

PETS, ADOPTION, AND MENTAL HEALTH

By: Karen Mount, Co-Lead THRIVE Wellness ERG

Have you ever settled into a quiet room to unwind after work, only to hear barking or meowing at the door? This happens to me regularly. I grudgingly get up to let in my loving cat, Dougie, who prefers to be wherever his family is. After a quick look around, he hops onto the furniture, stretches, purrs, and settles into the sweetest, most relaxed position. As I watch him, my muscles relax and I'm finally ready to begin my downtime.

I also attend virtual meetings as a member of the Wellness Employee Resource Group. On work-from-home days, furry pets sometimes wander onto the screen and you can hear the delight of my fellow members. Pets bring an authentic warmth to meetings; they simply want attention and connection. The same happens whenever I chat with coworkers about our pets, and the shared response is a guaranteed smile-maker.



According to *Science Insights*, an online magazine, in an article dated March 7, 2026: "Pets improve mental health through a combination of biological, emotional, and social mechanisms that researchers have been measuring for decades." The article explains: "Cortisol, the hormone your body produces under stress, drops during sustained contact with an animal. At the same time, oxytocin, the hormone linked to bonding and trust, tends to rise. These shifts are not dramatic spikes or crashes. They are subtle hormonal nudges that, repeated daily, create a calmer baseline over time." It further notes that loneliness is the feeling of disconnection, while any interaction with a pet creates connection.

I experienced this firsthand in my twenties, when I moved from a shared apartment to my own place. I was excited about the new area and personal space, but soon found that freedom also brought a quieter, lonelier reality, as I lived far from family and friends.

To ease those feelings, I began chatting with my neighbor Barry. As we grew friendlier, he asked if I would help with cat-sitting. I don't recall many details, but I remember how relaxing it was to get to know his furry roommate. With Barry's encouragement, my journey into pet adoption began.

My first cat, a calico named Tigger, was no fan of my snuggling. It took six months and a bout of the flu for him to decide he liked me. Since then, I've always had one or two cats, all adopted from local shelters, and each has helped me navigate life's different paths and emotions.

Pausing to laugh at a neighbor's dog or a chirping bird as you walk to your building might bring a smile to your face and even lower your stress. If your life could use more connection, I've listed a few animal shelter phone numbers below:

Burlington County Animal Shelter- 609-265-5073

Hamilton Animal Shelter- 609-890-3550

Trenton Animal Shelter- 609-989-3254