

## **Media Release**

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### **New research shows furry friends help support mental health in cancer survivors**

**Owning a pet may help support mental health in cancer survivors, new Cancer Council SA research finds.**

The study, which heard from 160 Australian cancer survivors, found that living with pets was associated with a higher mental health score.

More than half (55.6 per cent) of those surveyed were pet owners, with two thirds of cancer survivors having their pets by their side throughout their cancer treatment. Those with pets reported an overall increased positive mental health score.

Researcher Dr Joshua Trigg said that the research suggests just how important pets are in supporting positive mental health, particularly for those going through cancer treatment.

“Pet ownership can help support positive emotions in cancer survivors, a key factor in positive mental health outcomes,” he said.

“Feeling companionship and affection are important to the human experience, and for participating cancer survivors, living with a pet helped to create these positive experiences, supporting mental health.”

One quarter (27.8 per cent) of cancer survivors surveyed also reported that COVID-19 negatively impacted their activities and relationships to others. With a number of states and territories currently in lockdown, Dr Trigg said that pets can also play an important support role during periods of isolation.

“As the country faces varied stages of lockdowns, mental health continues to be a huge focus, particularly for those who are going through or have recently finished cancer treatment,” Dr Trigg said.

“Although caring for a pet brings various needs and responsibilities, it can be emotionally and mentally rewarding, especially during challenging times.”

ABC Broadcaster Julie McCrossin AM was diagnosed with stage 4 oropharyngeal cancer in 2013. Throughout her gruelling recovery, her dog Bruno was a constant support by her side.

“I think pets are crucial in cancer recovery,” Julie said.

During her treatment, which included 30 sessions of radiation and weekly chemotherapy, Julie lost her capacity to speak for three months and had extreme difficulty swallowing.

“I was very unwell. For the first time in my life, I had clinical depression. I would still be in bed at 11am – as someone who has worked all my life, it was completely out of character,” Julie said.

Sensing that she needed something to lift her spirits, Julie’s partner Melissa persuaded her to bring home a small cavoodle puppy that they named Bruno.

“We’re inseparable – Bruno’s never left my side. When you’re alone, you’re unwell and you’re emotionally bereft, a little warm mammal for physical company is so important,” Julie said.

“Another great thing is that they don’t care what you look like. I lost most of my hair and I was amazed how upsetting that was. When your friends see you, you can see the concern on their face – they’re frightened of what’s happening to you.

“But dogs don’t mind! They’re always just overjoyed to see you. Dogs help you in live in the now.”

For information, tips and support throughout your cancer diagnosis and treatment, reach out to Cancer Council 13 11 20 or visit [cancersa.org.au/support/support-services/13-11-20-information-and-support-service](https://cancersa.org.au/support/support-services/13-11-20-information-and-support-service).

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### **About Cancer Council SA**

Cancer Council SA is South Australia’s leading cancer charity working across every aspect of every cancer. Here in SA, every day, we support families affected by cancer when they need it most, speak out on behalf of the community on cancer issues, empower people to reduce their cancer risk, and find new ways to better detect and treat cancer. With your help, we’re getting closer to a cancer free future every day. Find out more at [www.cancersa.org.au](https://www.cancersa.org.au).