Robotic pets helping people combat loneliness during COVID-19 pandemic

It's not a real dog, but the health benefits of a robotic companion pet are proving to be just as real. Evalina Standifer received an Ageless Innovations Joy For All companion pet in November. The pet was originally designed as a consumer product to inspire play, but the pandemic revealed an even more powerful use, a potential treatment for depression and anxiety, possibly even slowing or reversing dementia disorders, which are all proven to progress more rapidly in isolation.
(WXYZ) — It’s not a real dog, but the health benefits of a robotic companion pet are proving to be just as real.

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“I was a little skeptical at first, but the feedback we have gotten has just been so positive. I’m mean this has been a life changing experience for some folks,” says Dr. Thomas B. Jankowski, a research gerontologist at Wayne State University.

He says social isolating to protect loved ones from COVID-19 has amplified another serious health risk, loneliness.

“Severe loneliness can affect your physical health as much as smoking and obesity does,” says Dr. Jankowski.

“The lonelier you are, the sicker you get.”
Loneliness and social isolation can be as damaging to health as smoking 15 cigarettes, according to federal data.

The National Academy of Sciences conducted a study in 2020 that revealed, 1/4 of those over 65 are considered socially isolated. They are 50 percent more likely to develop dementia; 30 percent more likely to have heart disease or a stroke.

But in the midst of a pandemic: “How do you help people when you can’t have contact with them,” says Dr. Jankowski.

The Senior Alliance of Western Wayne County launched Hotlines and Zoom programs but knew they needed to do more.
“We were taking a look at all the resources available to older adults when it came to isolation during the pandemic,” says Andrew Dabrowski, program manager at the Senior Alliance.

He acquired 30 companion robot pets in November just to see how they would work.

“Are they making the impact? And I would say just based on anecdotal feedback, it’s been overwhelmingly positive,” says Dabrowski.

The **Joy For All Companion** dog reacts to touch and voice.

Barking and whining, moving its eyes, wagging its tail and turning its head in response. When you snuggle, you can feel the heart beating.

In about a dozen small studies done across the country, these pets have consistently:

- Reduced depression and anxiety
- Slowed cognitive decline
- Increased cognitive capability

*JFA Impact Benefit Exec Summary* by WXYZ-TV Channel 7 Detroit on Scribd
In one anecdotal case, a patient spoke for the first time in years, to her doggie.

“It’s helping prevent people from having to see their doctor more often from having to take a trip to the hospital,” says Dr. Jankowski.

Evalina’s daughter says she noticed her mom is calmer at night, the robotic dog seems to ease her anxiety and bring her comfort.
"I think it’s a security and the fact that he does move gives a sense of friendship and companionship,“ she says.

The Senior Alliance of Western Wayne County has hundreds more robot companion pets they want to give away for free to seniors in need. They say other senior resource centers in the area are looking into distributing them, too.

Call the Senior Alliance in Western Wayne County at 734-722-2830 or 800-815-1112

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