



A PROJECT MADE POSSIBLE BY CAT PERSON

# **EXPLORING THE CAT-HUMAN BOND**

**THROUGH THE SPECIAL IMPACT OF THERAPY CATS**

Conducted by Pet Partners in collaboration with Dr. Lori Kogan

# About the Authors



**Taylor Chastain Griffin, Ph.D.**

In her roles as National Director of AAI Advancement for Pet Partners and Executive Director of the Association of Animal-Assisted Intervention Professionals, **Taylor Chastain Griffin, Ph.D.** 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. She 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 AAI. She is also a published author, dog trainer, and Pet Partners team evaluator.



**Lori Kogan, Ph.D.**

**Lori Kogan, Ph.D.** is a licensed psychologist, and a Professor of Clinical Sciences for the College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences at Colorado State University. She is the Chair of the Human-Animal Interaction Section of the American Psychological Association and Editor-in-Chief of the *Human-Animal Interactions Journal*, an open-access online publication published by CABI. She has published numerous journal articles and books including *Pet Loss, Grief, and Therapeutic Interventions: Practitioners Navigating the Human-Animal Bond* and *Clinician's Guide to Treating Companion Animal Issues: Addressing Human-Animal Interaction*. She has given invited presentations on topics related to human-animal interactions in both psychology and veterinary medicine venues, and is currently engaged in several research projects pertaining to human-animal interactions and the human-animal bond.

# About the Organizations



Pet Partners is the leader in the therapy animal field for registering volunteer teams. Since 1977, we have supported thousands of teams in making millions of meaningful visits across the country and around the world. Through the human-animal bond, we can improve the physical, social, and emotional lives of both the people and animals involved. Pet Partners supports volunteer teams by offering the highest quality preparation, an unmatched approach to evaluation and registration for nine different types of animals, and a focus on connections. We elevate the importance of therapy animal visits, and our teams help build a healthier and happier world for us all. Whether or not you have a pet, learn more about sharing the human-animal bond by visiting [www.petpartners.org](http://www.petpartners.org).

## Cat Person

Launched in March 2020, Cat Person is shaking up the pet industry by bringing transparency and innovation to a long underserved and confusing category: cat care. Cat Person was founded by two cat-obsessed persons who believe that cats and the people who love them deserve to be truly understood and catered to with an uncomplicated approach.

Cat Person is simple, high-quality cat care reimagined for cats and their persons to make real life with cats easier, so you both feel equipped for the long, sweet ride, even when it gets bumpy. To stay true to our purpose, we set aside 1% of our sales to studying the connection between cats and their people.



# Introduction

So many of us share our lives with cats, yet there remains such mystery surrounding this remarkable species that has long been underrepresented in research about the human-animal bond. *How are we impacted by our bonds with feline friends, and what does it truly mean to be a cat person?* To begin answering these questions, we conducted a study with a population of cat lovers who epitomize the cat-human bond: therapy cat handlers. At the core, these duos are everyday pet owners who realize the immense impact that cats have on their own well-being and decided to share their cats with others. Having established deep bonds and trusting relationships with their cats, these cat lovers inspire healing and connection all throughout their communities.



## Therapy Cats

- Cats that provide physical, psychological, and emotional benefits to people within their communities.
- Together with their handlers, are evaluated on their ability to safely interact with a wide range of populations.
- Provide animal-assisted interventions (AAI), which is defined as: Goal-oriented, structured interventions that intentionally incorporate animals in health, education, and human services for the purpose of therapeutic gains and improved health and wellness.

## Project Objectives

- Better understand the unique bond shared between people and their pet cats.
- Learn ways in which cats and their people are impacting their communities.
- Determine demand for cats as therapy animals and need to raise awareness.
- Illustrate, through the power of personal stories, how cats and people connect, thereby illuminating what it means to be a cat person.

## Answering a Significant Call

Limited research exists on the benefits of the cat-human bond (especially in AAI contexts), making it a critically important research topic. This study was designed to help fill this void and lay the foundation for future studies to support the unique nature of the cat and person bond.

## Study Design

This mixed methods investigation included multiple phases of data collection:



### Phase I

Given their ability to so powerfully represent cat owners who are advocates for the species, therapy cat handlers from around the globe were invited to participate in a survey. This survey explored owner-pet relationships, as well as experiences working together as a therapy animal team. Within this survey, participants were asked to provide contact information for any facilities in which they offered therapy animal visitation, along with an indication of interest in participating in a follow-up interview on the topic.

### Phase II

Surveys were sent to the facility contacts that were collected in phase one.

### Phase III

Participants from both the cat-owner/therapy animal handler group as well as the facility contacts were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews.

## These efforts yielded considerable data

**63** cat owner/handler survey responses + **29** cat owner/handler interviews  
**13** facility contact survey responses + **07** facility contact interviews

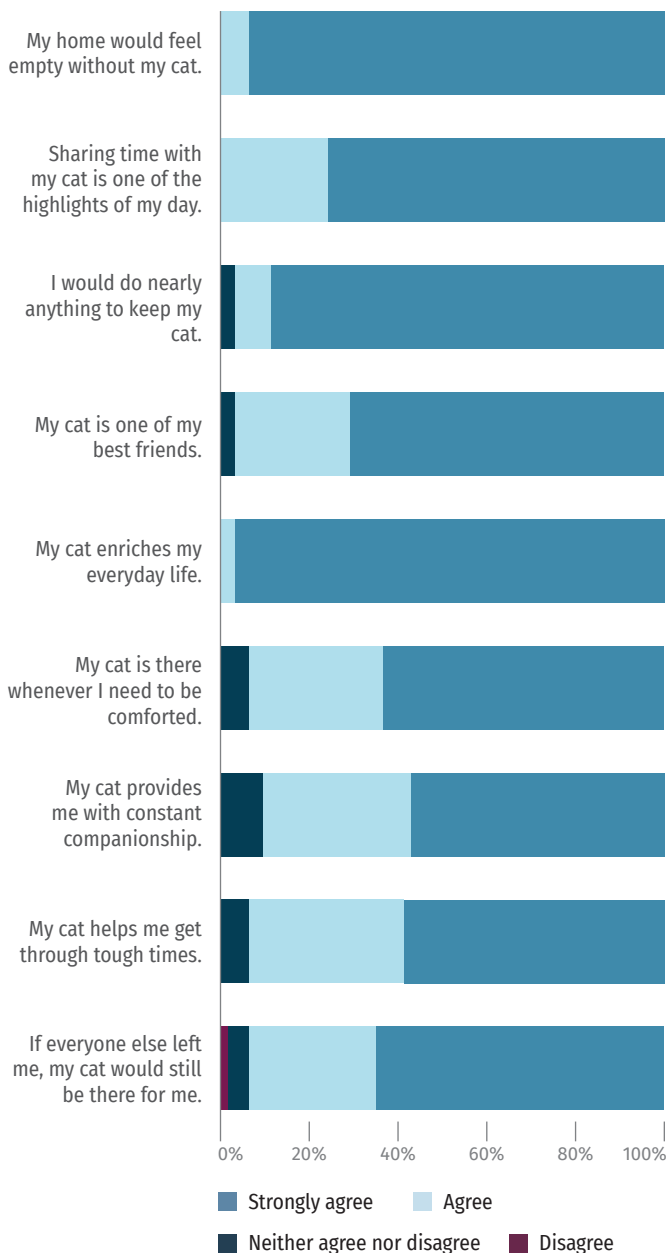
Given the limited number of therapy cat teams that exist (estimated to be around 200 in the U.S.), this project successfully captured the perspectives of a representative portion of this niche population.



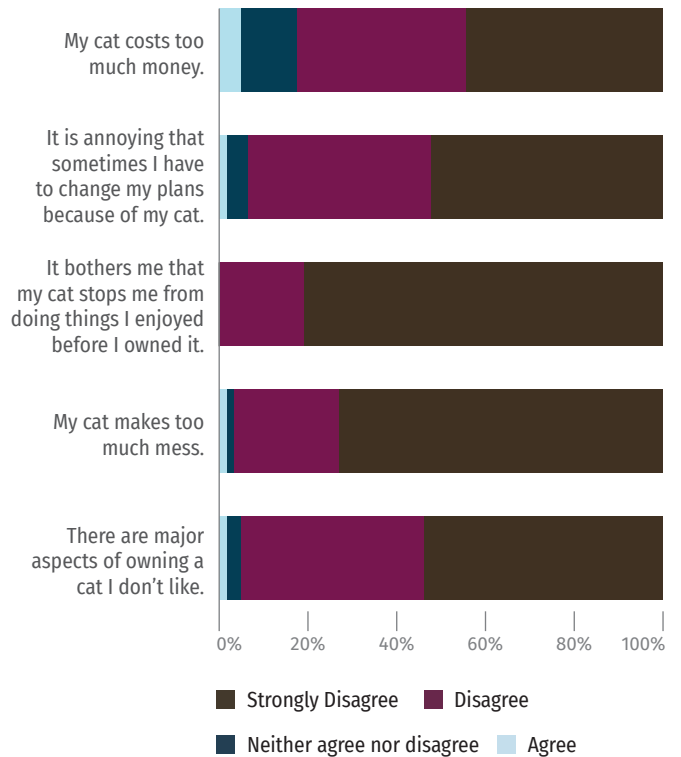
# Survey Findings

The handler survey created for this project included cat-owner relationship questions, using the Cat Owner Relationship Scale (CORS). It also included questions specific to AAI, including a subsection specific to AAI-related welfare issues. Of the 63 participants, most owners were married/partnered white, non-Hispanic females, 50 years of age or older, with a college education.

**One of the most significant findings of the survey portion of the research project was that these handlers reported very high bond levels with their cats.**

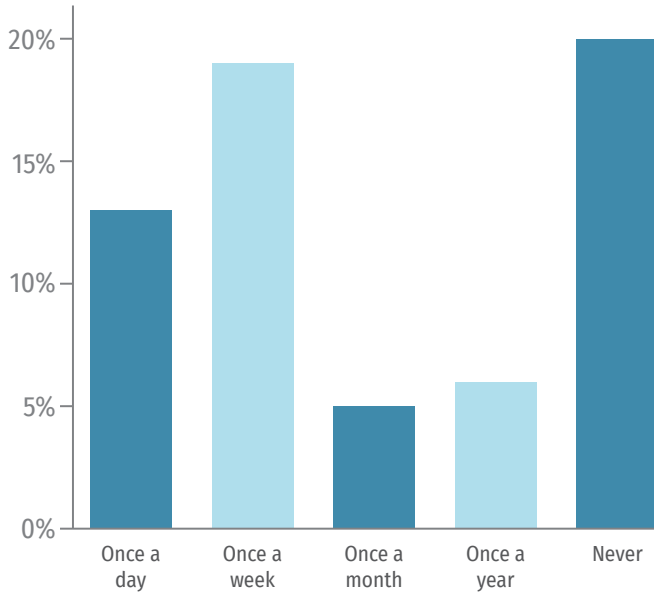


**In fact, very few owners endorsed items reflecting a strained bond with their cat.**



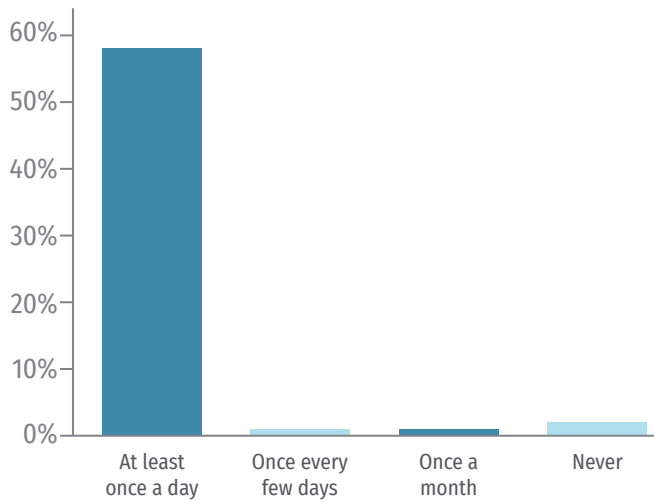
**Owners reported viewing their cats as special points of connection.**

How often do you tell your cat things you don't tell anyone else?

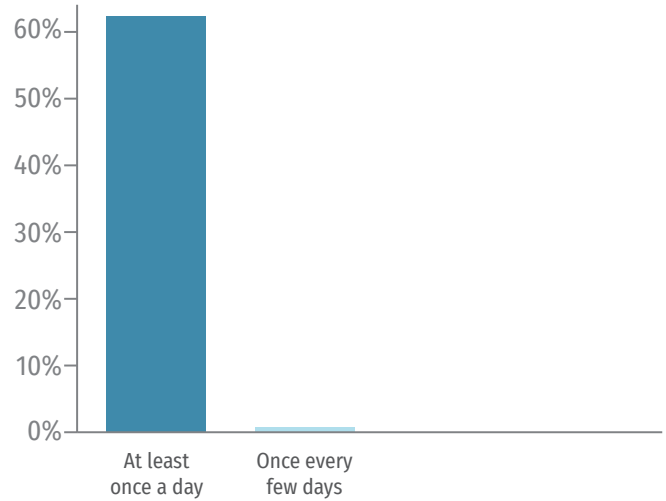


**These cats are important parts of owners' daily lives.**

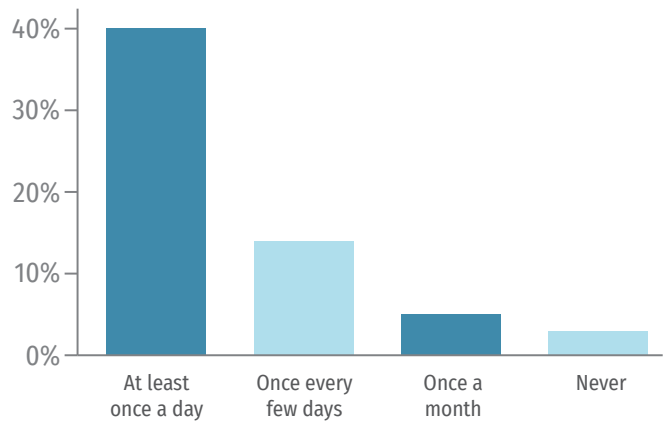
How often do you talk to your cat?



How often do you cuddle your cat?



How often do you play games with your cat?



And they feel that their cats are more than worth the effort required as a part of **responsible pet ownership**:

- 100% of participants reported that they never feel having a cat is more **trouble than it's worth**.
- Participants rarely reported feeling as though looking after their cat is a chore.

All in all, these findings point to the ways in which human lives are improved through relationships with feline companions. Cats are reported to be significant attachment figures who provide physical connection, play, and trusted social support. *For our participants, life is simply better when it's shared with cats.*

On top of an exploration of the cat-human bond between owners and their pets, participants provided information specific to the work that they do together with their cats by volunteering as therapy animal teams.

## Survey Findings Specific to Therapy Cats

<p><b>Mature kitties</b></p> <p>Most therapy cats were 6 years or older.</p>	<p><b>More neutered males</b></p> <p>65% were neutered males; 35% spayed females.</p>	<p><b>Established relationships</b></p> <p>Most of the cats had lived with their owners for 5 years or more.</p>
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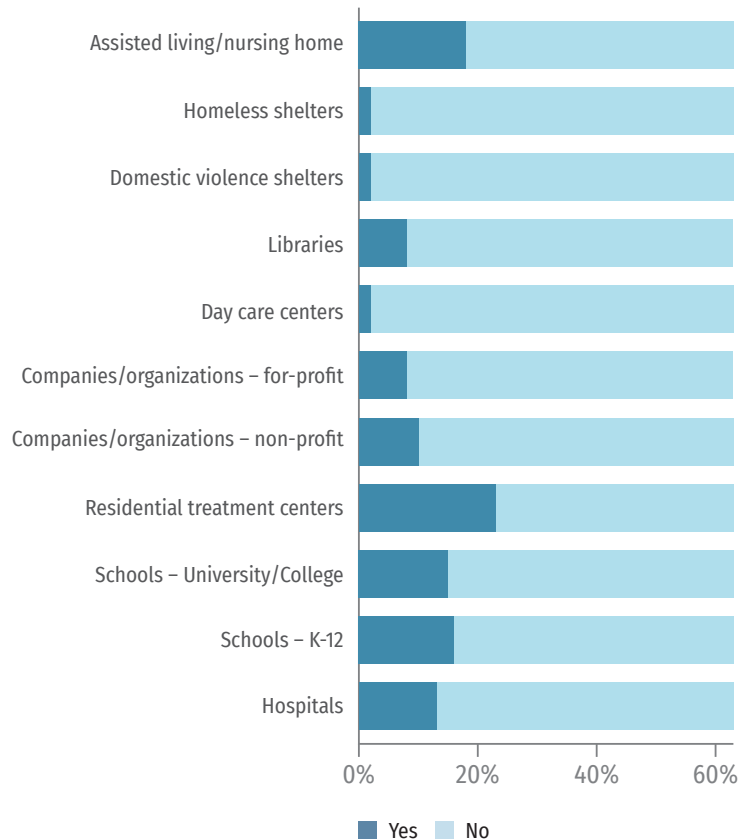
**Majority were rescued**

Over half of the therapy cats were adopted from a rescue group or humane society, followed by cats who came from breeders, family/friends, or were found as a stray.

**Variety of breeds**

About half of the cats were domestic shorthaired, followed by American shorthaired, American longhaired, Maine coon, Russian blue, ragdoll, and Persian.

## Where the Teams Visit





# Impact of Therapy Animal Visiting

Owners and facility contacts reported numerous benefits of therapy cat visits for the clients who engaged in AAI:

	Reported by handler	Reported by facility contact
Decreased depression	73%	81%
Decreased anxiety	73%	81%
Decreased loneliness	83%	75%
Decreased isolation	75%	69%
Decreased agitation	33%	69%
Decreased stress	72%	81%
Decreased aggression towards other people	23%	31%
Decreased preoccupation with physical pain	37%	63%
Increased interest in surroundings	37%	56%
Increased verbalization	77%	63%
Increased physical movement/activity	60%	63%
Increased compliance for physical therapy	12%	13%
Increased willingness to eat	13%	19%
Increased interaction with other people	60%	81%
Increased willingness to read	10%	6%
Increased ability to read	3%	6%
Increased ability to concentrate/focus	30%	44%
Increased interest in cats	87%	63%
Increased positive feelings for cats	80%	69%
Increased sharing of positive stories about animals	85%	81%
Increased sharing of stories about own cats (current or past)	92%	81%

*The facility contacts represented in this study held roles such as activity directors and program coordinators for a diverse range of client populations. When asked about their perceptions of the therapy programming with cats, 100% reported a positive view and 94% reported very positive.*

## Amazing response from our clients:



At first, we were hesitant; however, Harry the cat has exceeded all expectations. Most of our patients love the cat.



*Our patients and staff love the cats. It provides an opportunity to experience therapy animals for patients who are afraid of dogs.*

# Engaging in AAI Supports the Cat-Human Bond

*82% of the participants reported that their involvement in therapy animal programming positively impacted the relationship that they shared with their cat.*



*“Going on visits is always “our” time. She knows when she gets the harness on she is going on visits and gets extra cuddly as we prepare to leave. I feel like the visits strengthen our bond because she gets to love on others and still come home with me for cuddles after.”*

**Handlers are careful to monitor their cat’s stress level during visits. If their cat appears stressed, they rely on a variety of options to reduce stress when needed.**



**Breaks**

**67%**

Handlers who reported taking a break during a visit as prompted by their cat



**Cueing Clients**

**56%**

Handlers who reported asking the client to change the way they were interacting with the cat



**Providing Comfort**

**73%**

Handlers who reported providing comfort to their cat to reassure them during AAI



**Ending a Visit**

**68%**

Handlers who reported ending a visit early based on their cat’s needs







# Spotlight: Cat Person Staff

What does it say about a person that they love cats so much that their entire career is dedicated to creating products that enrich the lives of feline family members? As a fun point of comparison in this project, we invited the Cat Person staff team (n=32) to complete a survey that included the attachment to cats scale. In analyzing the aggregated data, a finding quickly jumped out at us:




## ***These folks are all-in on cats!***

Compared to average rates of attachment in existing pet-owner research, the Cat Person staff has significantly higher rates of attachment to their cats.

***Additionally, nearly all staff feel their cat is special (91%), sharing statements such as these:***

-  *She's very perceptive. When I'm not feeling well or having a bad day, she somehow knows to be more cuddly.*
-  *You know when you have a special connection. It's a lot of things, but it's a depth of communication and trust that is surprising given you can't communicate them verbally.*
-  *We call her "nurse Margo" because she is super perceptive of when someone is sad, or not feeling well—she sits on your lap or chest and purrs and makes biscuits.*
-  *Spending time with an animal is so grounding. For example, watching my cat take pleasure in something so small, like chasing after dust in the air, automatically centers me and makes me appreciate life.*

***As verified cat lovers, nearly everyone on the Cat Person team reported feeling that working for a cat-focused company gives them added job satisfaction (97%):***

-  *I love being part of a company that understands the importance of cats in our lives.*
-  *Because I care about cats, I care about the job I'm doing. It's also a subject I know a lot about, and it feels good using my firsthand experience with cats to inform my job!*
-  *It gives me more purpose and adds meaning to how I spend my hours. I get to work for my cat and think about ways to make him healthy and happier.*
-  *Cat Person really resonates with me, and I'm glad that there is a brand out there that is trying to destigmatize the cat lady stereotype.*



# Phase II: Interview Findings

Upon the completion of Phase I, thematic analysis of the interview data was performed. Transcripts were coded to identify patterns of meaning that frequently appeared within the participants' accounts. Those patterns were analyzed in several rounds of review to inform the themes explored here.

## Theme 1: The Depth of the Human-Cat Bond

Throughout all aspects of the interview, it was clear that these participants were highly bonded with their cats, who were often described as “family members” and beings they “couldn’t live without.” Participants described integrating their cats into all aspects of daily life. From simply watching television together to going on hikes and kayaking trips, these human/cat duos spend meaningful quality time with one another. Many participants described how they feed off of their cat’s energy, often feeling inspired to be a better, more balanced person because of the way that their feline companions respond to them. Cats were reported to invite their humans into play and presence, inspiring them with their sense of unconditional love.

*“ She gets me to slow down and to enjoy the moments...those more inane ones where I could be doing a million different things, but right now, I’m just breathing. She definitely slows me.*

*“ When you know another creature loves you unconditionally, it brings you the love. You also share the pain and the sorrow that you will have in your life. He seems to understand your struggles and challenges without words. It’s just an incomparable spiritual experience.*

## Theme 2: Cats Helping Their People Through Hard Times

The bond shared between these participants and their cats had special implications during challenging times in the humans’ lives, especially within the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Time and time again, participants said that they don’t know how they would have made it through if it weren’t for their cat. When life’s typical scheduling was turned upside down, cats were cited as reasons to get out of bed and hold to a routine. When social isolation and loneliness were at an all-time high, cats provided essential sources of connection and affection. Some participants even described their belief that being in lockdown with one another ultimately strengthened their relationships with their cats, making them more attuned to the cat’s body language and preferences.

*“ You feel life is out of control...beyond your control. It’s so unpredictable, full of uncertainty. He is the only certain thing I have in my life—the only reliability that I have in my life. Everything can be changed in the next seconds, but he’s with me. I cannot go through pandemic without him. That’s impossible. So, this is my support system. It’s my attachment. My security.*

*“ During the pandemic, it was really hard. I had to be away from all my family, and she was the only thing that I really had that I could tangibly touch and just get a lot of love and support from. So, she’s been huge. She’s been my little rock star, my little cheerleader.*

### Theme 3: You Don't Have to be Born a Cat Person!

Interestingly, no two journeys towards Cat Personhood are the same. When asked questions about how long participants have loved and lived with cats, many different experiences were offered. There were a great number of participants who identified as cat lovers as far back as they could remember, with several people referencing pictures of themselves as a baby with a cat at their side. Other participants were introduced to cats in adulthood and talked about how they developed an appreciation for the species over time.

### Theme 4: Breaking the Stereotypes about Cats

One of the most overwhelming findings within this project is that therapy cats help to break the stereotypes that often exist about cats in general. Participants described the ways in which society tends to conceptualize cats versus the lived experiences of people who share their lives with them:

#### Common Stereotypes

- ⊗ Aloof
- ⊗ Standoffish
- ⊗ Unaffectionate
- ⊗ All alike
- ⊗ Unable to be trained

#### Truths about Cats

- ✓ Intuitive
- ✓ Loving
- ✓ Eager to learn
- ✓ Personable
- ✓ Each cat has a unique personality



“There is a stigma that cats have – that they hate being out in public, and they hate strangers, and they won’t connect with anybody but their owner, it’s just not true.”

“A lot of people who say they don’t like cats have watched us for weeks, sometimes months, seeing the cat interacting with other people and then are like, “Oh, can I look at the cat? Can you bring them closer?” And it may take a couple of weeks, but then the cat is in their lap, like, “Oh, I love him so much. He’s so special.”

“We have people come up and say, “I don’t like cats. I don’t want to touch your cat,” but then they hang on the perimeter, and they watch and typically by the end of our time there, they’re right up next to her talking and asking questions, and sometimes even touching her by then.”

This theme was further developed when some participants talked about how therapy cats don't just challenge stereotypes about cats, but how they also help to break the mold of what is commonly considered to be a "cat person." Many participants described how they would never have imagined themselves as a cat lover. However, upon getting to know the species, they now proudly wear that badge. The same phenomenon was reported for the people who receive therapy animal visits. Just over a third of the interviews included stories about clients who at first expressed reservations about cats but who came to be cat lovers after interactions with a therapy cat.

## Theme 5: The Special Characteristics of Cats

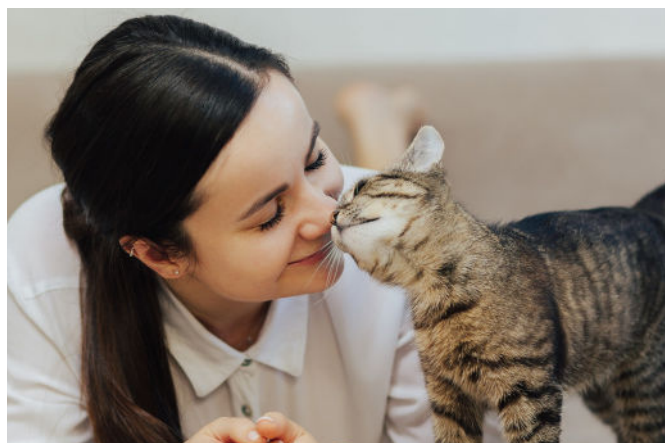
It likely comes as no surprise that the participants love cats for countless, complex reasons. The most commonly utilized adjective that was used to describe cats was "independent"—a notion that was repeated throughout this project. At a foundational level, participants appreciated the fact that cats are perceived as being easier to care for than many other species. They went on to describe a wonderful benefit of this independence: it can make them feel special when a cat "chooses" them. Whereas many other species that came up in the interviews were described using words like "needy," participants often talked about how humans have to earn the respect of a cat.

They talked about how cats can expertly communicate their needs and preferences, and many participants described an appreciation for the fact that cats are "honest" and "authentic." The appreciation of these traits was inspiring for a few participants, who described how humans could learn from cats by observing these traits and seeing the value of authenticity, boundary-setting, and general self-care. Participants often expressed frustration over the fact that cats are generally underappreciated by society. Cats are seen as smart, intuitive, communicative beings, and we are just now starting to understand them in ways that do them justice.

*"I feel that it's a lot more special in the fact that you can't make a cat do something without them wanting to. And so, it's definitely...it works more on consent. It's like I can ask her to do something. If she says, "We're not doing it," then it's like, okay, you have boundaries. That's great. I think it's really beneficial.*

*"Cats are mind readers. They seem to know everything that's going on around them. They seem to sense what people need and respond to that in ways that humans don't always get. We seem to think we know what other people need or want, and sometimes we get it right, and sometimes we don't. Versus cats just have that intuition or that ability to intuitively know when somebody needs their comfort, and they give it so unconditionally.*

*"Cat people love them for who they are, not who they want them to be, if that makes sense. A lot of people are dog people, and I'm not putting anybody down. Everybody has preferences. I love everything. But dogs are more into obedience and like, "I want you. I'll pay attention to you," and cats are just like, "This is me. Love it or leave me."*



## Theme 6: Personal Fulfillment from Involvement in Shared Volunteerism

At the core, the participants in this study were motivated by a desire to share the love of their cat with others in need. Participants reported a profound sense of personal fulfillment with their role as therapy animal handler. They described their involvement in animal-assisted interventions as a means for connecting with their communities and meeting people they otherwise wouldn't have come into contact with.

“ You connect with people. The cats connect with people. It's making a connection with people, and it's showing people that you care enough to be there and to share the cats with them...to share the animals with them. I think that's the basis. I would say if I could put it in one word, it's connection.”

“ If you have a cat that has these qualities, it's very fulfilling to go around with that cat and bring pleasure to the life of someone who doesn't have a lot going on in their day.”

## Theme 7: The Impact of Therapy Cat Visits

In conducting interviews with these therapy cat handlers, the impact of therapy cat teams quickly became tangible. Handlers talked about how clients are often eager to pet or hold their cat, noting that for many, the cat serves as one of the only safe places they have for physical touch and affection. Handlers also talked about how many clients they visit with simply desire to watch the cat, with many people completely shocked to see something like a cat on a leash. In fact, **surprise to see a therapy cat was cited in 100 percent of the interviews** as participants talked about how so many people are completely unaware of the fact that cats can be therapy animals.

Some of the most commonly reported experiences associated with therapy cat visits were:

- Inspiring clients to socialize and engage, a finding that was even more meaningful for some clients who were previously completely shut down due to their presenting health concern or diagnosis (~35% of the interviews).
- Motivating clients to talk about their own pets and love for animals (~35% of the interviews). This finding was even noted for clients with dementia, who seem to recall information about the therapy cats and/or information about their own pets as a result of the AAI.
- Comforting clients who have to be away from their pets for treatment, and often encouraging them to meet their treatment goals so that they can return home to their cat sooner (~28% of the interviews).
- Serving as a means to educate clients about the power of the cat-human bond. Participants talked about teaching clients about responsible pet ownership, the importance of respecting and caring for animals, and the differences between therapy cats versus other working animals (~21% of the interviews).
- 31% of the interviews included testimonies about therapy cats assisting a client in overcoming an existing fear of felines.

- These therapy cat teams noted positive impact not only for the clients but also for the facility staff where AAI programming occurs (~35% of the interviews). Language suggesting that clients' faces "light up" or "brighten" in response to the therapy cat were included in 41% of the interviews.

In short, this data points to the fact that human-cat interaction is meaningful even outside of the owner-pet bond. Similar to the data realized when respondents explored their individual relationships with their pet cats, visiting with someone else's cat has been found to inspire social engagement, connection, and comfort.

**Beyond these trends in the AAI testimonies, participants shared moving stories about the work that they do with their therapy cats. In the participants' own words:**

“ We had a youngster at the hospital in the emergency room. She was probably, oh I don't know, six or seven. They had to do an IV, and she was pretty distressed. I took Leo in there and he just wedged himself in next to her, and she started to pet him, and she calmed down enough to where she was distracted enough that they could do the IV. Then he wanted to stay with her so we stayed there for a while.

“ Cats provide an opportunity for patients to practice emotional regulation. They're not like dogs where they just come right up to you and they're really happy. You really have to calm yourself and be calm and quiet, and then the cat comes up to you. It's more rewarding for them.

“ This lady was in memory care and does not remember who she is, where she is, or anybody around her. But if I ask her, "Do you want to see Reba today?" she just looks at me and says, "Oh, the cat." She remembers the cat. And I think that's part of the power that animals have. It's this ability to awaken memories and to awaken feelings that people may have forgotten or may have been unable to access.

“ Some people will say it's the first time their child has smiled while in the hospital.

“ I have one resident who has dementia. People who are confused are often frustrated and either shut down and depressed, or angry and acting out, and can vacillate between the two. And this particular resident is mostly reclusive, sometimes agitated. But the cat comes, and she is a light. It brings out her softness. She becomes a caretaker and protective. Coos and wants to protect that cat and make sure she's holding him correctly. And that's a miracle for me to witness. It's a miracle for her to experience pleasure and feeling the importance of herself and the value of the animal.

“ The volunteer coordinator says that our visits are like bringing the outside world to this man who's not really able to go out and be in the world anymore.





## Theme 8: The Healing Power of the Purr

Of all of the ways that cats inspire wellness in the lives of humans, the healing power of the purr emerged as a highly referenced theme within this research. Some participants struggled to find the words, frequently coming back to phrases like “there is just something special about that purr.” Others referenced scholarly discussion on the topic, noting the belief that the megahertz of a purr is associated with healing properties.

“Cats have a real...healing quality to them, especially if they get to the point of purring. That purring... those vibrations...just the joy that having an animal like that crawl into your lap and just be there with you is just so healing.

“I think there’s nothing more comforting than having a cat in your lap who is snuggled in, purring. If you’re looking for comfort, if you’re looking for solace, if you’re looking for peace, if you’re looking for hope...having that cat trust you enough to snuggle in and purr...there is just nothing more comforting than that.

“She has a very soft purr, so I’ve told the kids, “If you feel her vibrating, that’s her purring.” So they do and they tell me, “I feel her. I feel her,” and I’m like, “Well, she’s purring for you.”

“Their purr is calming, very calming. Even if they can’t hear it, as long as they can feel it.



## Theme 9: Honoring and Ensuring Therapy Cat Welfare

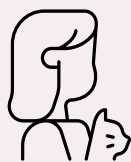
As with any therapy animal, it's essential that therapy cats don't simply tolerate their role, but truly thrive in it. Throughout these interviews, participants described the numerous ways in which they protect and promote well-being for their cats:

### Key Consideration



#### ***Handlers realize the importance of matching their visitation settings to their cat's unique preferences.***

Some cats were reported to prefer working with older populations while other cats were reported to be more child-oriented. It was noted by many handlers (~59%) that therapy cats tend to do better when they can visit with clients one on one.



#### ***Handlers are proactive in preparing clients for their interactions with the cat.***

It can never be assumed that a client knows how to appropriately interact with a therapy cat. Handlers in this study talked about how they would show clients the best way to pet or hold their cats to set everyone in the intervention up for success.



#### ***Handlers read their cat's body language and advocate accordingly.***

Because their work together is built upon the foundation of a strong and trusting relationship, these handlers are able to carefully watch the subtle cues that their cats demonstrate to inform the ways in which they direct the visiting environment. Handlers talked about ending visits when their cats started to show signs of stress or tiredness, and they also talked about extending interactions when it was clear the cat wasn't ready to move on.

# Call to Action

## 1. Appreciating the Benefits of a Life Shared with Cats

As expected with any foundational investigation on a historically under-researched topic, the findings from this project only scratch the surface with regards to the depth of the cat-human bond. However, rich themes about what makes this relationship so unique and so meaningful have come to the surface, inspiring a quest for greater understanding and increased appreciation for the ways in which cats impact our lives. Throughout this data, participants described how special they felt to be “chosen” by a cat. A beautiful anomaly was explored in the way participants described what it means to earn a cat’s trust and affection at the same time realizing the independent and authentic nature of the species. Cats were described as highly intuitive and emotionally in-tune—traits that aren’t commonly referenced in associated stereotypes. The stories shared through this study call for a baseline rethinking of this remarkable species, matched with a compelling invitation to open our hearts and lives to cats.

## 2. Greater Awareness About the Work of Therapy Cats

Realizing the incredible power of therapy cats, there was a clear need stated by participants for more teams to do this great work.

**100% of the interview participants noted that more therapy cat teams are needed.**

There is no doubt that there is something special specific to cats as therapy animals. When participants were asked how they were received during therapy animal visits, many themes emerged speaking to just what makes these beings extra special when involved in AAI:

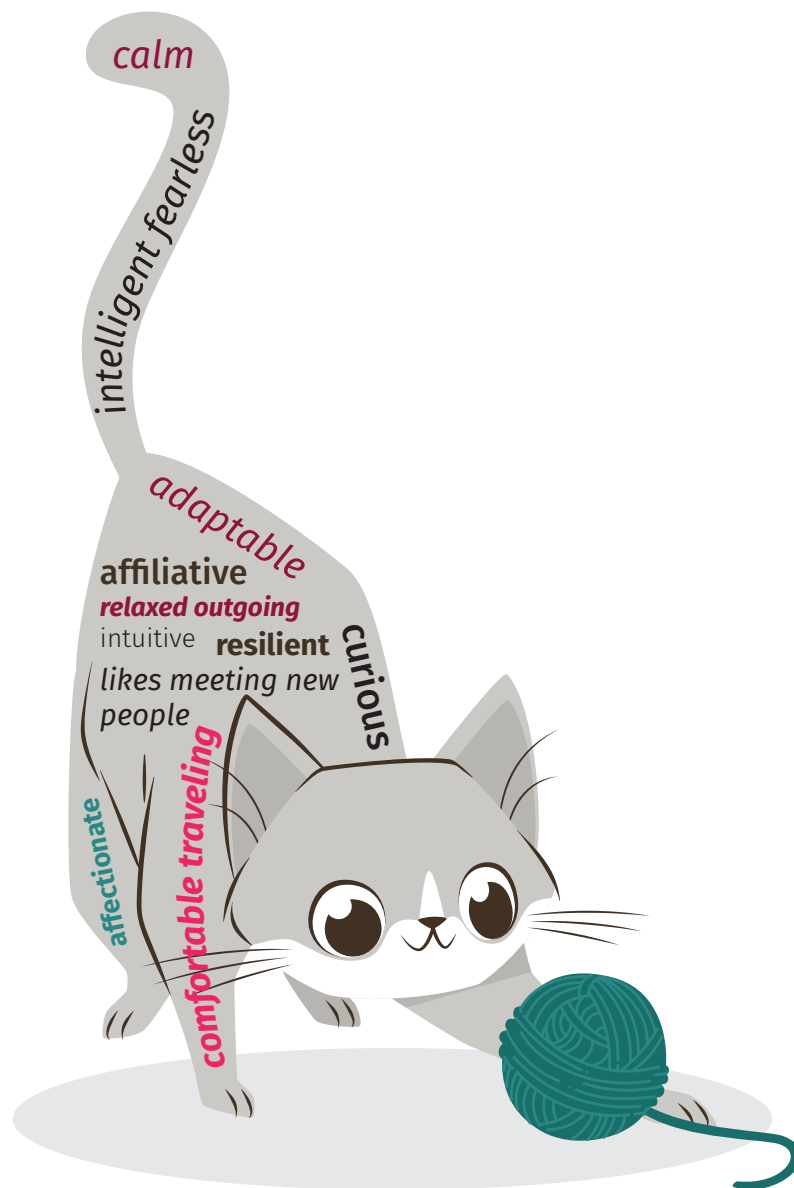
Cat People Need Therapy Cats!	Cats are the Perfect Size	Cats have a Calming Energy
Cats are the favorite animal of a large portion of the population, a truth that participants noted observing in their AAI programming. They often talked about how “cat people” were especially excited to be able to interact with a therapy cat. They also commonly referenced the belief that cats are a great fit for people who might be fearful of larger animals.	Over and over again, participants described the physical qualities of a cat that give them a unique advantage as therapy animals. Referencing their smaller size, ability and tendency to sit in laps for extended periods of time, soft fur, and majestic appearance, therapy cat handlers noted the special reasons clients love interacting with their pets.	“Calming”: a word that appeared time and time again through the interviews. Participants talked about how their therapy cats would intuitively calm clients down and how the cat’s own relaxed energy would often be preferred by certain clients.

Participants also talked about how clients express desires to interact with more therapy cats while referencing the fact that they receive more visitation requests than they can fulfill. When asked about ideas for how to close this gap, it became clear that raising awareness of therapy cats is an essential first step.

As noted before, every single interview participant talked about how surprised people are to learn that therapy cats not only exist, but that there are standardized, respected guidelines available to support the efficacy of the intervention. Participants in the study have a resounding message for the rest of the cat loving world:

***We need more people to consider whether their cats would be good therapy animal candidates!***

So what are those traits that make a cat a good fit for this work? Participants had a lot to share about those qualities:



Word Cloud Featuring Adjectives Participants Used to Describe Their Therapy Cats

## Participants also had helpful ideas for preparing a cat who shows propensity for AAI



1

### **Socialize your cat and watch their responses.**

Participants talked about how we tend to just assume that all cats are homebodies—a belief that certainly isn't true for the cats represented in this study. Handlers took their cats to places such as pet-friendly retail stores and parks and monitored them for signs of enjoyment.

2

### **Acclimate your cat to travel.**

If a cat is going to be involved in AAI, they will need to be comfortable in the car, bus, or subway to start and end their visits right.

3

### **Expose your cat to the necessary equipment.**

Therapy cats often walk on a leash/harness and are transported in carriers or strollers. Give your cat plenty of time to get used to this equipment, and work to make these experiences as positive and rewarding as possible.

4

### **Connect with AAI groups and learn from other therapy cat handlers.**

You don't have to reinvent the wheel! There are therapy animal organizations that have established standards and guidelines to assist you along your therapy cat journey.



*If I didn't know that there were therapy cats, other people don't know, and pet owners don't know that it's a possibility. I thought, "Wow, if more people know what I've seen... it would grow requests for it and people deciding to be therapy cat owners."*

## Suggestions for Future Research and Programming

This foundational research project with dedicated cat lovers shed considerable light on the vast benefits of the cat-human bond for cat owners as well as for those who come to love therapy cats through AAI. Upon getting the chance to share their stories, participants in this project communicated genuine appreciation for this formalized effort to better understand this commonly loved but historically underexplored species. This project is just the beginning, with many suggestions for research and practice inspired by the findings:

### Research

- Explorations of cat attachment and bonds for cat owners who don't participate in AAI would allow for comparative analysis of the impact that volunteering with your cat has on the cat-human relationship.
- There is a need for therapy cat research that includes program outcomes measured using objective, empirically validated methods.
- Additional research pertaining to cat welfare (within AAI and in general) is needed to ensure people-cat relationships are mutually beneficial.
- Though we scratched the surface with this project, much more investigation into the specific impacts that cats have on the lives of their human counterparts is called for.

### Practice

- A clear call was made by participants in this project for awareness campaigns focused on the vast benefits associated with sharing your life with a cat.
- Cat lovers need guidance on what to look for in assessing their cat for therapy work and how to get started in cat AAI.
- The sweeping stereotypes about cats and their people that tend to exist in this society should be challenged.



# Conclusion

Perhaps it is not surprising to discover that a significant cat-human bond exists for a population of people passionate enough about cats to become involved in animal-assisted interventions. However, the testimonies shared during the course of this project far exceed baseline affinity and connection. The depths of these bonds were cited as being life-altering relationships, points of essential emotional security, and even motivators for continued personal growth. Cats were described as intuitive, engaging beings who walk the line of independence and affiliation in a way that we humans can learn from. At the core, the data from this project confirms a truth known intuitively by the millions of cat owners around the globe: cats and people are better together. We conclude this project inspired to appreciate our feline friends for all that they truly are, while elevating the stories of how they inspire healing and alliance within their human counterparts. Though this study has reached its conclusion, the realization of the power of cat-human connection has only just begun.





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