

# Mind Matters Podcast - Can Pets Help Keep Our Brains Healthy as We Age?

Welcome back to another episode of the Mind Matters podcast where we talk about brain health, dementia, and many topics in between. We're going to be doing something a little bit different today in our podcast episode. We recently came across an interesting article from 2025 in *The Guardian* that talks about the connection between pets and cognitive health. This is certainly a topic of interest for many of us who are pet owners, or even just pet lovers, so we're going to be diving into this article today and talking through it.

We are all pet owners and lovers at this podcast and hearing that pets can help preserve brain function is a win-win! This article from *The Guardian* references a study completed in Europe that focused on whether pets influence our brain health and preserve brain function as we age. The study looked at data over an 18-year time frame in adults over the age of 50.

The focus was not just on pet ownership, but also on how different types of pets benefit the brain. So depending on what the pet species was, they found specific correlations to improvements in certain brain functions.

Dog owners primarily had memory benefits, showing an increase in both their immediate and delayed recall. So, remembering information that you learned a while ago and pulling that forward is how this benefit was shown. Essentially, dog owners had sharper memory over time.

It really makes sense because with dogs there's a lot of moving parts involved in caring for them. If you walk them, you are getting physical activity which is good for the brain, but you also have to remember where you put the leash last time. You have to remember each part of their routine, like whether or not you fed them today. All of these tasks support your memory as you care for your dog over time.

By comparison, the study found that cat owners experience a language benefit, specifically a slower decline in verbal fluency. Verbal fluency is the cognitive ability to quickly and effortlessly produce words and articulate ideas reflecting one's language processing and executive functions.

In general, cats are more aloof and prefer to give you affection when they feel like it. They are more autonomous and harder to predict in their behavior, so cat owners are more likely to talk to their cats than show physical affection, which supports language and communication skills.

Unfortunately, there was some bad news about birds and fish. Owning a bird or fish did not show any significant cognitive impact, but they can still be great companions. Even though some birds can talk, pet owners build a different and more physical bond with dogs and cats. So, you get more of a sensory experience that releases endorphins, which are good for the brain. Dogs and cats really require a level of engagement in caring for them that you just don't see with a lot of other animals.

Additionally, being a dog or cat owner forces you to have a routine. For example, many dogs and cats are creatures of habit so when you do something at the same time each day they come to expect it. And they will even come to remind you that it's getting close to time for that thing (like a meal or snack or walk). So, by the very nature of having that animal, the owner becomes a creature of habit and routine also.

One other element specific to dogs that was discussed in the article was the increased socialization you get as the result of being a dog owner. If you walk your dog, people are likely to come up and ask you about him or her, or ask to pet the dog. If you take your dog to a dog park, you are automatically interacting with other people who also have their pets there. Both situations prompt socialization on the owner's part. Even just walking your dog in your own neighborhood or along the same route each day can introduce you to neighbors and promote connection locally.

The article also talked a little bit about stress reduction, that release of endorphins and dopamine that you get when you are petting an animal. It's a very sensory experience and can be very soothing. Pets are really in tune with our emotions, dogs and cats especially. Even a very aloof cat will come over to you when you're sad or not feeling well. They kind of understand that unspoken emotional language we all have.

Being a dog or cat owner can also promote a host of other health and wellness benefits. If you are someone who lives alone or has a spouse who travels, a dog or cat can provide comfort and help alleviate anxiety or fear associated with being alone. You also get consistent exercise by walking a dog (or a cat!) and that increased blood flow helps your cardiovascular health, which is also in turn helping your cognitive health.

Having a pet, whether it's a cat, a dog, a fish, a bird, also gives you a purpose. It gives you a reason to get up in the morning and something to care for and to have a purpose bigger than you, which is a huge part of cognitive health as well. Sometimes being a pet owner can also force you into something that you wouldn't otherwise do for yourself. For example, if you're not a morning person but you are willing to get up each day at 7am to walk your dog, then you are getting the benefit of that routine also instead of oversleeping each morning.

The article mentioned that fish and birds, though, do not have the same impact and there were a couple of reasons for that. One reason is that you have less interaction, less physical engagement, as you can't cuddle up to a fish or a bird. So, you don't have those strong emotional bonds like you might have with a dog or a cat. Another reason is that birds and fish often have shorter life spans, which means less time for building connection. The article also talked about how a noisy bird can disrupt your sleep, which is certainly not ideal for brain health.

All these points emphasize the importance of not just having a pet, but that the connection and the bond that comes from having that dog or cat is going to enhance cognitive health in myriad different ways. We know from a previous podcast that loneliness and isolation are negatively impactful to people, especially older adults. You're more likely to have cognitive decline when you isolate or when you have decreased engagement with people and dogs & cats open that door. They can help fill those gaps of connection, of social support, of companionship. You are more in the moment with a pet rather than thinking about a million other things you must do, and the unconditional love they provide is rarely found elsewhere in our relationships.

Let's tie this article back to you - what does this mean for our residents, for those of you living in our ACTS communities? All Acts communities allow pets to live in various areas or provide opportunities for people to engage with pets in every level of living. This article is very in tune with what we're doing at Acts in that pets promote connection, they promote joy, and they're a part of our total well-being. As we roll out the Well-Being model and we look at the Joy Pathway, pets fit perfectly into that. They give you a sense of connection, they encourage movement and routine, they provide purpose and meaning. And those are all things that we look to really embody in that Well-Being model.

So, if you have a pet and you live in an Acts community, hopefully you're sharing that pet with others! We encourage people to do things like volunteer, maybe bring your pet for visits in the healthcare areas if you're willing to do that. And if you don't have a pet, there's a lot of ways to interact with animals still. You can be a part of pet therapy visits that might be occurring in your level of living, or you can offer to volunteer with animals. In many areas, there are dog rescues that rely solely on volunteers to be able to do things like run adoption events and even if you might not be able to foster a pet, you can still support through volunteerism in some aspect.

There are also ways to enjoy some of the more social aspects of pet ownership, even if you don't own a pet. If you're part of a social walking group that invites pets along, even having a single dog as 3 or 4 of you walk gives you an additional little bit of connection and engagement. You could also offer to pet-sit or dog-walk for someone else. Perhaps you have a neighbor that has an animal and they go

out frequently; you could offer to walk or check in on their animal. That way you still get the benefits of pet interaction without actually having the added responsibility of owning a pet.

Some of our Acts communities have dog parks that you can take your dog to, or even have visiting veterinary services, which is a huge benefit to people who might otherwise struggle to get out and take their pet to a vet on a regular basis.

There's so much opportunity to get the companionship, the brain benefits and the health benefits of pet ownership or pet interaction within our communities. Even if you don't have a pet, try thinking of outside the box of ways that you can engage with animals in a meaningful way.

Let's end with a line from the article that really ties in everything we've talked about:

*"It is about how we live our life. What is nice about this study is it suggests a fun and meaningful way of keeping healthy and engaged."*

This article just drives that point home, that pets can help us find that meaning and joy, and can also keep our brains healthy, impacting and enhancing our cognitive health.

As we wrap up, the hosts would like to share a bit about our furry family members. Katie is the owner of Finley, a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel who loves wearing her Acts bandana as an unofficial member of the team. Marisa has a mini-Labradoodle named Barrett, who is her adventure buddy and prefers to be outdoors whenever possible, especially in the snow. Christina has rescue pups, Paco and Layla. Paco loves to sit in the window and bark at other dogs, while Layla loves her walks (and the occasional adult beverage!).

If you're interested in reading the article we discussed today, the full article title is "Owning a dog or cat could preserve some brain function as we age, study says". You can access the full article with the QR code on the screen at the end of the episode, or you can see the website link at the end of the episode as well.

We'll see you next time. And as always, remember, your mind matters.