



Pet Partners®



WHITE PAPER

Animal-Related Engagement
**BENEFITING FROM THE POWER OF THE
HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND WHEN PERSONAL
INTERACTION IS NOT POSSIBLE**

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ABOUT US

For over 40 years, the Pet Partners mission has been to improve human health and well-being through the human-animal bond (HAB). With this objective in mind, we have developed various programs that explore and promote interactions with animals. We have funded research, created educational opportunities, advocated for public policy related to pets, and championed standards of practice to promote ethical and safe programming. Through our Therapy Animal Program, we have trained, evaluated, and registered over 60,000 teams throughout our organization's history, empowering individuals to share the love of their pets throughout their communities.

While there is nothing quite like interacting with a therapy animal face-to-face, we know that the bonds we share with animals are greater than any situation, context, or activity could ever be. As advocates for the HAB, we're committed to making this relationship available to as broad an audience as possible. Just by considering the unique connection that we share with animals, we can enjoy positive outcomes such as improved mood and better relationships with those around us.^{7, 12} Furthermore, in learning about the interconnectedness of humans with animals and the planet, we make significant steps towards a healthier and happier world for us all.

In this paper, we'll outline some of the benefits of engaging with animal-related activities while also exploring some ideas for continuation of services from some of the field's top leaders. Finally, specific activities will be suggested so that you're prepared to bring the love of animals to your facilities and clients, no matter the circumstances.

CONTRIBUTORS



TAYLOR CHASTAIN, PHD

National Director, AAI Advancement, Pet Partners

In her role as National Director of AAI Advancement for Pet Partners, Dr. Taylor Chastain focuses on supporting research and professional development within the therapy animal arena. Having witnessed hundreds of interactions between her own therapy animals and the people with whom they've visited, she is passionate about bolstering the intervention with empirical investigation and the promotion of field standardization. Dr. Chastain obtained her doctorate in research psychology in 2018, with her studies focusing on the human-animal bond as it is experienced in contexts of shared traumatic experiences. Through her undergraduate education in psychology and animal behavior to her graduate work to become a mental health counselor, she has always strived to shape her educational and professional endeavors with the foundational goal of promoting Animal-Assisted Interventions (AAI). Dr. Chastain is also a dog trainer and Pet Partners team evaluator, and has been a registered handler with Pet Partners since 2015. She is based in Georgia where she lives with her cat and seven dogs.



AUBREY FINE, ED. D

Dr. Aubrey Fine is a native of Montreal, Canada. He received his graduate degree from University of Cincinnati in 1982. He has been on the faculty at California State Polytechnic University since 1981 and is presently a Professor Emeritus and a licensed psychologist. In 2001 he was presented the Wang Award given to distinguished professors within the California State University system (23 universities).

He has been recognized by numerous organizations for his service and dedication to children, animals, and the community. In July of 2016 he received the William McCulloch Award for Excellence in HAI Education and Practice from the International Association of Human Animal Interaction Organizations (IAHAIO), in Paris, France.

Dr. Fine's primary research interests relate to the psycho-social impact of human-animal interactions and animal-assisted interventions, social skills training and children with ADHD, and resilience in children. He is the author of several books including *Our Faithful Companions*, *Parent Child Dance*, *Therapist's Guide to Learning and Attention Disorders*, *Fathers and Sons*, *The Total Sports Experience for Children*, *Give a Dog Your Heart*, *The Handbook on Animal Assisted Therapy* (the 5th edition was released in July 2019), and *Afternoons with Puppy*. He is a past board member of Pet Partners and is presently the chair of the Human-Animal Bond Advisory Board of Pet Partners; the past chair of the steering committee on Human Animal Interactions for the American Veterinary Medical Association; and member at large of the Human Animal Interactions Section of Division 17 of the American Psychological Association.



LESLIE A. STEWART, PHD, LPC

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Dr. Leslie A. Stewart is a licensed professional counselor and associate professor of counseling at Idaho State University's Department of Counseling. Her research agenda includes animal-assisted interventions in counseling and supervision, crisis response, trauma-informed counselor preparation, and counselor training with experiential modalities. Before beginning her career in counseling and counselor education, Dr. Stewart facilitated therapeutic horsemanship as a Professional Association for Therapeutic Horsemanship

(PATH, Intl.) instructor. Since then, Dr. Stewart has incorporated animal-assisted interventions with dogs and rabbits in college counseling and juvenile detention settings. At Idaho State, Dr. Stewart directs the Certificate Program in Animal Assisted Interventions in Counseling, offers AAIs in her clinical supervision, and incorporates AAIs in her teaching across the Council for Accreditation and Related Educational Programs Core. Dr. Stewart is the primary author of the American Counseling Association *Competencies for Animal Assisted Therapy in Counseling*, while currently serving as the chair of Ethics and Standards for the Human-Animal Interactions in Counseling Interest Network of the American Counseling Association, a member of the Pet Partners Human-Animal Bond Advisory Board, and a subject matter expert consultant of the American Psychological Association's Human Animal Interaction Division. Dr. Stewart shares her life with several species of animal family members including dogs, rabbits, mice, a cat, and a ball python. In her free time, Dr. Stewart volunteers at a local educational zoo that houses injured or unreleasable native wildlife species and enjoys hiking, camping, kayaking, and wildlife viewing in the beautiful Rocky Mountain wilderness.

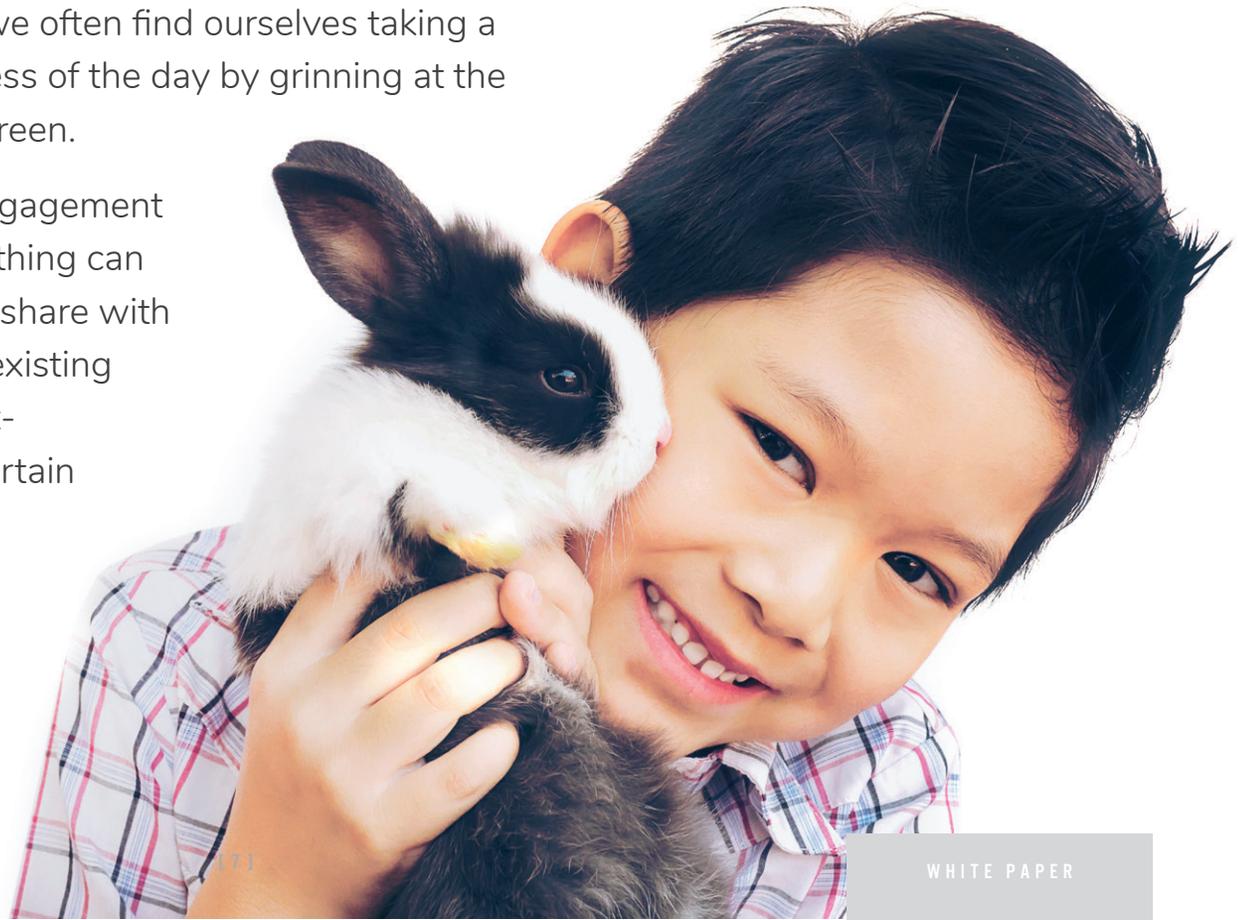
BENEFITS OF ANIMAL-RELATED ENGAGEMENT

Think back to the first time you were brought to tears over the way that an animal touched your heart. For some of us, these memories stir up accounts of interactions with childhood pets, recalling rich stories of the beloved creatures with whom we shared our homes. For others, an animal may have first stirred our hearts when we were lost in a story about the pet's great adventure. Maybe you were empathetic to an Aristocat, or perhaps you mourned along with Billy while reading *Where the Red Fern Grows*.

Even when engaging with animal-based content doesn't bring forth deep emotions such as love and lament, this kind of content can certainly inspire a smile and brighten our mood. After all, there must be a reason that some of the most-viewed videos online include dancing birds, curious kittens, and cuddly canines. By simply watching these clips, we often find ourselves taking a breath of relief, breaking free from the stress of the day by grinning at the animal who has found its way onto our screen.

Preliminary research on animal-related engagement (ARE) echoes these sentiments. While nothing can replace the emotional connection that we share with animals during face-to-face interactions, existing literature has supported the claim that pet-related stimuli can also be impactful for certain populations.

In a 2010 study¹⁰ that investigated the impact of different dog-related stimuli on engagement levels of people with dementia, researchers looked at how



interaction with a dog was received as compared to viewing a puppy video, completing a dog-coloring activity, and interacting with a plush and a robotic dog. Participants across all groups maintained consistent levels of engagement, suggesting that the inclusion of an animal both in practice and in thought fostered an environment of participation and collaboration. An additional finding of this study was that among all groups, residents who viewed the puppy videos maintained their engagement for the longest period of time. Anyone who has ever lost themselves in puppy videos on YouTube can certainly relate!

This isn't the first-time researchers have investigated the impact of pet-related stimuli on people with memory impairment, and the interventions of interest are not always media or crafts that focus on animals. A 2004⁹ study called for the incorporation of a robotic cat and a plush cat into a residential facility for people with dementia. The researchers were interested in determining whether these model animals would influence the participants' moods. Relative to baseline measures, participants who interacted with the plush cat demonstrated statistically significant decreases in agitation. Similar findings existed for those who interacted with the robotic cat, yielding data that is further supported in a 2008¹ investigation that found that interactions with a live dog and a robotic dog led to similar improvements in participants' loneliness.

While much of the foundational research focused on pet-related stimuli has concentrated on measuring the intervention's impact on people with memory impairment, there has been more recent research to help us better understand just why we so often go down the proverbial animal-related video rabbit hole (pun completely intended), and then feel so much better after doing so!

Watching animal videos has been empirically correlated with a more positive affect in the viewer, leading to an enhanced mood and increases in general feelings of positivity.⁷ The creation of this positive affect¹² not only brings a smile to our face, but it might also help open our minds, making us more receptive to resources and options that are available to us. This is great news for those of us whose bosses may occasionally walk up behind us to catch a kitty on our screen. As a matter of fact, a 2012 study¹³ found that participants who viewed animal footage not only reported better moods, but they had positive increases in their productivity as well!

Realizing that it's not always possible for people to engage in hands-on interaction with animals,⁴ researchers have also evaluated the impact of animal-related engagement in studies that involve fish tanks. When an aquarium was added to the dementia unit of a senior living facility, it was not just the people with dementia who displayed significant improvements in behavioral measures.⁵ The researchers in this study also monitored the staff's job satisfaction throughout the progression of the experiment, noting significant improvements after the fish tank had been added to the facility.⁵ While further research on the topic is needed, a comprehensive meta-analysis on the impact of fish tanks noted their association with relaxation, mood, pain perception, and even nutritional intake and body weight.⁵ Whether it be through watching animal videos on the internet or gazing into



the aquatic life of an aquarium, there is some sort of innate attraction in witnessing the actions of animals that we're only just beginning to empirically appreciate.

Finally, research suggests that we may be inclined to get along better with one another when we remember the affection that we have for animals. There is extensive literature that focuses on the ways in which a pet impacts the relational dynamics of our homes. For example, attachment with a pet in childhood has been associated with prosocial behavior and better quality of life in adulthood.⁸ Furthermore, a child having a bond with their pet has been correlated with the development of important constructs such as social competency and empathy.¹⁴

But even outside of the inclusion of a pet in specific family dynamics, there is evidence to suggest that just by looking at cute animal photos, interpersonal relationships might be enhanced.¹¹ In a 2017 study, researchers repeatedly paired positive stimulus (photos of puppies and bunnies, to be precise) to photos of participants' spouses. As a result, participants demonstrated more positive automatic reactions to their partners over time. Even more impressively, the participants also reported improvements in overall marriage satisfaction throughout the course of the study. In this case, by improving automatic attitudes and responses that participants had towards their loved ones, the animals' images made a lasting impact on family relations.

Bolstered by both our anecdotal experiences and some foundational research on the topic, let's define animal-related engagement.

Any engagement opportunity that allows participants the benefits of the human-animal bond by encouraging the remembrance of feelings that are commonly associated with interaction with an animal.

These activities might include the following:

- Virtual therapy animal visits
- Crafts, puzzles, or games based on animals
- Interaction with videos, written content, photos, or even model animals (plush animals and robotics)

Finally, these activities can be adapted so that they are appropriate for a wide audience, varying in subject matter so that the content speaks to the young and the old, those who are sick and those who are well, and to lovers of all different kinds of species.



INCORPORATING ANIMAL RELATED STIMULI WHEN ANIMAL-ASSISTED INTERVENTION IS UNAVAILABLE

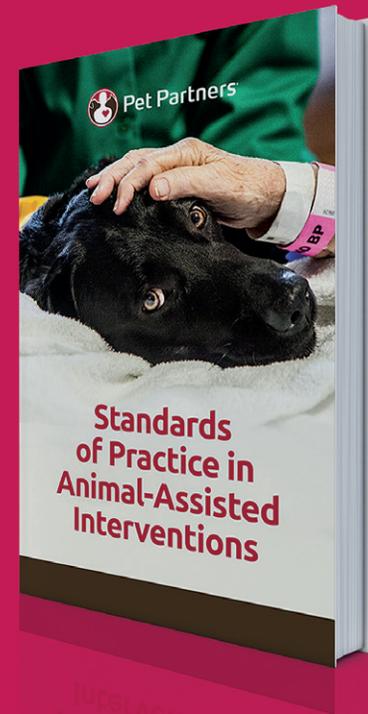
The world would be a better place if we all had unlimited access to therapy animals. However, there are many reasons why we might find ourselves limited in our ability to engage in animal-assisted interventions (AAI).

- **The high demand for teams versus the volunteer nature of most AAI**

At Pet Partners, our Therapy Animal Program is made possible by the committed human handlers who take time out of their busy schedules to share the love of their pets with the world. Given the volunteer nature of their work, they are not always available to visit every facility that requests their services. While we're continually striving to add more teams to the Pet Partners program, we understand that it can sometimes be challenging to find teams who can visit according to your facility's demand.

- **Respect for the welfare of our therapy animals**

The well-being of our therapy animals is top priority. We believe that animals should not merely tolerate their role in a visitation program, they should enjoy it! Pet Partners has many standards in place to protect the well-being of our pets during therapy animal visits. One of those standards limits an animal's visiting capacity to two hours per day. This helps prevent animals from becoming too tired or burnt out, promoting the safety and integrity of our work.



- **Infection Control & Zoonosis**

Pet Partners has long championed standards of practice for therapy animals. These standards offer the field's best measures for limiting the chances of spreading infection through therapy animal programming. To reduce infection, Pet Partners teams are extensively trained on the following infection control measures:

- ◆ Hand hygiene protocols
- ◆ Barriers while visiting
- ◆ Disinfecting equipment used during visits
- ◆ Animal health requirements
- ◆ The prohibition of raw meat diets for animals

While these standards ensure that the thousands of therapy animal visits we complete each year are done in a safe manner, there are times when issues of infection control make it impossible to engage in a visiting program. These cases sometimes take place on an individual basis, when a client's specific treatment plan calls for extreme measures of infection prevention. But we've recently learned how global circumstances can prevent our volunteerism, leaving a massive need for the benefits of the human-animal bond during a time in which visitation is nearly impossible.

In any of these circumstances, ARE can be utilized to fill the gap and provide clients and patients with a valuable reminder of the power of animals.

Use ARE to set the stage for future AAI

While you're waiting for therapy animals to become available at your facility, you can begin to set the stage so that your clients are optimally prepared for the intervention. Check out some of the suggested activities that you'll find later in this document and determine which opportunities will be most appropriate for getting your clients ready for their upcoming interactions with therapy animals.

Incorporate ARE when AAI services must be suddenly terminated

There are times when we must suddenly cease or delay clients' interactions with therapy animal teams. Maybe a team is unexpectedly unavailable, or maybe a client is no longer a good fit for active engagement with an animal. AAI professionals often talk about the need to plan ahead for the termination of AAI services, as not being able to continue interaction with a therapy animal (due to retirement, loss, or unforeseen circumstances) can greatly impact a client who has formed a bond with that animal.^{3,6}

In order to uphold ethical integrity and best practices, we must be ready to facilitate conversations about what it is like for the client to no longer be able to visit with the animal they have bonded with.³ In these cases, leaders in the field of professionalized AAI often suggest that clients be provided with a token of remembrance to assist them during times of separation from the therapy animals.³ Perhaps one of the activities that is outlined in this resource can be adapted for your client's needs, promoting conversations about the human-animal bond and incorporating the warmth of animal interaction even if the therapy animals cannot be present.

Fill the gap that some clients experience when AAI is simply not possible

Maybe your client is a great candidate for AAI, but for reasons outside of your control, therapy animal visits are simply unavailable at the moment. We think you'll find that the activities outlined here still have the ability to bring a smile to your client's face, providing even more evidence to support the fact that the human-animal bond is larger than any circumstance we could ever find ourselves in!



NOTES FROM LEADING AAI PROFESSIONALS

When therapy animal visits must be discontinued due to external circumstances, those who work in the world of AAI must be especially diligent to ensure not only that client services are being upheld, but also to keep therapy animals active and engaged so that they are ready to return to work when the timing is right. At Pet Partners, we're fortunate to work with some of the top leaders in the AAI community. See what these experts have to say about how they are navigating uncharted waters in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

NOTE FROM DR. AUBREY FINE

AAI Advocates,

All of us would agree that we live in a seemingly uncharted era. The uncertainty of COVID-19 has had a tremendous impact on all of us and compels many of us to reconsider what is important and how we continue to live our lives going forward, including our work as pet handlers. As I sit here considering what to write, I am reminded of an African proverb that emphasizes *"However long the night, the dawn will eventually break."* This verse, no doubt, conveys a sense of encouragement and optimism that we can continue to find enrichment in our lives. This enrichment should also include our devotion to our companion animals and being Pet Partners handlers.

Just like many of you, I have worked alongside animals for several decades. I have witnessed personally, as

well as professionally, the positive impact of human-animal interactions. These relations are now being more rigorously studied and documented by scientists. In so many ways their findings (the science) are catching up to what many of us have known intuitively for centuries: animals are good for our well-being. Our animals have lifted the spirits of many and have helped provide opportunities filled with joy, hope, and optimism. Our visitations have aided individuals who benefited from a humane reminder of their importance and value in life. The visits also provide a gentle nudge to persevere and deal with the challenges they are experiencing in their daily lives. Our visits make a difference and even if we cannot visit in person, our presence could be a welcome breath of fresh air in this time of uncertainty. I believe that there are still many ways that you can let people know that they are remembered and continue to share

our animals' tremendous gifts of life. A realistic option in this era of physical distance is to try to stay connected virtually. The following represents a few ideas that I have used recently and over the years, so that my clients can still connect with my animals.

I have had many virtual visits with several of my patients who all seem not only to miss our interactions but also miss seeing their four-legged friends. Ironically, as I sit virtually talking with my patients (children and teens) and their parents, the dogs instinctively lay by my side listening to the conversations just as they would have done in my own clinical area. At times they lean on my lap so they can see who is on the screen to the delight of the children that I serve. Frequently, children will call out their names and the dogs react positively in response.

I periodically integrate a couple of interactive activities while visiting virtually so the children can continue to engage with the dogs. For example, I have them talk to my animals and ask them to follow certain directions. Some children may ask the dogs to sit or lay down. Some have even asked if I could throw a ball to the dogs, or give them a belly rub, or they give me ideas of how to brush them. For a few moments they are involved and connected!

I've also incorporated some relaxation and mindfulness activities with the children while sitting alongside my therapy dogs. In this short essay it would be difficult to explain the exercises I implement, but perhaps in

the future I can put together a webinar or website for all of you to observe. In essence, I sit next to my dogs and together we model and have the children practice and regulate their breathing. The process has a positive impact on supporting their sense of calm.

Other suggestions that are just fun exercises can be to develop some educational activities such as small word searches and puzzles that are easy to make (free online resources exist to develop them) as well as various humane education activities that could support character development. Your clients (especially children) can continue to read to the dogs and you can facilitate a short interaction applying what you may be using with our Pet Partners program. Additionally, I've recommended to families that they read stories about therapy animals, and watch films with positive messages that have dogs as well as other animals in them.

Finally (as I noted in the book *Afternoons with Puppy*), I frequently write children letters from my dogs with healthy and hopeful messages they can enjoy reading while they are at home. Over the past couple weeks, I've written a couple of dozen cards that maintain our continued connection with fun messages! Parents have shared with me that their children enjoy receiving the mail and seem to be in better spirits while reading the notes.

Especially now in our hectic and frantic times, I encourage all to set aside a few moments to reflect on



the importance of what we contribute to the quality-of-life of those we serve. A time of social/physical distance as a new way of life should not mean that we cannot have and sustain connections; it truly is amazing that these alternatives can sustain our relationships and provide for some opportunities for the connections that they seek. They may not be as good as our actual physical visits, but they are alternatives that we must embrace!

Providing a sense of hope will not only allow us to realize that positive outcomes are still in our reach, but also permit us to continue to enhance the daily lives of those who benefit from them. Our animals have become an integral part of people's lives and for them to realize that

we are continuing to support them is a gift worth sharing! I could end this short commentary with quotations from great sages and philosophers about the importance of our connections with those who care about us. However, the words of Winnie the Pooh, a somewhat unacknowledged philosopher, said it best: *"if there ever comes a day when we can't be together [in person], keep me in your heart. I'll stay there forever."*

In a time of restricted visitations, we don't have to discontinue our connection, but must search for alternatives to share the tremendous benefits derived from the bond. Our clients will appreciate the notion that they're being thought of and for that moment being remembered.

Dr. Aubrey H. Fine

NOTE FROM DR. LESLIE STEWART

In many ways, we are experiencing a global event that some might say crisis and trauma specialists have been training for through our entire careers. In many ways, this is true. In the midst of a global pandemic, almost every aspect of our daily lives and routines has been interrupted, shaken, modified, obstructed, and even sidelined. Further, as we struggle to adapt to profound changes in our fundamental ways of being in the world, we find ourselves without the ability to access one of the most important human coping strategies: person-to-person social support. As a Licensed Professional Counselor specializing in crisis response and trauma-informed care, I find solace in the somewhat predictable processes of the human crisis response. From this perspective, we can understand and normalize some of the experiences we share in these times: feelings of agitation and restlessness while simultaneously lacking motivation and focus; irritability and difficulty being fully present in our socially-distant interactions; a sense of existential fear in not knowing how and when this will end; and of course, a sense of isolation and grief that somehow runs deeper than experiences of loss and loneliness we've encountered before.

Though some comfort is available in knowing all of these experiences are normal and temporary, they hurt. They hurt badly. And it feels like they will last forever. Even as a seasoned crisis responder with an

arsenal of relevant information and resources, I find myself stretched to the very limit of my own coping. But one thing has not changed. In a hurricane of global uncertainty, fear, and crisis, our animals stand before us — unchanged, consistent, and ever attentive. It is as if their dependability and devotion shine as a beacon of familiarity, comfort, and support to guide our navigation through this storm. They are our allies, our teachers, our companions, our rock.

It is for these very reasons that I choose to include the animals I work with — an exuberantly affectionate English shepherd named Star, and a sassy and charismatic rabbit named Saki — into my role teaching and preparing the next generation of professional counselors and crisis responders. They have much to teach us about patience, trusting the process, creating safety in relationships, and honoring authentic connection above all else — all crucial lessons for mental health professionals of every specialty. These animal-assisted education interventions are experiential to the core, and rely greatly on the physical interactions between my students and my animal partners. Even outside of the classroom, many students seek support for their own journey of healing and personal growth by working with my animals one-on-one in my office. Their presence has become a trademark of our curriculum, and their physical absence is greatly missed by my students following our

transition to Zoom-based class lectures, supervision meetings, and advising meetings.

Although there is no true substitute for in-person human-animal interaction, we rise to the challenge to adapt our animal-assisted intervention to virtual formats. Simply stated, we want to continue working on the lessons that were so unceremoniously cut short. I know the animals miss their students, too. Any time she hears the familiar voices of her student friends, Saki jumps awake and bounces around the room. Star jolts to attention and jumps into my lap to be included. During emotionally-charged meetings or discussions, Saki still sends us calming signals by deliberately grooming herself in our line of sight, and Star nuzzles my hand, leans in close, and hops into the chair next to mine, 'her' office chair, to provide cuddles and watch the computer screen. They don't recognize the faces of their students on screen, but they know they are with us somehow. And they can still detect and respond to pain and powerful emotions. These responses are further evidence for something I already intuitively knew: the bonds forged between our students and their animal teachers are mutual, deep, and lifelong.

Indeed, the animals are already implementing their own natural solutions to the physical divide, and this has certainly not gone unnoticed. As the human handler and caregiver of these extraordinary beings and the holder-of-space for my students, I'm inspired to generate

some solutions in kind. Below, I discuss some of the interventions we've adapted and created to help maintain the personal, professional, and educational benefits associated with my four-legged co-instructors.

Trick training is one of my most-utilized interventions for teaching counseling and crisis response students. By using only positive, relationship-based training methods to teach an animal a new behavior or trick, students must first learn to establish a relationship of trust and mutuality. To do that, we must understand the perspective of another who is very different from ourselves. Students must appreciate that the animal did not necessarily choose to participate in this learning by utilizing positive and non-coercive training techniques to engage and interest the animal. As this process takes time and does not always go as planned, students learn to trust the process, honor the relationship, manage expectations and frustrations, and adapt in real-time to unexpected responses and circumstances.

This semester, several of my students, supervisees, and advisees are working on target training Saki the bunny. Target training involves teaching an animal to approach and make contact with a target (in our case, a ping pong ball hot-glued to the end of a wooden dowel). Once the animal understands and consents to the concept, numerous tricks and more complex behaviors can be built upon the target foundation. This year's student-selected goal: teach Saki to circle around someone's foot with the

target stick. Since students are no longer able to work directly with Saki, we have implemented the following adaptations:

1. **Working with the student's own animal.** For students with pets at home, the relationship-building and positive reinforcement training techniques practiced with Saki are applied to working with a personal pet at home. In this intervention, I am able to participate virtually in many of the same ways I would in live sessions, such as serving as a process observer and consultant. In the sessions we've conducted in the past few weeks, most students chose to continue the goal of target training. Species included so far are dogs, cats, and rabbits. For some students, we are able to move directly into the trick training by transferring skills learned with Saki. With others, we've first needed to attend to relationship building and student management of expectations or personal reactions to the pet's unexpected responses or lack of engagement. So far, a vast majority of students report a more meaningful and positive relationship with their own pets and are still able to translate challenges and lessons learned with animals to the challenges and nuances of effective clinical work with human clients.
2. **Working with Saki/Star by proxy.** If a student does not have a pet at home, or cannot engage with a pet for an extraneous reason, I become the student's proxy with Star or Saki. In this type of exercise, the student directs my every move and word when working with either animal. Although I did not expect it, this adaptation has offered my students some benefits of becoming the process observer for their own choices, as it offers a unique 'outsider' perspective on the behaviors they instruct me to perform. In several proxy sessions, students have discovered insights about how they might be coming across to others.
3. **Reflection activities.** If animal interaction is not the priority for a class or session due to more urgent clinical or other consultation needs, we engage in reflections on lessons learned before COVID-19 interrupted our in-person work. After describing the challenge or issue at hand, I invite the student to first reflect upon the lessons they learned when working with Saki. What ideas or metaphors are translatable here? What did you already successfully do with Saki that you can apply to this situation? How do you think an animal would perceive you if you were interacting with her in the same way that you are interacting with the colleague/clinical client?



The examples I discussed above represent only a handful of potential strategies for virtual animal-assisted interventions. Each professional handler knows their animals and professional population best, and I am eager to hear about the ingenuity and innovation that my fellow professional handlers create and employ in the months ahead. Even though we may not be able to see it in this moment, I wager that this era will result in unprecedented ingenuity to increase access to AAI in populations that were previously underserved in this way. I can only speak from my own experience, but if I've gleaned any tips from that, it would be to trust yourselves and follow the lead of your animals, invite solutions and ideas from the populations and individuals you serve,

and don't overthink it! Just like I encourage my students to do, trust the process, honor the relationship, embrace less-than-graceful learning curves, and remind yourself that the power of the human-animal bond has been a steadfast force for thousands of years throughout every trial and tribulation of history. Our animals, our rocks, have stood the test of time for us for millennia. Trust in them, and COVID-19 will be just another disaster conquered together alongside our ever-dependable, ever-attentive, ever-devoted animal allies, teachers, and companions.

With sincere wishes for the well-being of you and yours,

Dr. Leslie A. Stewart

SUGGESTED ANIMAL-RELATED ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

There are so many ways in which our love for animals can be meaningfully incorporated during times in which therapy animal visits aren't possible.

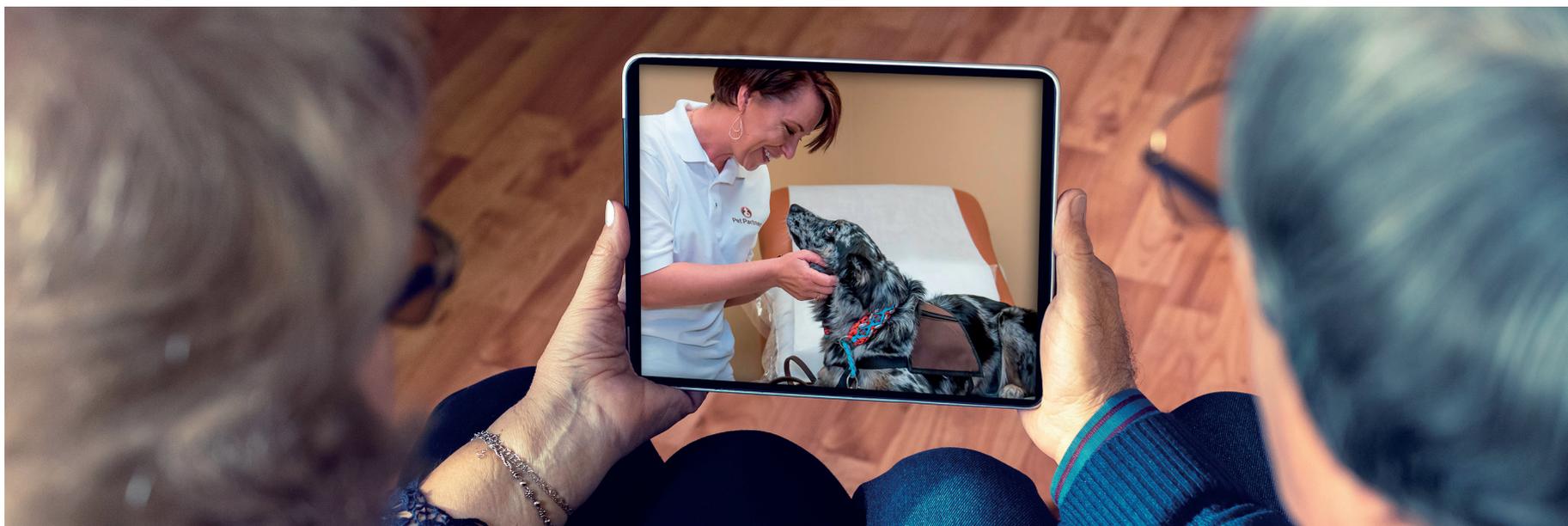
Crafty? We've got you covered!

Tech-driven? There's something for you.

Perhaps you'd like to learn or give back to the community around you? There's an ARE for that, too. The following suggestions will help you determine what activities will work best for your circumstances.

1. Virtual Therapy Animal Visits

These are real-time digital interactions with Pet Partners therapy animal teams. As outlined in our [Virtual Visit Guide](#), these visits allow for personal interaction via means such as video calling and other interactive video platforms.



2. Pet Partners' We Are All Ears Program

Impressive things happen when we practice reading to animals. In existing research on the topic, young readers have demonstrated increases in measures such as reading rate, accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.¹⁵ Children not only improve in their reading skills through this practice, but the addition of a furry friend to reading time might also help young readers stay on task and focus during their reading sessions.² Through our [Read With Me](#) initiative, Pet Partners teams have partnered with young learners for years by bringing therapy animal teams to schools and libraries. However, even when in-person visiting is unavailable, pets can still be incorporated to positively influence a child's reading experience.

[We Are All Ears](#) is an online platform with resources designed to encourage young readers to practice their skills with the pets they have at home:

- Take a pledge for children to read to their pets
- Download a reading log, bookmark templates, and a special bingo card that encourages regular reading
- Print out a Certification of Completion to present to your child and pet upon reaching their goals — pretty much equivalent to an honorary “dogtorate” degree!

Even if you don't have pets at home, there are ways to infuse a child's love for animals into their reading practice. Step outside and read to the wildlife around you, find a friend whose pet could use some video story time, or encourage your young learner to read to a favorite stuffed animal. Select books that tell the stories of animals and

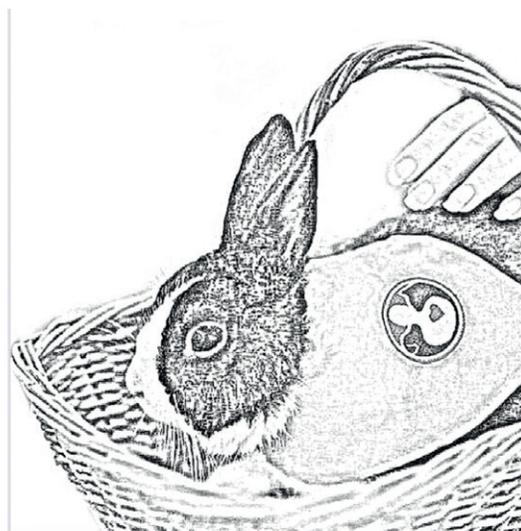
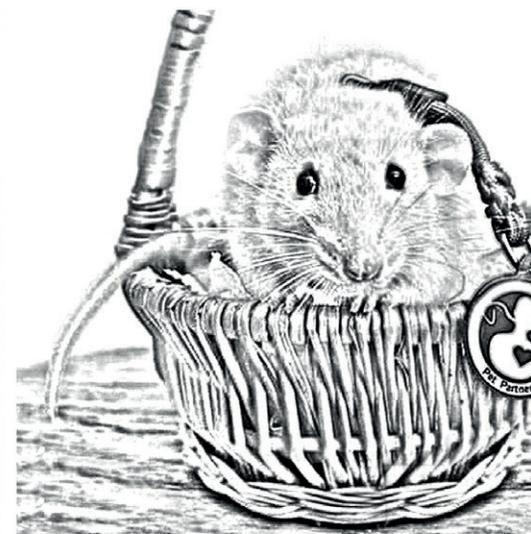


their connection to humans. By shifting the focus to a nonjudgmental animal companion, reading time will take on a whole new life in your home or facility.

3. Animal-Based Arts and Crafts

As evidenced in preliminary research on animal-related stimuli, some populations may see improvements in measures of mental wellness just by coloring a picture of an animal.¹⁰ Consider incorporating some animal-focused arts into your facility's toolkit. Perhaps you and your clients can create reusable cage cards for your local animal shelter, make greeting cards to thank therapy and working animals, or use clay to create models of your favorite childhood pets.

Realizing that these activities will often be incorporated in the absence of therapy animal visits, Pet Partners has created a therapy animal coloring book available for [download](#).



4. Video Content that Focuses on Animals

How many of us can attest to personal stories of being brought to tears while watching an online video of a person and an animal? Whether it be a short clip showing a soldier returning home to their pet or a full movie about an animal's great adventures, we know that this kind of entertainment has a way of pulling on our heart strings. Consider the age and circumstances of the population you're working with, and then select appropriate material to share.

Pet Partners also has some video material that is sure to warm your heart. Realizing the power of sharing ARE, Pet Partners has recently launched a new [Facebook group](#) where members are invited to contribute their own content. In this group, you'll find videos in which handlers share the love of their animals in many creative ways. Some handlers post videos to educate others about the unique attributes of their therapy animal's species or breed, while others share heartfelt personal testimonies for AAI. Log on to view this content, and perhaps you'll even be motivated to create and share a video of your own.

5. Connect with Local Animal Organizations

The only thing that feels better than giving back to the community is giving back to the community in a way that reflects your love for animals. There are many pet toys that can be made at home, and staff at your local shelter can help you select a design that best fits their most pressing needs.



Or maybe a splash of personal touch will make all the difference when adopters walk through the shelter halls. Consider working with your clients to create custom and creative adoption cards that are sure to spark the attention needed to match Fido with his forever home.

6. Provide Education Related to Animals

Consider engaging clients with materials that teach them about different kinds of animals. For example, you might develop population-appropriate engagement that teaches about the work of therapy animals, educates about a specific breed or species, or even provides education in animal welfare.

Whether you develop curriculum on therapy animals or on polar bears, engaging clients in educational material that speaks to their love for animals will not only yield new knowledge, but also stir up passion for animals that will exist whether or not we're actively interacting with the animals we're learning about.



Suggestions for education topics:

- ✓ What is the difference between a therapy animal, a service animal, and other kinds of working animals?
- ✓ How can you tell what an animal is feeling based on their body language?
- ✓ What kinds of species can become therapy animals?
- ✓ What do parrots eat? How long do they live?

CONCLUSION

At Pet Partners, we believe more than anything in the healing that comes with experiencing the human-animal bond. While we hope to see a day when every single person who desires to visit with a therapy animal is able to do so, we also know that the connection that we share with animals is larger than any single intervention could ever be. In promoting the ways in which a simple consideration of an animal might positively influence people of all ages and circumstances, we're proud to be advocates for the ever-expanding realization of the power of the human-animal bond.



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