

SASSAFRAS LOWREY GEAR OCT 4, 2020 7:00 AM

Robot Dogs Can Help Seniors Cope—Especially During Covid

They're not about to replace real-life therapy dogs, but research shows that motorized mutts can benefit people struggling with loneliness or dementia.



PHOTOGRAPH: KAZUHIRO NOGI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

AS A DOG trainer, one of the main things I tell people is that dogs are not robots. What I mean is that, no matter how well trained our canine companions might be, we cannot expect dogs to be perfect, and to assume otherwise sets up unrealistic expectations. My favorite thing about sharing my life with dogs is that their very essence is joyful imperfection.

They're also (and maybe somehow *because* of this) good for us. Canine companionship can relieve stress, depression, anxiety, and loneliness. They also help to keep us physically active, and thus healthier both mentally and physically. Most of us have seen viral videos of the robotic dogs that scientists and the military are working to build. Some of these move like dogs and are inspired by real dogs. But they are distinctly *not* doglike. That said, robotic dogs are much more accessible and less like science fiction than you might think.

Enter the Robot Dog

Electronic pets are becoming increasingly common, and no, we don't mean the keychain Giga Pets of the 1990s (though those are making a comeback as well). Joy for All Companion Pets are "lifelike" robotic dogs (and cats) specifically designed for seniors. These programmed plushies are designed to give a sense of companionship and comfort to senior citizens, especially those living with dementia or Alzheimer's. Companion Pet dogs cost around \$130 and can be purchased online through retailers like Amazon and pharmacies like CVS. Unlike a traditional stuffed animal, the Companion Pets are interactive—they have a heartbeat and respond to human touch and interaction.

Ted Fischer, co-founder and CEO of Ageless Innovation, the company behind the Joy for All Companion Pets, explained that its robotic dogs were "developed with extensive input from older adults" and designed "to look, sound, and feel just like real puppies—without the responsibilities of pet ownership." Fischer says that "older adults want realism, interactive two-way companionship, and pets."

Essentially, they were designed to be lots of people's idea of what a perfect dog would be. Joy for All's Companion Pet comes in two varieties: the Golden Pup and the newly announced (but not yet for sale) Freckled Pup. Fischer notes that these robotic dogs "provide a similar type of warmth and love that real pets offer their owners, all without the mess or time-consuming responsibilities." They have doglike fur, make realistic puppy sounds, and are somewhat responsive to people near them. "The Companion Pet pup reacts to the sound of its owner's voice and responds to their touch, much like a real puppy. This two-way interaction helps create a personally rich experience that can bring fun, joy, and friendship to older adults," explained Fischer.

That interaction is key to fostering the relationship between seniors and their Companion Pets. Fischer notes that many people name their robotic dogs and form attachments to them. Beyond that, the relationship each person forms with their robotic dog is unique to their cognitive abilities and their caretaking team. Some treat the dogs as though they are real puppies; others understand them to be robotic stuffed animals. Either way, they seem to benefit from the companionship of these robotic dogs.

Are Robot Dogs Ready to be Therapy Dogs?

In pre-Covid times, trained and certified therapy dogs visited hospitals and nursing homes, along with their owner/handlers, to entertain and emotionally support patients and residents. Significant research has shown that these therapy dogs benefit the people they visit in a variety of ways.

Beyond being a link to the outside world and providing a welcome distraction from a medical environment, petting dogs can support mental stimulation that assists Alzheimer's patients with recalling memories. Therapy dogs can also serve as ice breakers between doctors, medical staff, and patients. They can also help patients relax during physical therapy exercises and offer gentle motivation. Some patients can even develop similar kinds of relationships and benefits from engaging with robotic dogs.

“Several clinical studies conducted by AARP, UnitedHealthcare, and other clinicians have proven that the Joy for All Companion Pets can help to enhance the well-being and quality of life of lonely or isolated individuals and those living with dementia and other forms of cognitive decline, by providing a level of interaction and comfort from a lifelike companion,” Fischer wrote in an email.

This sentiment was echoed by Greg Olsen, director of the New York State Office for the Aging, who said that in his program many people who receive the robotic pets “cry when they receive them—they love them like a real pet—and their families and caregivers have said they see a huge difference in their loved one's mood.” The Office for the Aging began a 12-county pilot program in 2018 by giving the robotic pets to isolated seniors. Case managers working with the individuals administered a social- and emotional-isolation scale assessment prior to the “adoption” of the pets, and then at three, six, and 12 months after receiving them. Olsen says they “found that 70 percent of pet adoptees indicated a reduction or significant reduction in feeling isolated after one year.”

The Companion Pets are also being used by the Florida Department of Elder Affairs, which began giving the robot dogs to socially isolated seniors living with Alzheimer's disease and related dementia. The agency initially purchased 375 of the robotic pets, but the feedback from program participants and their caregivers was so positive that it ordered a total of 1,800 to keep up with demand.

The Florida agency also noted that demand has increased because of Covid-19: “The companion pets are certainly enjoyed by families of those living with Alzheimer's disease or any form of dementia, but the pets have also been increasingly popular with many older residents who find comfort in them during this time of physical distancing.” Covid has led to feelings of loneliness and social isolation for everyone, but it's particularly challenging for seniors in assisted-living facilities.

For their own protection, most of these individuals have been in strict isolation for months, with physical visits by friends and loved ones suspended. Olsen says that in New York, he too has seen an increased need for the robotic dogs. “When the pandemic hit, we purchased an additional 1,100 pets and distributed them statewide to help isolated older adults. We have also helped other New York state agencies like the Office of Mental Health and the Division of Veterans' Services.”

As a dog trainer, I worry that a rise in consumer use of robotic dogs will foster unrealistic expectations about what real dogs are like. Perhaps not for the recipients of the Companion Pets, but for their families and caregivers. First-time pet owners too often want their actual dogs to behave like glorified plush toys. And because robotic dogs don't need food, don't need physical or mental exercise, and don't need to go to the vet, they may reinforce the idea that “good” dogs are seen and not heard.

Personally I'd rather have no dog than a robotic approximation—but then again, I *like* the neediness, unpredictability, and naughtiness of real dogs, and I'm in a position to handle the responsibilities of a real, living, thriving companion. It's impossible to deny that robotic dogs like the Companion Pet are having real and tangible benefits in the lives of people who may need them the most, which perhaps make them more doglike than I'm giving them credit for. Have a lonely senior in your life? They just might benefit from a robotic canine sidekick.

[Sassafiras Lowrey](#) is a Certified Trick Dog Instructor and author of “Tricks In The City,” “Bedtime Stories For Rescue Dogs,” and the activity book “Chew This Journal” forthcoming in Summer 2020.

CONTRIBUTOR 



COMMENTS

Join the conversation


REGISTER

SIGN IN

Welcome to our community. We invite you to join our discussion. Our [community guidelines](#) are simple: be respectful and constructive, keep on topic, support your fellow commenters, and report bad behavior.

If you're new to our comments section, your first comment will be held for moderation.

And if you're interested in accessing all WIRED has to offer, [subscribe now](#).

 Comments are closed on this story.

All Comments

Newest

– **Robotsbest** 1 year ago

I am severely disabled Wheelchair user with mental illness need a lot of care myself! So I unfortunately can not care for Real pets! So those Alternates like aibo brings me some of happiness back and I am very thankful! It makes me very sad to see most of West people don't understand :(So Sony has an reason not to bring aibo official back to Europe which is super sad because aibo is adorable on his own! And no Replacement!

Respect Reply Share

Report

– **PoppynPixl** 1 year ago

FB36--No thanks! We have our silly, sock stealing, lovable, fierce, and fearless pom pup sisters and wouldn't trade them for all the extra work in the world, along with our previous princess pups! They make us laugh til we cry and when its time to let them go it's at the top of the grief scale yet we bring them home knowing full well what lies at the end of their road.

Respect Reply Share

Report

– **FB36** 1 year ago

Think about any giving time how many countless pets are mistreated by countless people and/or hungry/thirsty/locked-up! & think about how much money is spent for pet food & healthcare etc! Think about countless diseases/parasites always keep jumping between humans & pets (including COVID-19)!

Think about countless wild animals captured & turned to pets!

& all for what? ENTERTAINMENT!!!

IMHO humanity need to make it a long term goal to get rid of & eventually ban ALL PETS!

(People who are ADDICTED to pets (because of growing in a family w/ pets) need to switch to robot pets!!!)

Respect Reply Share

Report

TOPICS DOGS ROBOT ROBOTICS PETS HEALTHCARE

WIRED COUPONS



DYSON

Top Dyson promo code: Extra \$30 off Supersonic hair dryers



GOPRO

GoPro Top Deal for February: \$225 off the HERO10 Black + Free Enduro Rechargeable Battery + Free 64GB SD Card



SAMSUNG

Samsung promo code - Up to 40% off sitewide



DELL

Winter Sale: up to 50% off laptops, monitors, & desktops with Dell coupon code



BEST BUY

Best Buy deal of the Day: Get 15% off or more



AT&T WIRELESS

Sitewide 30% off accessories - AT&T Wireless promo code