**Saratoga Library English Conversation Club**
**Emotional Support on Four Legs: Animals and Mental Health**
**September 24, 2026**

This week we continue our discussion of mental health and ways people can seek support. In particular, we will explore how pets can help people cope and improve their mental wellbeing. First, review the vocabulary and then practice using the words in some dialogs.

**Vocabulary Preview:** Read these words and match them to their meanings.

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|---|---|
| 1. **antidepressant** (an-tee-duh-PRES-uhnt) | A. deep sadness, usually caused by someone dying or a major loss |
| 2. **anxiety** (ang-ZY-uh-tee) | B. the state of being completely alone or separated from others |
| **3. companionship** (kuhm-PAN-yuhn-ship) | C. the practice of paying close attention to the present moment and your thoughts |
| 4. **empathy** (EM-puh-thee) | D. love that has no limits or conditions and never changes |
| **5. grief** (greef) | E. (adjective) improving or brightening your emotional state |
| **6. hormones** (HAWR-mohnz) | F. a feeling of friendship and closeness with others |
| 7. **isolation** (ay-suh-LAY-shuhn) | G. treatment that helps make a mental, emotional or physical problem better, treatment is often given by a professional |
| 8. **mindfulness** (MYND-ful-nis) | H. a deeply distressing or disturbing emotional experience |
| 9. **mood-enhancing** (mood-en-HAN-sing) | I. natural chemicals in the body that control growth, energy, and emotions |
| 10. **overwhelming** (oh-ver-WELM-ing) | J. the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person |
| 11. **therapy** (THER-uh-pee) | K. a medicine used to help people feel less sad or depressed |
| 12.**to thrive** (thryv) | L. an empty space or a deep feeling of loneliness and loss |
| 13. **trauma** (TRAW-muh) | M. (adjective) too much to handle or deal with emotionally or physically |
| 14. **unconditional love** (uhn-kuhn-DISH-uhn-uhl luv) | N. a feeling of worry, nervousness, or fear about what might happen |
| 15. **void** (voyd) | O. to grow, develop and prosper in a vigorous and healthy way |

Answers: 1-K; 2-N, 3-F; 4-J; 5- A; 6- I; 7-B; 8- C; 9 – E; 10 – M; 11 –G; 12 - O; 13 – H; 14 - D; 15 -L

**Dialog 1**
**Setting:** A local coffee shop. Andi, Tom and Sal are at a table talking.

**Andi**: Grandpa has a hard time coping with his **grief** after Grandma died.
**Sal:** I know. Her death has left a huge **void** in his life. The loss is completely **overwhelming** for him.
**Tom**: They spent every day together for over 45 years. I asked him if he'd be open to going to **therapy** to help him with his **anxiety** and feelings of **isolation.**
**Andi:** The doctor also has a **therapy** group of people who have lost a close c**ompanion.** They get together every week.
**Sal**: Yes, I heard many good things about the group. They show such deep **empathy** and compassion towards everyone who comes.
**Tom**: I think he would like to attend that group rather than taking **antidepressants, hormones** or other **mood-enhancing** drugs.

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**Dialog 2**

**Sal**: How is your Grandpa doing now after the **trauma** of losing Grandma?
**Tom**: He's doing so much better. He said it's hard to get over the loss of someone who meant so much to him.
**Andi**: Yeah, she gave him **unconditional love.** The group **therapy** sessions and **mindfulness** exercises he's doing have helped a lot.
**Sal**: That's great. He's made many friends from the group. They inspire him.
**Tom**: Some of them are even **thriving** a few years after their loss.
**Andi**: That's good to know.

Now read the following article about how pets can help people improve their mental health.

**The Science Behind How Pets Improve Mental Well-being**
by Stevenson Village Vet Hospital, Oct 17, 2025

From wagging tails to soft purrs, pets have an extraordinary ability to bring comfort and joy into our lives. But beyond their adorable charm lies fascinating science — one that explains *why* spending time with pets can actually improve our mental well-being.

Research has shown that interacting with animals releases **mood-enhancing hormones**, lowers stress levels, and even helps combat loneliness. Let's dive deeper into how our four-legged friends help keep our minds healthier and our hearts happier.

***1. The Chemistry of Happiness: How Pets Influence Brain Chemistry***

When you pet a dog or cuddle a cat, your brain releases a surge of "feel-good" **hormones** such as oxytocin (ox-ee-TOH-sin), dopamine (DOHP-uh-min), and serotonin (sair-uh-TOH-nin). These chemicals are the same ones that boost feelings of love, joy, and relaxation.

At the same time, interacting with pets reduces the stress hormone cortisol (KOR-tih-sol), helping you feel calmer and more centered. This combination of chemical changes creates a natural **antidepressant** effect, often leading to improved mood and emotional balance.

In fact, multiple studies have shown that even a few minutes of gentle interaction with a pet can noticeably reduce **anxiety** and tension — a simple act with deep impact.

Discussion:

- Do you have a pet? If so, what kind?
- Have you had good experiences with pets?
- How do you feel when you pet a dog or cat?
- Are there other kinds of pets that calm you?

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***2. From Stress to Serenity: Pets as Natural Stress Relievers***

Life today can be **overwhelming** — work deadlines, social pressures, and endless responsibilities can affect one's mental health. But when a pet welcomes their person back home with excitement or curls up beside them after a long day, that stress begins to melt away.

Pets help us slow down, live in the moment, and shift focus away from our worries. Many pets seem to give **unconditional love.** This offers emotional stability, providing comfort during difficult times.

Imagine the following situation:
You have had a stressful day at work or getting something done. When you return home, how might your mood be affected if you had a pet?
–*Without a pet*: Will you keep thinking about work and worry about it?
–*With a pet*: Will a pet help you relax and get your mind off your worries?
The simple presence of a pet can transform the energy in your home — and in your mind.

***3. The Healing Power of Routine: Responsibility and Purpose***

Caring for a pet adds structure to daily life. From morning walks to mealtime, pets **thrive** on routine — and so do we. Maintaining a schedule around your furry companion can create a sense of purpose and predictability, which are key elements for emotional well-being.

For individuals struggling with depression or **anxiety**, these small, consistent responsibilities provide a reason to get out of bed and engage with the world. That gentle accountability fosters discipline, routine, and motivation — all essential for recovery and stability.

Discussion:

- Do you think have pets help children develop a sense of responsibility?
- What are some things a person needs to consider before they get a pet?
- Are some pets easier to take care of than others? Why?

***4. Companionship That Heals: Combating Loneliness and Isolation***

Loneliness is one of the biggest threats to mental health. Pets, however, fill this emotional **void** beautifully. They offer **companionship** and unconditional affection, reminding us that we are never truly alone.

For seniors, people living alone, or those dealing with loss, pets can be a lifeline. Their presence not only reduces feelings of **isolation** but also encourages social interaction.

Discuss whether you agree with the following statements or not:

- Pet owners are often more likely to engage with neighbors, visit parks, or get out of the house.
- Owning a pet is a good way to make new friends.

***5. Physical Activity, Mental Clarity: Pets Keep You Moving***

One of the lesser-known benefits of pet ownership is its impact on physical activity, which in turn enhances mental health. Dogs, in particular, require regular walks and playtime — motivating their owners to stay active.

Exercise can improve a person's mood, physical health and sleep quality. Walking your dog in the park doesn't just benefit your pet — it also provides a refreshing mental reset for you. Even smaller pets, like cats or rabbits, encourage playful interaction that adds moments of easy movement and laughter to your day.

Discussion:

- Do you agree that owning a dog can improve your physical and mental health?

***6. Therapy on Four Legs: Emotional Support and Healing***

Animals are now a recognized part of many mental health therapy programs. Emotional Support Animals (ESAs) and therapy dogs are used in hospitals, nursing homes, and counseling centers to provide comfort and support to patients.

Their ability to sense human emotions is truly remarkable. Dogs and cats, for instance, can detect sadness, fear, or stress — often responding with affection and calmness. This innate empathy provides emotional grounding, helping people cope with **trauma**, **grief**, and **anxiety** more effectively.

Discussion:

- Have you ever had a pet that could sense how you were feeling?

***7. Teaching Empathy and Mindfulness: Pets Make Us Better Humans***

Pets remind us of essential human qualities — kindness, patience, and compassion. Caring for a living being requires **empathy**, which can strengthen our emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships.

Moreover, pets live completely in the present moment. Watching a cat bask in a sunbeam or a dog delighting in a simple game of fetch encourages us to embrace **mindfulness** — to be fully present, grateful, and content in the now.

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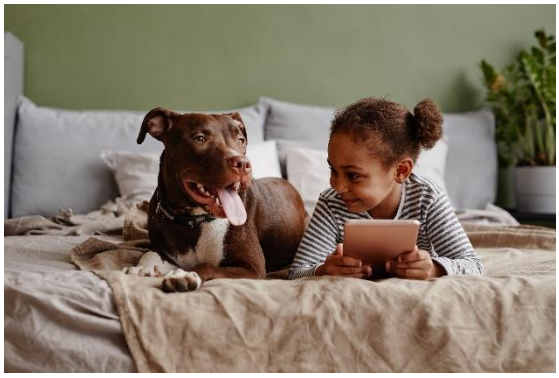
Discussion:

- Do you try to practice **mindfulness** by being in the present moment?
- Can this shift in perspective transform a person's mental well-being and foster calmness and resilience in daily life?

***8. Pets and Children: Building Emotional Strength Early***

Children who grow up with pets often develop stronger emotional foundations. Having a pet teaches responsibility, empathy, and emotional regulation from a young age.



Studies show that kids with pets tend to experience lower stress levels and greater self-confidence. They also learn to process grief and attachment in healthy ways, which supports long-term emotional maturity.

Discussion:
Did you know that many libraries have "Furry Friends Reading Buddies" programs? These programs are designed for children to practice reading out loud to a friendly dog without feeling pressure that they have to be perfect. What do you think of this idea?

***9. The Ripple Effect: Healthier Minds, Healthier Communities***

When individuals thrive emotionally, communities flourish too. Pet-friendly neighborhoods promote social interaction, compassion, and shared joy. Animal shelters, pet adoption drives, and local pet events bring people together for positive causes — strengthening the bond between humans and animals.

Discussion:

- Do you believe that pets promote social interaction and better communities?
- Would you say you live in a pet-friendly community?
- What is the most pet-friendly community you have been to?

Task
If you have a pet, please send a picture of it to Lisa at lisa.liu@lib.sccgov.org. Thanks.

**References**

https://www.stevensonvillagevet.com/how-pets-improve-mental-well-being/
https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2018/02/power-pets