

Why pets make great Valentine's

By Lisa Bloch

It's not hard to figure out who's an animal lover and who in particular has pets. We talk about them a lot, take endless photos of them, spoil them, worry about them, and simply delight in being with them. For years, cat videos have dominated YouTube and both dog and cat photos, videos, and stories are hugely popular on other social media sites like Instagram and TikTok. There's even a CatGPT!

As Valentine's Day approaches, it's the perfect time to reflect on why we love these enchanting creatures who share our lives. Here's my top-five list:

- The unconditional love. Our pets couldn't care less about how attractive or successful we are, or whatever blunders we've made on any given day. The look of adoration a dog or even a cat — yes, a cat! — gives us will truly make the heart melt. Unlike our human entanglements, their love is simple and pure.
- The cuteness. Oh, the cuteness. True, we all have our particular favorites when it comes to breed mixes, colors, and sizes, but you have to admit, whether soft fur or scrunchy face, it's hard for many of us to resist. The inherent cuteness and appeal of many animals, especially baby animals, with their big eyes, soft fur, and playful behavior, is thought to trigger our innate nurturing instincts and desire to care for vulnerable creatures. This likely stems from an evolutionary need to protect our own young. Whether it's innate or not, I know that I physically cannot walk by the kittens at our shelter without at least a quick squeal of delight at seeing them (sorry, co-workers within earshot).
- The emotional support. Tied to that unconditional love, any animal lover can tell you how good it feels just to be around these amazing beings. There's a great deal of research that shows that interacting with animals, even if it's something as simple as sitting near them, can lower our blood pressure, slow our heart rate, and ease anxiety and stress. Marin Humane's animal-assisted programs bring this emotional support to schools, care centers, hospitals, and many other places where the presence of an animal can bring some sense of ease and even delight.
- The companionship. You're never really alone if you have a pet. My dog makes for a great hiking companion and my cats are champion snugglers when it's Netflix time. They also tolerate my singing. Pets can also ease feelings of loneliness, especially for those who live alone.

- The inspiration. Pets, in particular dogs, motivate us to get up and get moving. I know I wouldn't be quite as active, especially in these cold, gloomy months, if I didn't have a dog that needed the exercise. Pets can make for great conversation starters, too. I've met so many people in my life — some of whom have turned into friends — because our dogs wanted to say hi first.

For those who love animals but don't have their own pets, consider fostering one or volunteering at a shelter. Those animals could use some extra love — and they'll certainly return the favor with a wagging tail or a loud purr.

Lisa Bloch is the marketing and communications director for Marin Humane, which contributes Tails of Marin. Visit marinhumane.org, find us on social media @marinhumane, or email lbloch@marinhumane.org.