Green and furry friends to the rescue: plants and pets parenting during the COVID-19 pandemic

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To the editor

In a recent article published in this journal, Brüne and Wilson [1] employed an evolutionary theory to improve our understanding of how people respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. They argued that human behavior is guided by ancient mechanisms involving either the avoidance of infection or defense against attacks in times of enhanced vulnerability. They also reframed some of the behavioral health issues associated with the pandemic in a game-theoretical scenario which helped explain why most people comply with rules of social distancing, while a minority fails to do so. These key points are reasonable enough to explain variation in the human response to the current crisis. Here, I want to highlight a coping mechanism in confronting the pandemic by Filipinos which is more practical but effective, that is, plant and pet parenting.

As of this writing, 10 August 2021, Metro Manila was on its fourth day of a strict enhanced community quarantine for the third time due to the increasing cases of COVID-19, particularly caused by the more deadly Delta variant. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), this new variant of concern spreads between people more efficiently than other variants, including Alpha variant that was first detected around December 2021. This scenario caused more stress and anxiety to many locals, and the lockdown negatively impacted many Filipinos’ mental health. As a response to it, many locals found a way to distract themselves by taking care of plants or animals. This became an effective coping mechanism for them.

Harvard naturalist Dr. Edward Wilson popularized the term biophilia—the idea that humans have an innate tendency to connect with nature. It is important to note that biophilia can mean both love for living creatures (life) and love for Nature (Life), understood as the set of living creatures plus the abiotic environment in which they thrive [2]. Biophilia has two fundamental constructs: fascination and affiliation. Nature exerts a fascination on human beings, that is, an attraction capable of activating the involuntary/effortless modality of attention. Affiliation, on the other hand, is our capacity to experience empathy and establish
emotional bond with other creatures. Given these constructs, biophilia may serve as a mechanism for people to adjust to a hostile environment. Thus, during this pandemic, I propose that biophilia helps combat the negative effects, most especially mental health.

Plant parenting has become a viral phenomenon in the Philippines and many people find comfort and psychological reassurance in plant tending and gardening. This activity became a coping mechanism to lessen the impact of social distancing enforced through quarantine protocols [3]. The Philippines’ rich and diverse habitats, which make it one of 17 ‘megadiverse’ countries, are thought to contain at least 70% of the world’s flora and fauna species. Professor Gary Altman explained that houseplants promote a sense of calmness and provide an opportunity to tend to psychological and physiological needs. By having small vignettes or spaces with groups of plants at home, we can create a sanctuary where we feel safe and relaxed. By focusing on nurturing ourselves, we aim to coddle the emotions that are needed to promote repair in the mind, body and spirit.

The pets or animals that we care for are considered as equally helpful during this pandemic because they serve the same purpose of battling against the negative effects of the pandemic. While engagement with pets has an ecological and evolutionary risks concerning the transmission of COVID-19, the risk of animals spreading the virus to people is considered to be low. Reports of animals infected with the virus have been documented around the world and most of these animals became infected after contact with people with COVID-19, including owners, caretakers or others who were in close contact. Despite this, the biophilic behavior of humans remain unaffected. As the pandemic continues, pet stores, animal rescue shelters and private breeders witnessed the rise in customers. Veterinary clinics also experience a sudden surge in the number of customers as dog owners hope to provide their fur babies with proper care [4]. Most popular animals like dogs, cats, fish and birds are treated by humans as pets which are taken care of by owners not as a working animal but primarily for companion and entertainment. Let us take for example the case of dogs which are commonly described as ‘man’s best friend’. In a recent study conducted to 5926 participants, 89.8% of this total who had at least one companion animal mostly perceived their animals to be a source of considerable support. The authors concluded that human–animal bond is a construct of potential clinical importance to identify mental health vulnerability in animal owners.

Animal ownership appeared to mitigate some of the detrimental psychological effects of lockdown [5]. Another study highlighted that dog walking may promote physical activity and contribute to weight control. Dog walking appears to be a mechanism by which residents of high-walkable neighborhoods obtain their physical activity [6]. Lastly, a total of 17 studies were reviewed concerning both the positive and negative benefits of pet ownership. The review suggested that pets provide benefits to those with mental health conditions [7].

As there is no certainty when this pandemic will end, coping mechanisms are essential for physical and mental health. In the same way, as we utilize our plants and pets to serve this purpose, let us also be considerate enough to provide the needs of our ‘best friends’ and give them our utmost care since we coexist in this world, called out to live in peace and harmony.

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