Moreover, the study concluded that pets have an influence on the coping capacity of widowers and owning pets keep them from developing pervasive depression and loneliness. Finally, the study recommended community interventions that aim to improve the overall well-being of older adults utilizing pets or non-human companions.

Keywords: life experiences, challenges, pets, insights, coping, older adults, widowers

INTRODUCTION

People dream of having a long, happy life with their spouses. However, what if the person that someone intends to spend the rest of their life with passes away before they do? Losing a close friend, intimate partner, or psychological support is equivalent to losing control of half of one's life and has dreadful repercussions (Atalay & Staneva, 2020).

For those left behind losing a partner is traumatic. It can exacerbate health issues, increase the risks of morbidity and mortality, and evokes feelings of loneliness and social isolation (Cybulski et al., 2022; Wister, 2019; Raina, et al., 2018; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017; Dahlberg et al., 2016), desolation (Spencer, 2021; Sahin et al., 2018; Tshifhumulo & Itsweni, 2018), and incessant yearning for the lost affection of their beloved (Vander Kaap-Deeper et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2019; Lyons et al., 2017; Nath, 2019). It may even lead to further mental health issues (Majid & Ennis, 2022; Zielińska-Więczkowska et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019; Wister, 2019; Kristiansen et al., 2019).

Globally, mental health problems are common among adults aged 60 years and older, particularly following the loss of loved ones (Cybulski et al., 2019; Wister, 2019). Alarming, it has been discovered that loneliness and social isolation are associated with poor mental health outcomes (Nath, 2019) and are thought to cause loneliness in elderly persons (Raina et al., 2019). However, interest in the mental health outcomes of older persons has only just begun to receive the attention it merits (Cybulski et al., 2022). In the Philippines, twenty percent of elderly Filipinos are estimated to have a mental condition (Carandang et al., 2020). While in Mindanao, studies on older people and widowhood concentrate on remarriage and aspects of older people's mental health while residing with their families (Kim et al., 2021; Abalos, 2019). This further implies that there are lacking studies focusing on improving the mental health of the elderly in the country (Carandang et al., 2019).

Furthermore, previous studies have not mentioned non-human companions, particularly how they can help widowers overcome the loneliness and social isolation brought on by their circumstances (Bowen et al., 2020). However, empirical evidence has revealed the benefits of having pets. In connection, the study by Carandang et al. (2020) focused on the mental health condition of elderly Filipinos using quantitative methods. It did not focus on the strategies that helped them to cope. Meanwhile, the study by Kim et al. (2021) discussed remarriage and mental health of older adults, and Abalos (2019) focused on identifying the determinants of health and well-being of older adults, which utilized secondary data only from 2007 to 2010. Due to the mentioned gaps, the researchers find it relevant to conduct this study.

Moreover, studies have shown that owning a pet can lower the incidence of depression, loneliness, and anxiety in later life (Gee et al., 2017). Understanding the potentially effective interventions that can encourage healthy aging, particularly in older persons (Hawskin & Tip, 2021; Geneve et al., 2020). Accordingly, owning a dog can enhance the psychological well-being of socially isolated older adults and provide companionship, social support, a sense of purpose, and meaning in life (Geneve et al., 2020; Ghan et al., 2020; Mueller et al., 2018), as well as psychological and emotional comfort (Hawskin & Tip, 2021; Ikeuchi et al., 2021; Friedman et al., 2020; Rartschen et al., 2020). Pets also assist widowers in overcoming lapses in socialization (Rartschen et al., 2020; Gee et al., 2017), reduce stress (Kelenkoski, 2020), boost their sense of happiness (Friedman et al., 2020), and encourage physical activity and healthy living (Geneve et al., 2020; Curl et al., 2016).

Despite the possible advantages, there is a deficiency of research on the particular encounters of widowers who possess pets. Comprehending the exceptional challenges and benefits of owning pets for widowers can assist in informing therapeutic interventions that could enhance psychological health outcomes for this group. In addition, given that the world is still grappling with a global pandemic, examining the therapeutic significance of having pets has become even more imperative. As quarantine measures leave many people feeling socially isolated and lonely, having a pet could offer a much-needed source of comfort and companionship. Consequently, it is crucial to study the therapeutic value of owning domestic pets for widowers. By gaining insight into this group's experiences, more effective interventions could be developed to boost psychological health outcomes and promote well-being.

The study can be anchored on Mueller's Theory of Human-Animal Interaction (2014) and Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (1950, as cited in Leong et al., 2022). The former theory emphasizes that human and animal relationships are common and distinct across the lifespan and shows that attachment and emotional attachment with animals are related to positive physiological, cognitive, socio-emotional, and moral outgrowth for humans (Bosacki,

2019). The latter is a theory introduced in the 1950s that enlightened how people of older ages are vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation because losing someone and a sense of connection in the community can cause changes in one's perception of the world. It has been linked to a higher risk of mental and physical conditions (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014), which may indicate regret and loneliness when older adults look back—an indication of despair (LibreText, 2020; Santrock, 2019).

The researchers' intentions and goals were emphasized by unraveling the experiences of widowers who own domestic pets. In addition, the results supported the notion of the potential benefits of pets for the overall well-being of older adults in later life. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by widowers after being left alone by their partners?
2. How does owning pets help widowers cope with psychological, physical, and emotional challenges after being left alone by their partners?
3. What insights can widowers share about owning a pet and how it relieves isolation and loneliness?

Finally, this phenomenological study only explored the experiences of widowers residing in Davao del Sur's locality. This study's findings addressed the lack of studies on the topic of interest and indicate the possible interventions involving animal companions to support widowed older adults.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Nine (9) widowers were chosen to participate in the study. The sample size was based on the criteria set by Creswell and Poth (2018), which indicated that phenomenological studies include at least five to 25 informants to arrive at data saturation. This study was conducted within areas of Davao Del Sur, Philippines.

Instrument

To collect data, the researchers conducted one-on-one in-depth interviews using a semi-structured Interview Guide Questionnaire. It was a set of carefully designed and related open-ended questions that were constructed wherein the participants were allowed to answer the questions freely and in-depth. Berger (2011) indicated that this method allowed participants to express their ideas/views and attitudes for the researchers' benefit. The interview guide helped the interviewers to focus and organize the processes of thinking and questioning during the interview (Bird, 2016).

Design and Procedure

As this study aimed to explore widowers' lived experiences and the benefits of owning domestic pets, it employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach. The qualitative research design is a natural inquiry process to gain a more profound knowledge of how pets may benefit widowers (Creswell, 2013). In response, the researchers observed respect and open-mindedness to facilitate the design approach to gathering data. During the data analysis, the researchers were vigilant for signs of bias to ensure that no data fabrication or falsification was done. The primary data collection was maintained comprehensively and concisely. Thus, the researchers followed the six-phase guide of Clarke and Braun (2006) for conducting a thematic analysis.

Ethical Consideration

In this study, the researchers adhered to the UM Digos College Research ethics committee and kept a keen watch on ethical guidelines to protect the researchers and the prospective

participants. According to Arifin (2018), ethical issues are salient with the vulnerable groups invited to partake in in-depth interview processes because of the nature of qualitative studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges Faced by Widowers

This section presented the challenges the widowers faced after their wives' death. In the analysis, two themes emerged, namely; (1) *desolation experiences* and; (2) *yearning for affection*. Identifying the challenges faced by the widowers is relevant in this study because it served as the benchmark to identify the benefits of owning and raising domestic pets.

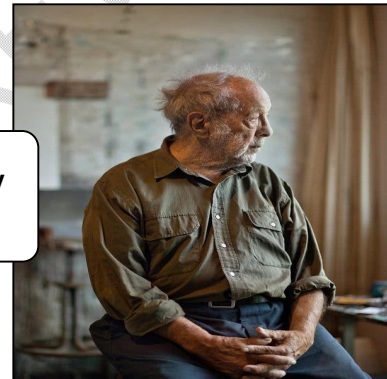
Based on the findings, the responses of the participants revolved around the psychological well-being of widowers, which led to isolation, loneliness, and a sense of hopelessness. A theme illustration in Figure 1 was made to facilitate a visual understanding of the findings.

Desolation Experience



Source: <https://pin.it/6FSeGz>

Yearning for Affection



Source: <http://pin.it/6q75fDb>

Challenges faced by
widowers

Figure 1. Theme Illustration of Challenges faced by Widowers

Desolating Experience. The passing of a loved one is not an experience that anyone can quickly and hurriedly accept. For widowers, the death of their wives leads to desolation. When asked about how they felt immediately after the passing of their wives, the respondents shared that they have found themselves distancing from their families. The participants consciously distance and remove themselves from the care and sight of their children. There was also a lingering feeling of loneliness, hopelessness, and emptiness.

Participant 1, called Yo Carling, is 71 years old and lost his wife at 42. Losing his wife impacted him enough to make him live alone with his dogs, far from his family. Yo Carling was aware that he was distancing himself from his children, a hard decision but a favorable one. He believed that distancing himself from his loved ones would prevent him from experiencing loss once again.

“Syempre nagoul kong taman sa pagkawala sa akong asawa. Mao tong nagdesisyon nalang ko nga magpuyo nga ako ra usa. Ug karon, naa ang akong mga iro kauban nako sa balay.” (Of course, I got distraught because my wife is gone. That was why I decided to just live on my own. And now, I have my dogs at home). RQ1_P1_017

Moreover, participant 7 is Sir Jo, who is 60 years old and lost his wife at 45. He did not remarry and is a waterfall of worry and self-blame whenever he is alone. He said:

“Daghan, daghan mag flashback sa akong labi nag ako nalang isa nya mag meditate ko sometimes ma blame nako ako self maybe lapses and then kining mga worries nako daghan labi na karon tiguwang nata unsa bay mahitabo.” (A lot (of problems). I get flashbacks, especially when I am alone or meditating. Sometimes I blame myself, maybe I had lapses, and I have worries that are becoming plenty as I age.) RQ1_P7_018

The findings are supported by the study of Sahin et al. (2018), which found that older men who have lost their wives manifest desolation. This is also true with Spencer (2019) and Tshifhumulo and Itsweni (2018), who found that spouses left behind experience loneliness, hopelessness, and dread, which characterize desolation. It also conforms with the study of Dahlberg et al. (2018), which indicated that as older adults, social support networks diminish and weaken, leading to higher risks of loneliness and depressive tendencies. Growing older, widowers are more susceptible to feeling empty and alone (Zielińska-Więczkowska et al., 2020; Nath, 2019; Kristiansen et al., 2019; Dahlberg et al., 2018; Perrigchiello et al., 2016; Cohen-Mansfield et al., 2016). This implies that over the years, older people's emotions intensify because of their age, leading to more pronounced feelings of desolation and a higher risk of depression.

Yearning for Affection. After losing a lover, friend, and longtime life partner, the spouse left behind feels a sense of longingness and desire for their wife's presence is inevitable. This was a challenging experience that the participants of this study had to face years and years after their wives passed away. Consequently, this affected the overall well-being of widowers.

According to Farming Jun, often, he misses his wife. He imagines his wife, healthy and still alive, living with their family. Sometimes, he would have dreams about his wife, her smile, voice, and loving and caring gestures. Farming Jun said:

“Gina imagine nalang nako akong asawa na kauban nako pero wala najud diay. Usahay kay magdamgo ko nga naa ra sya permi sa akong tapad. Usahay makalipay, pero sakit siya sa buot nga wala na akong asawa.” (I imagine that my wife is still with us, but she is gone in reality. Sometimes, I would dream that she was always by my side. Sometimes it makes me happy but it pains me, knowing that she is gone). RQ1_P2_040

Apparently, Farming Jun longs for his wife. Unfortunately, this experience may become detrimental to attempts to move on in the absence of their wives. They continue to live in the pain of losing the person whom they lived most of their lives with.

Further, participant 5, Tay Fernando, is 62 years old and lost his wife when he was 57. Tay Fernando had no child with his wife, making his deceased wife the only person he valued for the rest of his life. With his wife gone, Tay Fernando is left with memories and emotions and no one to share them with. He yearns to talk with his wife even today, said:

“Ahm, kanang maglihok ko nga ako ra usa dri sa balay ug wala ko maestorya kay we were together for 40 years na and it suddenly happens nga nagkasakit sya tas di na nya kinaya.” (When I handle stuff at home, I do not have anybody to talk to because I was accustomed to her presence for almost 40 years). RQ1_P5_027

The findings conform with the study of Van der Kaap-Deeder et al. (2021), older adult widowers are more psychologically and emotionally vulnerable when faced with complicated and tragic life circumstances. This implies that the age of the widowers implies their susceptibility to negatively experiencing the loss of their wife. Also, the findings are in line with the findings of Morgan et al. (2019) and Lyons et al. (2017), which both supported that spouses who are left to mourn the death of their spouse manifest yearnings. They become preoccupied with the memories of the past.

The findings could be further elaborated on by Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development (1950 as cited in Leong et al., 2022), suggesting how people of older ages are vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation. To lose someone and a sense of connection in the community can cause changes in one's perception of the world, and it has been linked to a higher risk of mental and physical conditions (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014). The theory also supported the claims that aging amplifies emotional and psychological experiences. Also, older adult widowers' constancy of psychological preoccupation with the past can be explained by this theory. Nevertheless, this study's participants faced challenges after their wives' passing.

How Pets Help Widowers Cope

This section presented the themes that emerged in the attempt to determine how having pets have helped widowers cope with the challenges they face after losing their wives. Based on the findings, three themes, namely; (1) *sense of security*; (2) *relief and delight through pets*; and (3) *attachment and companionship*. A theme illustration was crafted to facilitate a visual understanding of how pets helped widowers cope with losing their wives.



Figure 2. Theme Illustration of How Pets Helped Widowers Face challenges

Sense of Security. One of the three ways that pets can help widowers cope with their challenges is their capacity to offer feelings of security. Based on the analysis of the statement of the widower participants of this study, it was found that owning pets provides widowers a sense of security in three aspects, namely; (1) physical, (2) financial, and (3) emotional. The findings revealed that widower participants felt a sense of physical security in owning dogs. Their dogs served as guards of their homes. Their pets kept strangers and evil-doers away from the homes of the widowers. Yo Carling shared that he would be alarmed whenever his pet dogs bark and become much more attentive to his surroundings.

“Ahw kani sila kay kusog kaayo mo aw-aw, kung nay ga tawo muadto sa akong payag, makabalo ko kung nay mga tao kay muosig man dayon ni sila.” **(They bark when there is someone in my house, and I would know if there are other people).** RQ2_P1_042

A pet dog's tendency to bark and be vigilant of any sound and foreign disturbance in their surroundings keeps widowers feeling physically safe from harm. Yo Carling's pet dogs are named Batoytoy and Jerry. He had two dogs which made him feel physically safe and far from danger. Similarly, Tay Elmo has a dog as well. He said:

“Diri sa balay kay makatabang sila mubantay sa amoa. Mo aw-w man dayon ni basta tay Makita nga tay padulong na tao. Pero di man ni sila mamaak noon kay buutan man ni sila.” **(They can help by guarding and protecting us; they bark when they see people reaching our house. However, they do not bite because they are all good dogs).** RQ2_P3_050

In terms of emotional security, dogs are not vicious animals. They are disciplined with a good owner, and pet dogs are helpful for Tay Elmo. He also said that his pets do not bite, which may reflect how he is as an owner. Living alone, their pet dogs assured Tay Elmo that he would leave his apartment with his dogs, not fearing that a burglary may take place. In terms of emotional security, Sir Jo said:

“Dili jud ko ganahan (pets) pero dili pa jud ingon nga as in ganahan kay ko pero diha nako na realize pag naa diay kay pet ma divert diay nimo imong attention didto sa pet mao nang as of this moment ganahan kay ko mamuhig pet. Naka epekto jud sya sa ako challenges nga na experience ang pag amoma og mga pets is naa siyay ka avenue nga ma divert imong kaugalingon didto makwakwan imuhang mga problema. **(Before my wife passed away, I did not want to take care of pets, especially dogs and cats, but now I realize that if you have a pet, you can divert your attention towards them. It helps in the challenges I have experienced because you can divert yourself towards your pet and can reduce stress in life).** RQ1_P7_028

Sir Jo shares his experience of initially not wanting to take care of pets but eventually realizing that having a pet can provide a diversion from life's challenges and can help reduce stress. Further, he explains that pets can divert one's attention away from challenges and problems, which can help reduce stress. This suggests that pets can serve as a source of comfort and emotional support for their owners, and can contribute to overall emotional well-being. The passage highlights the positive impact that pets can have on their owners' emotional security, particularly during difficult times.

Furthermore, the findings align with the conclusion of the study by Ghan et al. (2020) that owning dogs offers a personal sense of security. They also indicated that older adults benefit from the sense of protection and security that dogs offer. It also conforms with the public perceptions of the capacity of pets as service dogs to lead happier and better lives (Gibson & Olivia, 2022). The bond between the pet and the human intensifies how widowers might perceive the presence of their pets. The lapses in human socialization that widowers have lost, the sense of security, and the assurance that someone will always be there for them

and their pet animals can help them cope (Gee et al., 2017; Bowen et al., 2020). Dogs, in particular, are found to be nonjudgmental, unconditionally accepting, nearly always available, and provide a haven in times of stress (Sable, 2013), reflecting the development of deep human attachment. They respond to the needs of their humans.

Relief and Delight Through Pets. To deal with the feelings of loneliness, desolation, and yearning, the responses of the widower participants displayed how their pets provided them relief from the burden of loneliness and feelings of isolation after losing their loved ones. Their pets' presence, playfulness, and very nature bring pleasure to the widowers.

For instance, Farming Jun shared that they have someone to talk with through their pets. At random times, talking with their pets becomes a daily activity, mainly when they are alone or working alone. Their pet's presence provides them the comfort of someone willing to listen to them unconditionally. Farming Jun said:

"Usahay sad kay kung naa ko sa uma kay estoryahon nako sila sa akong kasubo ug kalipay. Mao to moestorya ko sila usahay lay mahimoot nalang kos akong kaugalingon." **(Sometimes, when I am at our farm, I talk to them about life's sadness and happiness. That is why when I do talk to them. I would be glad for myself).** RQ2_P2_074

Similarly, Tay Elmo mentioned that their pet alleviated loneliness and yearning. By simply playing, cuddling, and having small interactions with pets provide liberation from negatively draining emotions.

"Matambalan niya ang akong kamingaw, hilig man gud ni sya makipagdula." **(They can cure the loneliness I felt. Then they also like to play with me).** RQ2_P3_034

Pets also become a channel through which widowers can channel their caring behaviors previously addressed to their deceased wives. Physical contact with pets can be explained by Hawskin and Tip (2021) who provided evidence that pets convey benefits for increased motivation and behavioral activation, reduced risk behaviors, increased negative feelings, and emotional strain. Boosts in the mentioned feelings and behavior allow widowers to cope with the challenges such as loneliness and desolation. The inherent benefits of pets may have been the key to widowers not being engulfed by pervasive depression and anxiety (Gee et al., 2017). Additionally, the study's results were congruent with the study by Kalenkoski and Thompson (2021), which indicated that owning pets, playing, walking, and exercising with pets and companion animals provide natural happiness and meaning and reduce stress beyond other pleasurable activities of older Americans. The finding supports Well (2019), which provided that interaction with pets induces the release of oxytocin, a hormone that lowers the stress and anxiety of a person. It scientifically explained how widowers felt better and more active while interacting with their pets.

Attachment and Companionship. To widowers who were previously very intimate with their wives, yearning for attention, someone to talk to, and just being playful is a challenge they must deal with. The constant physical companionship they feel may become a challenging feat they must endure for the rest of their days. Fortunately, although pets cannot truly replace their wife's roles, pets are excellent companions. Hence it is not surprising that attachment to non-human companions is standard.

During the in-depth interviews, one researcher-investigator mentioned that pets, particularly dogs, maybe a 'man's best friend'. Yo Carling agreed with the statement, and he said:

"Oo ingon ana gyud tama gyud ka (dog is a man's best friend). Kay bisan asa ko padulong kay sunod-sunod pud ni sila. Kung mahubog ko kay kuyugan pud ko nila muoli." **(Yes, I believe in that saying (dog is a man's best friend). Because they**

will never leave me wherever I go. If I am drunk, they will accompany me back home). RQ2_P1_048

Pets provide widowers with more than just someone to accompany them but the reassurance that they will not be left behind. Almost like a sentiment that they could retrace back to when they were left alone by their deceased wives, widowers constantly yearn for a presence of a companion to be near them all the time, and their pets can provide that. Findings are supported by Ghan et al. (2020) study, which revealed that one of the benefits of owning a pet is the capacity to develop a sense of companionship with humans. Pets, such as dogs and cats, make older adults feel that they have someone alongside them, a friend and companion who will willingly be ever-present whenever they need them. In the study by Thompson et al. (2021), male pet owners' bond with their pets serves as an avenue to externalize their grief to their pets. Pets are not only seen as companions and family members by humans, but they also serve as an additional source of social support (An & Park, 2021). Studies suggest that pet ownership can be particularly beneficial for widowers and individuals struggling with loneliness and desolation, as pets provide companionship and a sense of purpose, ultimately increasing socialization (Genieve et al., 2020; Gan et al., 2019; Mueller et al., 2018).

Insights of Widowers About Owning Pets

Based on the analysis of the gathered data, three emergent themes were identified to categorize the insights shared by the widowers. The themes include: (1) *ease loneliness and longing*; (2) *provide comfort and warmth*; and (3) *provide entertainment and happiness*.

Ease Loneliness and Longingnes



shorturl.at/eqRS1

Provide Comfort and Warmth



shorturl.at/eghZ1

Insights Of Widowers About Owning Pets



<http://pin.it/1UvrWxl>

Provide Entertainment and Happiness

Figure 3. Theme Illustration Insights of Widowers About Owning Pets

It was revealed that widowers could consciously perceive the benefits of owning pets, their relevance to ease feelings associated with the death of their loved ones, the warmth they provide, and the happiness they offer to the pet owners. A thematic illustration of the themes can be found in Figure 3.

Ease Loneliness and Longingness. In times of loneliness and yearning for the loss of their loved ones, based on the experiences of widowers, they shared that, indeed, pets could ease these feelings. Tay Elmo, lost his wife at the age of 47, and in the years that passed. Despite that, after the years had passed, he did not lose count of the days that he appreciated how his cats and dogs could ease those feelings in times of sadness, longing, and loneliness, and it kept him going. He said:

“Makahatag sila ug kalipay sa mga adlaw nga ako gasubo.” (They can provide happiness when I am sorrowful). RQ3_P1_074

Meanwhile, Farming Jun recognizes the significant impact of having pets in their life as a widower. He is 62 years old and raises the carabao left behind by his wife, and somehow, over the years, he has realized that they are a necessity to their life. He also shared his insight that sacrificing a little time to care for pets cannot compare to the significant help they offer to a human's life. From his statement, it is apparent that the death of his wife has made him realize how significant their impact is on their life. Along the way towards rediscovering life, overcoming challenges, yearning and loneliness, he has come to terms with caring for and loving his non-human companions.

“Ato lang huna-hunaon nga ang hayop kay gikinahanglan jud nato sa atong kinabuhi. Dapat mugiya pud tag sakripisyo sap ag atiman sa atong mga binuhi kay nagatoo ko nga dako jud ni sila ug natabang sa akong tibook nga pangpuyo ug kinabuhi.” (We will just set in our minds that we need animals in our life. We must make sacrifices to take good care of them because I believe that they help my overall well-being). RQ3_P2_076

Further, based on the experiences of older adult widowers, owning pets helps them in their daily struggles to overcome the challenges of isolation and loneliness. When they are down, the presence of their pets assures them that they are never alone, pets are a source of happiness, and walking their pets are avenues towards creating a safe space for interacting with others. The findings of the study are congruent with the study of Kalenkoski (2021) and Thompson et al. (2021), which entailed that after the death of a loved one, a person's interaction with pets provided a sense of purpose in the daily routine, which helped to ease loneliness.

Provide Comfort and Warmth. In the journey of widowers toward overcoming the challenges after losing their wives, the widower participants of this study shared their insights. They shared that pets provide comfort and warmth. According to Yo Carling, he is thankful for having pets that will accompany them wherever they go. Knowing that they have pets willing to walk and want to be with them provides them a feeling of warmth, comforted by the fact that a companion wants to be with them.

“Pasalamat jud ko sa akong mga iro kay mukuyog jud ni sila kung asa ko. Bisag musakay kog motor kay mugukod gyud, malooy nalang ko maglantaw. Mao nang kung naa koy adtoan kay mubaklay nalang ko para makakuyog sila sa akoa.” (I am thankful for my dogs because they are always there for me. Even when I ride a motorcycle, they will run after me, and I pity them. That was why whenever I had places to be, I would choose to walk for them to come with me). RQ3_P1_072

When they are tired, pets cuddle and ask for their attention, which reduces their tiredness. Tay Elmo said he could still go to the river with his dogs after farming.

"Kanang lambing lambingon ka mabawas bawasan imong gihuna-huna labi nag magpahuway ka gikan sa pag uma kay nag tanom tanom man pud ko diha ug ginagmay duol dayun na magpa hapyod hapyod ineg muadto kog sapa mukuyog ra pud maligo pa dyun." **(Your thoughts are reduced when you are caressed when you take a break from work because I have a small farm in my backyard. The dog will come right away and likes to cuddle).** RQ3_P6_054

Similarly, pets provide warmth for widowers through their presence in accompanying them on their journey to exercise.

"Kanang muadto kog sapa kuyog pud na siya pirme maligo kanang ilakaw lakaw nimo para ma exercise so ma apil pud ka." **(When I go to the river, I always come with the dog to take a bath, and when we walk, it is like we are exercising).** RQ3_P6_050

Based on the responses, the widowers shared that after they have experienced the value of owning pets, they can vouch that the presence and interaction they foster with their pets provide emotional and psychological comfort and warmth. It allows them to realize their intentions, their experiences, and the activities that they do. The presence of their **non-human companions motivates widowers to participate in exercises, walk constantly, and interact** (Kalenkoski, 2021; Curl, Bibbo, & Johnson, 2016) due to perceptions about feelings of comfort and warmth. Also, adults who live alone and interact less actively socially have a standard response in the study of Hudson and colleagues (2020).

Provide Entertainment and Happiness. Looking back on their experiences, the widowers realized that owning pets provides them entertainment and happiness. Yo Rody shared that for him, pets can help them. At night they provide a sense of security. Second, to that, they provide happiness. Widowers become entertained just by seeing pets run around the house and bathe in the river.

"Para sa ako makatabang jud ang iro sama sa akong giingon kaganina nga sa panahon sa kagabhion mahimotang ka ikaduha malipay ka makit an lang nimo siya nga mag dagan dagan gani adtog sapa kalit rag ambak kay maligo ingon ana gani ma enjoy ka ba sa iya gipangbuhat." **(For me, the dogs can help. I said earlier that you would be asleep at night in peace. You will be happy to see him just run and even jump into the river to take a bath like that, you will even enjoy what the dog is doing).** RQ3_P6_058

In addition, the innate playfulness of dogs attracts people to be closer to them. The statement of Sir Jo suggests that having or owning pets, regardless of the initial ambivalence of owning one, their endearing nature and playfulness could do nothing more but help a person. **Widowers may not realize it, but simply having pets around can bring numerous health benefits.** The entertainment and the sense of happiness they feel is an experience that Sir Jo could say is possible in having pets. He said:

"Everytime nga maabot ko mo interact na siya gusto na siya makig play magpa kugos and napalapit jud ako loob tungod anang behavior niya." **(Every time I come home from work, he wants to play, and I get closer to him because of his behavior).** RQ3_P7_044

The capacity of pets provides feelings of happiness and reduces the stress Americans experience (Kalenkoski, 2021). On the other hand, the findings entail the importance of the claims of previous studies that suggest the potential use of training and using pets as a tool to promote healthy living in older adults (Genieve et al., 2020; Tkatch et al., 2021; Hawskin,

& Tip, 2021). Based on the insights shared by the widowers and the findings, this potential might have garnered other evidence to support the claims. According to the theory of Erickson, a reaction may be influenced by age. On the other hand, the findings have also explained the theory of Mueller (2014), which indicated that companionate animals have helped widowers cope with challenges as pet ownership can reduce the rate of depression, loneliness, and anxiety later in life (Gee, Mueller, & Curl, 2017; Bowen et al., 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study provided evidence of how owning pets can have a prominent role in coping with unpleasant experiences, alleviating loneliness, and providing a sense of security and companionship. The findings are highly relevant in providing better mental health care for older adults in our community. The findings are generally relevant to the Local Government Units, and private organizations which seek better living conditions and the overall well-being of older adults in our community.

The findings have implications for the current mental health program for Senior Citizens in the province. The findings may become a means to craft community interventions that aim to improve the overall well-being of older adults and may utilize resources that are most accessible to the economically disadvantaged. Pets can be used to improve senior citizens' well-being.

In nursing care for older adults, pets trained and cared for could be used as a frame of reference to create a more sustainable mental health movement for the general population. Possibly not only older adults by seniors and older adults who suffer from feelings of isolation, desolation, loneliness, and yearning for affection, attention, and love, pets can offer them purpose and gain positivity. Thus, future explorations, possibly experimental studies led by sophisticated organizations, may be done to study non-human companions and how they improve the overall well-being of a person.

Lastly, the results of this study could be used to develop mental health programs that target older persons who are currently living alone and struggling to make ends meet. Such initiatives will not only help identify the target population but will also draw attention to their needs. Weekly pet visits or the establishment of pet-friendly resting places may cause a ripple effect that causes the needs of the older population to be reconsidered rather than just the needs of the younger generation

CONSENT

The author has requested and received approval from the respondents. Informed consent has been completed, signed and documented.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical considerations are important to be made during the conduct of a study. This ensures that this research considers the participants' best interests. This also ensures that boundaries that may make the participants uncomfortable or that may impinge upon their basic rights are considered. The ethical considerations that have been made in this research are voluntary participation, privacy and confidentiality, informed consent process, risks, benefits, fabrication, falsification, and authorship.

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UNDER PEER REVIEW