

# Think Tank: Why pets are your best friend

## Speakers:

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Erica Hanlon: So we all know people who have pets, who love their pets and pets are super lovable. And that's what today's podcast is all about. Why pets are your best friends.

Hi everyone. You are listening to The Think Tank Podcast. My name is Erica Hanlon. I'm a licensed professional counselor and life coach. And today I'm joined by Lynn Borteck, licensed clinical social worker, and Angela Bell, head of communications. We know that during COVID, lots of people are social distancing and for some people this leads to loneliness, but pets... There's all kinds of research, right? That pets can be a positive distraction, they can be a great friend to have. What makes pets such good friends? Who better to ask this question to than the experts, pet owners. We asked a few pet owners some questions about their pets and thought we'd share their responses with you.

Our first question is, do you ever talk to your pet? If yes, when and why?

Pet owner 1: We have five cats and I do actually find myself talking to them more than I thought I did. Usually not whole conversations, but quick check-ins like: "Hello", "Ow!", "Stop!" and "your claws hurt." A lot of times I'll ask rhetorical questions while I try to figure out what's going on, "What's the matter are you hungry? You want to play? What are you doing? Is he eating your food?" And in response to one of our cats meowing like a siren, we used to say no, but recently began meowing back. Not only is it more fun, but it gets her to stop faster. The only downside is we have no idea what she thinks we've said.

Lynn Borteck: It sounds like from this guy's response, that talking with his cats really is part of his every day. And in fact, talking with your pet can help you solve problems. You can actually bounce ideas off your pet. And obviously you're only bouncing them off of yourself, but your pet looks so intent when you do that. It kind of feels like they're thinking it out,

along with you. And also they help you stave off loneliness because just their presence there, whether they're cuddly or whatever kind of pet they are, they are another being with you during this lonely time and during a lot of times.

Angee Bell: Yeah, totally. Ever since I've gotten the ducks, I've totally felt like: One, my life is busier because they take a little bit more care and two, they're so playful. Ducks are such interesting creatures they are kind of like dogs almost. You can train them to do things, they follow you around. They're very lovable animals and I talk to them too. I do. I talk to my ducks. They all have names and they love to play. It just gives me a lot of joy to be with my ducks.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. I talk to my dog. I don't know. I don't want to say all the time but we have conversations. It's a thing. It's a one-sided conversation to be clear. I'm not hearing voices or hallucinating.

Angee Bell: Well, I used to talk to myself a little bit. Just a little bit and it always was like, "Oh man, maybe I shouldn't talk out loud when I talk to myself," and then I got cats and all of a sudden it was like, "Oh, well, I'm talking to my cats, I'm not talking to myself anymore." It was kind of a little band-aid there.

Lynn Borteck: I find myself saying, "Hey, do you want dinner?" And I'm not really expecting a response. But I am having... I will have an all-day conversation with my dog. It'll be like, "Let's go outside and sit on the deck for a little while," or something like that. It's just like having a friend around in the house.

Erica Hanlon: It's still an interaction. When I talked to my dog and say, "Do you want dinner?" He responds. It's not like he's a stuffed animal.

Angee Bell: Exactly. All right. Second question. Do you or your family exercise or play with your pet?

Pet owner 2: Yes. We do exercise our two dogs. We usually start the day off with a two-and-a-half-mile walk. And then throughout the day they like to go into the backyard and run around and play and fetch their ball.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah, I think there's lots of evidence that... I think I've read research studies that say people... I think, especially who have dogs tend to be more active than people who don't have pets. I think pets keep us nice and active. I know for me, just like the speaker we just heard from. My dog expects his walk every single morning, even if I don't feel like it.

And then I feel bad if I don't walk him. So it certainly is encouraging me to go and, get that one to two miles in every single day.

Lynn Borteck: Same for me. I mean, there are days when I really want to take my... I do a two mile walk every day. There are days when I just want to do it kind of fast and do it myself. But then I kind of look at my dog and she looks at me and I'm like: "Okay, we'll do it together," which slows it down. But it's really so much more fun. And you know... It keeps me religious in terms of doing my walk every day. Because she really wants to go.

Angee Bell: Yeah. It can encourage you to take breaks too, because you know, pets... They need to be played with, they need to be... They need that attention, you know, in the middle of the afternoon, I like to bring my ducks some fruit. So I cut up some fruit and I bring it out there to the ducks and it encourages me to just step away from my desk for a little bit. Whereas, I didn't really do that before. Whether I'm running around with them or not, but I'm still getting up and moving around for a little bit, which I think is really healthy.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah, for sure.

Lynn Borteck: So next question. What routines or chores do you and your family do with your pet?

Pet owner 3: Toby, our dog is my alarm clock. He would come to my home office at 2:30 PM every day, to let me know it's time to pick my son up from school. He also has a routine that, he would go to bed at 8:00 PM every night. So, no matter what you do, he would not open his eyes. He just goes to his room and sleep.

Angee Bell: That is so cute. That is so cute, that he knows it's bedtime, I'm out. Don't bother me. Don't talk to me. I'm going to sleep.

Pets could really help us get into our routine and teach responsibility. Not only for us as adults, but also for children. I mean, it's so great to get maybe even a puppy or even an older dog, or a cat, or any kind of animal, guinea pig turtle. Something where the kid can take care of the pet, change out their cage if they're in their cage, or their water, or their food, take them on walks. They're learning a schedule, they're learning a routine and they're learning to stick to it. And it really helps them take that responsibility on.

I know with my cat Cheese if I forget to refill their water bowl, he'll come up to me and he'll just go "Meow...meow". I'll be working and I'll

be like, "what's up cheese?". He just looks at me like "Meow...meow" and he won't stop... And finally I get it. I'm like, Oh yeah. Sorry. Sorry. I'm sorry, man. I'll go fill up his water bowl. But he... He will not drop it until I fill up that water bowl.

Lynn Borteck: The responsibility thing too, is really important with kids. I know the first dog that we had when my kids were seven and nine. That dog after we had him a year developed epilepsy and I called the place where we had gotten him and I said, "this dog has epilepsy." And they said, "Oh, give the dog back and we'll give you a new dog." And I said, "Wait a minute. What is that going to teach my children? When something is sick, you give it back?" I said "no, no, no, that doesn't work for me."

And so it really became a family project. To learn how to help this dog and to medicate the dog, so that it made it through its seizures and lived to a very ripe old age. But my kids learned a lot from that.

Angee Bell: That's great.

Erica Hanlon: So our dog is very social. He loves to go to the dog park. He loves to go to doggy daycare. If we go for walks, he's very good on a leash until maybe he sees another dog. And then he becomes very excited to see another dog.

So we have been... I can't believe I'm saying this. We have been in conversations about whether or not we should get a second dog to be his BFF. I have... Clearly... Clearly I have some feelings about this and some ambivalence. But my son in particular is very concerned about the mental health of our dog, and is worried that he's depressed because he doesn't have a sibling.

So, he has taken it upon himself to go above and beyond with taking care of the dog, to try and convince us to get dog number two. It's been very interesting to watch.

Lynn Borteck: My kids went out and got two dogs instead of one. On that theory that they would be companions for each other. And honestly, I thought they were a little bit crazy. But honestly it has worked out so well because the dogs keep each other exercised and happy and occupied all the time. And they still pay lots of attention to my grandchildren and my kids. So, it's not like they lost that part of it. And it's... They're just so funny and fun. But a lot of work.

Erica Hanlon: We did have a fish. It was our introductory pet for the kids and teaching them responsibility. That fish's name was Lucky.

Angee Bell: He wasn't lucky was he?

Erica Hanlon: He was not lucky. Lucky died within six weeks. He was a Betta fish. We looked it up. Betta fish are supposed to live a really long time. So Lucky was not lucky. It was not confidence inspiring, as far as pet care taking. On a happier note, how do your pets make you laugh or smile?

Pet owner 4: I am the pet owner of a five-month-old puppy and two cats who are seven years old. And each of them has such a unique personality. They make me laugh and smile throughout the day. I can't even tell you just looking at their faces. The adorable little expressions that they make. The way the puppy turns her head and looks at you in such an inquisitive way, as she's exploring all the new things around her. I'd have to say one of the things that makes me laugh most is our puppy. Her name is Stevie. She has a little swimming pool out in the backyard and she just loves to lay down in this pool. And she doesn't quite understand that if you lay down and you put your head down, you will go under water and dogs don't breathe underwater. So she is confused and baffled by this every single time. And it's absolutely hysterical, but brings us so much joy. And animals and pets are truly some of the light of our lives.

Lynn Borteck: Pets can definitely make us happy and generate a lot of positive emotions. I know the funniest thing my dog does, which cracks us up every night. It never stops being funny. Is that at a certain time each night, while we're sitting in the den watching TV or whatever, she will start throwing a tennis ball to herself and then chasing it around the room. And it's... It is the funniest thing. And occasionally she'll let us throw it, but really she seems to enjoy throwing it to herself. Which is... I just can't tell you how silly and adorable and funny that is. And it cracks us up every night.

Angee Bell: That is so cute. Cheese... Cheese does something kind of like that, except with his tail. He gets in the kitchen and all of a sudden, like he catches the little wisp of his tail on the peripheral of his vision. And all of a sudden he's after it. And he's going around in circles just chasing his tail and then he'll get on the ground, and it'll slide across the floor. It's hilarious. Because he's really kind of... He's a chunky cat so when he slides, it's this big old mass of yellow orange hair flying across the kitchen floor.

Erica Hanlon: That's so cute. So our dog Rome, he does this thing that I just love. I love it so much. I don't even know if I can adequately describe it, but I will attempt. So if he's playing with a toy and chasing after it, he does this thing where he lifts up both of his front paws and legs and kind of like in sync and it's like, he's bounding. But it's like... I can't... I can't adequately describe it, but it is so funny and so cute. And it just makes me smile every single time.

Angee Bell: Next question. What's your favorite thing to do with your pet? Or can your pet do any tricks?

Pet owner 5: My dogs name is Cusco. And my favorite thing to do with him is cuddle. Even though he's a 75-pound German shepherd mix. He loves to cuddle and I'd say his absolute favorite thing to do is go on long walks. Whenever he sees me put my tennis shoes on, he runs to go get his leash wherever... Where we keep it. And he just gets so excited. The tricks we taught him are pretty much the basics, like sit, shake and lay down. He's also pretty good at catching food with his mouth. He's also... He also likes to get his teeth brushed. It must be the flavor that he loves so much, but he's a pretty good dog.

Erica Hanlon: So, pets definitely help us mix things up. When life gets kind of boring and stale, which if you're social distancing and at home a lot right now, you probably need more than ever.

Lynn Borteck: The other thing is, during this social distancing time and all of the COVID stuff that, especially when it was brand new, like a month into it. That's when we got our dog. It wasn't... We didn't really get her because of that, but it was the timing when we wanted to get a dog. There have been days during this whole COVID nightmare that I have really felt down or blue. And it's like, when she pops her head up or jumps onto the bed or whatever, you just... It's hard to be unhappy around them. They're just so cute. So, I really find that having a pet really helps me boost my mood.

Angee Bell: Yeah, that's a great point. That's the same thing that happened with me when we got the ducks.

Erica Hanlon: So my pet... We... So, he was actually being trained as a service dog. And failed out of service dog training. And was put up for adoption.

So they were teaching him how to open and close cabinets and how to do light switches. And my kids were very excited about these potential tricks. And have tried to encourage him to do the light switches in particular. Which has not... It's had... We've had mixed success with

that. But other than that, he is, you know, I don't know that he does fun tricks. He kind of has all the standard basic, you know, sit, lie down, stay, leave it skills.

Lynn Borteck: Okay. Well you guys are definitely ahead of me when it comes to that. And ahead of me and my dog. Because since we got her during social distancing, I haven't been able to take her to any training classes or anything. And she's picked up a lot of our routines. She knows when we're going to bed. She knows when it's time to go out that kind of thing. But we have not had a lot of success with teaching her to sit, or stay, or leave it, or anything like that. We definitely have some work to do.

Angee Bell: Well Lynn... I mean... I think that's totally understandable. I'm sure she does a lot of cool things that give you a lot of joy. And that's really what it's all about. My ducks though... I don't know... I can't tell if I trained them to do this or not. But every night when it's time to go to bed, we have this duck hut for them. And we started off like, "Come on ducks time for bed, time for bed". And we have to kind of gather them up and they'd get in there eventually. And then I noticed over time that, I'd just start walking over there, as it's getting dark and they would follow me and they'd go right on in there. And now sometimes if it's getting dark and I haven't gotten a chance to go out there and put them away. I'll come out and they're already in the duck hut and they're all like... And I come up there and they peek out and they look at me like, Hey, what's up?

It's so funny because I'm like wow!

Erica Hanlon: It's so cute.

Angee Bell: They got it. They figured it out.

Lynn Borteck: They learned.

Angee Bell: Yeah.

Erica Hanlon: That's super cute.

You know, I just remembered when I was a kid we had a dog. It was... We had a corgi. Back when nobody had corgi and nobody knew what they were. And everybody thought that we just had this kind of strange looking dog. And we taught him how to play dead. We would make our hands into a gun and we'd point it at him and say bang. And he would fall over on his side. It was very cute.

Angee Bell: That's so cool.

Lynn Borteck: Okay. Here's our last question. What do you like most about having a pet?

Pet owner 6: To me having a pet gives you someone that wants unconditional love and is willing to give you unconditional love. It can be such a stress reliever and a happy moment. Even if it's for a very short time. Where you can forget about the life and the stresses that are going on and just have a close moment with your pet. They also seem to have a knack for knowing when to play with you. When to nudge you, to get you to forget about what's going on in life and just relax for a few moments.

Angee Bell: I love that response and I love that you can hear his bird in the background. That's so cute. I mean, I think that's... Everything that he said is really related to all the points that we've been talking about. You know, combating loneliness, companionship, it's even a great way to get out and meet other people that have pets.

I know... I liked what he said a lot about how pets have a way of knowing when to nudge you. And I've experienced that a lot myself. Sometimes if I'm feeling sad or depressed, and I might just be laying there on the bed or something, my cats... They always can detect that I'm not feeling good and they'll come up and they'll sort of but me with their head and be like, Hey! Why aren't you acting like your normal self?

Cats are so... Cats and dogs, animals in general. I mean, they really can feel, I think they have a sixth sense or something. They understand feelings and emotions more than we really attribute to them.

Erica Hanlon: You know what that makes me think of, is when I was on bed rest with the twins. And it was before I had to go to the hospital. But I... I had to lay in bed or lay on the couch all day long. And our dog at the time he would get up and he would lay with me all day long, all day long. And it wasn't something he usually did. So, it's really interesting that you call that out about how they can sense that something's going on and just provide comfort by being there.

Lynn Borteck: The other thing that he said in his answer, he talked about stress and how having a pet can help you de-stress. Because when you're engaging with your pet, playing with your pet, just taking a walk or going to the dog park or whatever, you totally forget about everything else. And things that maybe were making you hairy at home or worrying about at work or whatever. They just disappear for that time



that you're distracted with your pet. And I think it's really a great thing for people. A great way to take a step back maybe, and even come back to something feeling fresher.

Erica Hanlon: And I think pets can make you... They can help you meet new people. Like if you're at the dog park, you have something in common. If your dogs are playing together, you can strike up a conversation. And then conversely, I feel like they can provide security. I used to be a runner. I had some bad experiences being out, running by myself. But now having this big Labrador retriever mix, I feel much more secure running with him. I feel like people will leave me alone.

Angee Bell: Yeah, that's a great point.

Erica Hanlon: And the other thing is he's so well behaved. He's so wonderful. He does not have polite manners when somebody comes onto our front porch, or rings the doorbell, he will bark.

And quite frankly, I don't want to discourage it. It sort of makes me feel also more secure that he has that sort of protective element to him. And that it might discourage any... Anybody who has less than good intentions, who's coming up to my front porch or coming over to our house.

Angee Bell: That's a good point. Maddie does the same thing. She hangs out in the front yard and backyard of our property during the day. And we live down by the lake and it's a... It's a dead end road. So if you make it to our house and you're coming up to our yard, you're definitely... You have a reason. It's not on accident.

So anytime somebody comes into the yard she barks, if we have a delivery or anything, she barks at the delivery people and I have to run out there.

She doesn't bite. She's not mean, but she likes to alert me that somebody is in the yard. The only thing is, she barks at the neighbor when they get home. And I haven't quite trained her on how to know, not to bark at the neighbor. The neighbors okay.

Lynn Borteck: Yeah. My dog... My new dog also barks like crazy when anybody that she doesn't know comes into the house, she just barks like mad until she... I calm her down. I show that the person's okay and so forth, but it's... It is... There is a little sense of security in it. Yeah. I agree.

In closing this really great discussion about pets. I think we need to say that we've heard from everybody, that pets just bring great benefits to a family, to children, to an individual. And they can help you with mental health challenges. They can cheer you up when you're sad, they can keep you physically healthy, because they need some exercise. They can help teach responsibility and even help you and your family form routines and habits.

Erica Hanlon: So, after listening to this podcast, maybe you are super sold on the idea of getting a new pet. And a lot of people are adopting pets right now. It's a great time to do it. And so if you want to adopt a new pet and you don't know where to go, you can go to [aspca.org/adopt-pet](https://aspca.org/adopt-pet) to find more information about pet adoption. Or you can visit your local animal shelter or do an online search for animal rescue near me. There are lots of places where you can find your next new best friend.

So, next month is actually suicide prevention and awareness month. So, our podcast next month is going to be on how to talk to someone who is depressed or suicidal. So, check it out for some really good tips and resources on a tough subject. Bye everyone.

Lynn Borteck: Bye bye.

Lynn Borteck: Bye guys!

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