

Practicing kindness while sharing our pets! Maureen Ross, MA

Kindness isn't just a happy-face-emoji or cherry on the cake. Cooperation and collaboration fosters kindness, one of the main reasons we thrive in communities. It is needed more than ever in times that are challenging.

Metaphorically, it makes sense when someone opens a door for us, we benefit from not getting smacked in the face! I smiled at an elderly woman (and I'm not young) in the grocery store. She stopped, turned and look me square in the eye saying, "Ya know, your smile just made my day, thank you!" Her kindness made my heart soar.

Acts of kindness, like sharing our pets is powerful and empowering. We may be the "icing on the cake" for that person. Each small daily choice we make to nurture ourselves and others reduces anxiety and makes us healthier!

Kindness, and sharing our pets in safe, caring and appropriate visiting situations, triggers feel-good hormones (oxytocin, dopamine, cortisol).

Add empathy biggie sizes the benefits. We can amplify kindness for ourselves and others with connections and empathy (trying to feel what someone else is feeling). Not assuming – but carefully clarifying. Though empathy may not be directly related or necessary, it is a strong motivator to kinder behavior towards others. Actions (like visiting with our pets) with understanding makes a difference.

Sometimes it's hard to remember kindness when engaging with real humans when staring at a desktop, laptop, tablet and cell phone. I'm no exception. I am aware, especially when it directly affects me. I admit I send electronic greeting cards, but not always. Some people enjoy getting real cards or pictures – not picages.

We take so many "images" these days, that we can forget to ask permission especially while visiting with our pets. Photo releases are required by organizations registering visiting therapy teams. If I'm in a relaxed situation, I ask anyway to be polite (showing behavior that is respectful and considerate of other people).

There are many creative and unique ways to practice kindness every day. Registered therapy teams do it well because of training from organizations like Pet Partners. We can all share our pets, if we do it safely, pets are healthy, and enjoy interacting.

There are many ways of practicing kindness and reducing stress. Choose what works best for you. Here are some helpful considerations/reminders:

- GEL: Genetics loads the gun; Environment pulls the trigger: Lifestyle choices create positive change. So, make some - one at a time.

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- Awareness: Notice how well you play with others. Does it trigger you to respond promptly with a negative fast ball when someone disagrees – especially on social media?
- Pause or PAWS! Rushing leads to feeling anxious. It is difficult to practice empathy and kindness while staring at social media or listening to bad news for the 8th time. Be aware of overload and when to politely say “NO”. Breathe in deeply nose-to-navel. Switch it off and up (social media, cells, TV).
- Patterns and Paradigms: We are all conditioned from infancy to adulthood. We can choose & change; It isn’t easy. Some can go cold turkey – and just STOP. Most of us need practice and more practice (like me). Keep going and letting go.
- SPOT / STOP / SWAP behaviors that don’t serve you (Jay Shetty).
- Empathy – Try to see it their way. Consider the situation from the other’s point of view. Example: It’s not fair to confront someone in the middle of a meeting or event. Wait, set up a time to talk. By then, we generally calm down.
- Creating kind habits – dogs help us do this everyday because they are a different species requiring understanding, patience and learning a new way of communicating. You can’t go to a whale and tell them to SIT!
- Clarify (ask questions). Strive for a win-win. If you can’t ... move on.

Being kind and sharing our pets doesn’t mean we have to allow others to walk all over us. We can walk away, learn to say nicely say “NO”, and set boundaries especially if we are already tapped out. Speaking of which ... search Tapping Solutions online. There is a brief, simply chart at Dog Talk and New England Pet Partners too. Tap your stress away!

Tapping, breathing in 4, hold, exhale 4, spotting patterns, and switching them, are powerful ways to cope with stress. Visiting with our pets, as noble as it is, can be stressful for us and our pets. Same techniques apply. Set boundaries.

Being aware of this, puts us in the driver’s seat, not the one pushing the bus up a hill. Imagine you are the bus driver. Anyone continually triggering your “red light” emotions can be politely (or not) asked to get off your bus!

Enjoy the journey with empathy and kindness while sharing our pets.