

Season 1, Episode 7 : Aging With Pets

Speaker 1: You're listening to Real Life Renos with Karen Brown and Melissa Schenk, the show where this dynamic duo gets real about your life because change happens to more than just your own.

Karen: Hi, I'm Karen.

Melissa: And I'm Melissa.

Karen: And on today's show, we're going to talk about older adults and the pets that share their lives. If you have a pet or are thinking about getting a pet, this episode is for you because it turns out there are a lot of considerations that can make your life with your pet a lot better. Spending as little as 15 minutes with an animal, bonding and loving on one another, sets off a chemical reaction in our brains. Those feel-good hormones get pumping, heart and blood pressure rates drop, and stress levels drop as well. In the long-term, having a pet in your life can lower cholesterol, fight depression, and according to studies, may help protect against heart disease and stroke. Getting out walking a dog gives needed movement and social interaction, which are both necessary as we age, but it's not all cuddles and love.

Karen: Pets require care and proper training to be the best possible companions to an older adult. Here to talk us through some of the important considerations is Dr. Ellen Shapiro of the Exeter Animal Hospital. Dr Shapiro is intimately familiar with the rewards and challenges of older adults and their pets. Welcome, Ellen.

Ellen Shapiro: Hi, and thanks for having me. This topic is really near and dear to me. I'm really delighted to have the chance to share some ideas about having safe and healthy and joyful relationships with our pets as we age. We always wonder how people get to being veterinarians. My mother tells me as a youngster, I wanted to be a little old lady in a flower shop. But as I remember it, I really was always that smitten. I did explore archeology and meteorology and special education, but coming to veterinary medicine really felt like coming home.

Karen: Yeah.

Ellen Shapiro: I've been a small animal practitioner for more than 35 years. I graduated from Cornell and have practiced both in the United States and Canada. And I guess I would say my favorite thing about it really is being able to know and support the owners and as their pets progress through their lives. And it's really been an honor to be able to contribute to those relationships.

Karen: Terrific. Well, planning is such a huge part of the work that has to be done before a pet comes home for anyone. There are a lot of considerations for older adults that may be a little different. Can you give us an idea of the kinds of things people need to consider?

Ellen Shapiro: Well, one of the things is it's really best to have a very clear idea of what might work for you in your situation before you acquire a pet. Many, many times, as things change in our lives, what worked once upon a time no longer works. So is having a pet even permitted in your presence and in your future housing? Are their size and species and breed limitations? And there are also many different species that are appropriate and each choice has different benefits and responsibilities.

Ellen Shapiro: Sometimes, we tend to fall for the cute and the needy, and that may be something that we can cope with earlier in our lives when we have strength and time. But maybe as we age, we don't want that big rambunctious puppy. Maybe that flat-faced adorable pup might need thousands of dollars in surgery that's no longer in budget. On the other hand, maybe retirement is the time to give to a dog who has some extra needs, so you want to be ready to know if your home really is the right one for them.

Melissa: Do you find with your clients that sometimes you'll get pets or people will have the pets because their children have gifted them with a pet because their lives have perhaps changed direction so it's, "Mum or dad, can you take my pet now?" And that may or may not be a good decision for them.

Ellen Shapiro: Absolutely. That's really, really common. And in fact, I think that's probably in fact the most common way that older adults acquire a new pet, is that the child's situation has changed, they've moved, they're getting married, they want to travel. And sometimes, it's presented as a short-term arrangement that then becomes semi-permanent and it is really important to establish some boundaries about that. Things that can be really problematic for seniors, like a big rambunctious dog, becomes compounded because they are under-exercised and then get into more mischief and more destructive behaviors or even knock the owner over, which might've been fine when they were 30.

Melissa: Do you find... So because of your experience, I mean you've done this for over 30 years, right? What would you say is the most prevalent of the people walking through your door? Is it an older audience now? Is it a younger demographic that have pets? Is it mixed, in between? Do you see a difference?

Ellen Shapiro: It's quite mixed. I certainly see a lot of young families with bigger, younger bouncier dog and a lot of older people who generally are tending more toward the small dogs and the cats. They're a little more portable, little easier to carry. And so, I think it's still really quite a mixture. Sometimes, the very sad thing is when we have an older person, whose pet passes away, and they feel that they

are too old to acquire a new pet. And then, they miss out on all that companionship and all the social connections and that's really, really sad. And sometimes, there are ways to plan around that. And that's again where some of these planning questions come in because you certainly can have a pet if you have arranged a support system that will help you with things like exercising the dog or like cleaning the litter box, carrying that heavy litter, handling the pet, and having a home for that pet if you want to travel, if you need to be hospitalized, or in the event of your passing away. Many people don't want to get a pet because they're afraid that the pet will outlive them and that the future for that pet will then be an unknown.

Karen: Now, I think that we tend to default to thinking of dogs and cats, but there's actually a wide range of pets that could be considered companion animals for older adults.

Ellen Shapiro: Absolutely. And especially if people are living in apartment buildings, oftentimes a dog that requires going outside, going down the stairs, in an elevator, might be barky, may not be the ideal pet. And something like a cat, who doesn't go outside and is quiet, or a house rabbits, they can be house trained, they make lovely, lovely pets. They do tend to chew your furniture a little bit.

Karen: That wouldn't go over well.

Melissa: Not in my house.

Ellen Shapiro: But they're very quiet. They are very, very quiet. And for some people, actually fish are ideal. They're not really cuddly, but they do provide a lot of distraction, and it's like having a little soap opera in a box in your house.

Melissa: Well, and a sense of calm.

Karen: Yeah.

Melissa: Right?

Ellen Shapiro: Very much. Very much.

Karen: And even having somebody to talk to. One of the things that older adults who are a little bit more isolated run into a problem with is that if they don't have someone to talk to, they don't vocalize. And that leads to a whole host of other problems.

Ellen Shapiro: That's very true.

Melissa: Well, what's that Tom Hanks movie, Wilson?

Karen: Yeah, Wilson the ball.

Ellen Shapiro: That's very, very true. And certainly we attribute all sorts of emotions to even inanimate objects and fish are great that way. They really will have all sorts of exciting adventures that you kind of maybe give them a little more emotional content than they feel.

Melissa: Well, we're focusing on some of the positives and I just wondered if we could expand for that even more so with, what are some of the positives you've seen with some of your clients, especially let's talk about older adults and their pets, in the course of your practice?

Ellen Shapiro: Well, I'll tell you a story about a friend actually, and we had provided her with a tiny very needy kitten, and she was developing early Parkinson's. And that kitten and that kitten's needs became her reason to get up in the morning, and she was completely clear that otherwise she would not even try to move forward in her day. And that's very common that people will find that the structure and the rhythm of having another living being in their life that's dependent on them helps them doing actual self care.

Karen: I can completely see that.

Ellen Shapiro: Because they have to get up, they have to get dressed, they perhaps have to go outside.

Karen: Right. The other side of the coin though are the negatives that come along, the heartbreaking time when you have to re-home your pet because maybe you're moving into long-term care or you're hospitalized and just simply can't look after a pet anymore or you can't afford the treatment that might be necessary.

Ellen Shapiro: And that's very, very true. I think that, again, there is a planning component of it to having your dog for example or your cat already used to perhaps having a caretaker come into your home or that's perfectly comfortable going to someone else's home. Pet sharing is pretty common in some areas and can be a wonderful solution to keeping both families or multiple households independent and active in not being tied down to the geographic location of their pets, but the pets have multiple homes. And so that's a really important thing to think about when you imagine that perhaps you might be hospitalized or pass away.

Melissa: I had never considered that before.

Karen: Right. I know.

Melissa: Yeah. That's a great idea.

Karen: Most of us don't.

Melissa: No, but you think about even kids nowadays too. Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you, but I was just thinking about kids nowadays too. Even in terms of divorce, kids have two homes. Kids have more, three homes sometimes. So can your pet.

Karen: Right.

Ellen Shapiro: Absolutely. Absolutely. The other thing too is just the attitude to set up and reach out to other resources. Sometimes you can't exercise your dog anymore and you need to find some high school student who runs. You might need to find a groomer who will pick up from your home or a mobile veterinarian. You might need to get a neighbor who can help scoop the litter box. There are a lot of toys that will help you wear out your pets, and definitely a tired dog is a good dog. There are toys that will throw balls. There are toys for cats that are very easy for somebody who's mobility limited to play with a cat, like a laser pointer, a feather toy on a wand, treat dispensing toys. All of those keep the animals engaged and keep their minds busy as well as exercising their bodies. Because just like us, if we're bored, we get into much more mischief.

Karen: Right. And one of the things in my world that's very important is the fall risk that animals can be.

Ellen Shapiro: Yes, yes. And that's also partially a training thing. You certainly can try to teach your pets to get out of your way rather than them expecting you to get out of their way. And sometimes that's a consideration in the size of the animal. I think unfortunately some of the smaller pets are more of a trip hazard because we don't see them as easily. And you have cats who are lolling around on the stairs, things like that. Bigger dogs are more likely to knock you over if they're not trained to not push you or pull on the leash or things like that. But some of the smallest animals are even more trip risks than the the medium size ones. You can definitely do things like keep your a dog off the stairs. Use a baby gate. Teach them to be crated at night so there's no risk of you treading on them and falling on the way to the bathroom in the middle of the night. And again, these are sort of proactive kinds of things that you want to be arranging early on in the relationship. And these are good for everybody. This has nothing really to do with aging. Nobody likes a big, muddy, all cranky dog all over your shoulders when you're all ready to go out.

Melissa: Yeah. In terms of being proactive, let's talk for a moment about not so much an older pet or a ... well, I want to focus on different things, small versus large, but also a younger pet versus an older pet. What are some of the differences that we should be considering?

Ellen Shapiro: Well, lots of times with a youngster, and speaking more so about dogs than cats, certainly they have a much higher activity level, a much higher need for structure and training. You have a little bit more theoretical control over what the breed characteristics might be. You would probably not want a border collie for example in an apartment building. Those dogs need to work for 10 hours a day. But perhaps something that's a little smaller and quieter would be a better fit. So when you were to select a particular breed, then you have a little more control over that. But those first years are very expensive comparatively. Certainly for a dog, it would not be unusual to be anticipating two to \$3,000 in that first year. A cat, a couple of thousand, because those initial times are very expensive. And they have to have their puppy vaccines and kitten vaccines and they need to be spayed. They need training. As time goes on, there are continuing costs, cost of grooming, food, toys, pet insurance perhaps, boarding.

Ellen Shapiro: The mature dogs, you have the advantage to knowing perhaps a little bit more about their temperaments. Are they kind of a chill, laid back kind of a dog or are they an aggressive, don't touch me kind of a kitty? Then you kind of have a little bit more of a sense. Would you rather have a cat who is a little more distant and aloof or do you want a lap sitter? And you might have a little more of a sense of that with the more mature animal.

Melissa: In your experience, is there a place that people can go to research this? You're thinking, "Oh, I want this or this or I should do this, how to consider it." Do you find, is the Internet the place to go or should people talk to other people?

Ellen Shapiro: There are actual sites on the Internet that will allow you to input what your lifestyle is. Are you active? Are you quiet? How much grooming do you want to deal with? How big a dog or cat you'd want to have. I found unfortunately, when I input various scenarios, I shake my head afterwards and go, "Hmm, not so sure about that."

Melissa: Right, so the Internet isn't always-

Ellen Shapiro: The internet is not always the best thing.

Karen: The place to go.

Ellen Shapiro: Certainly each of the breed organizations is going to promote their breed as the best of all, so you have to read between the lines a little bit, but they certainly will give you an idea of how big is that animal going to be, what are the grooming needs going to be, maybe what the temperament is. Is it more of a kind of guard dog, one person's my pal kind of a breed, or is it a party animal? Sometimes people will have a really good time going to, for example, a dog show or a cat show and just talking to the people who adore those particular breeds and asking what they find most wonderful about their breed.

Ellen Shapiro: That also can be kind of a nice source for acquiring a mature animal. For example, there might be a breeding dog who is being retired who has had very good quality care and is well socialized and has a known temperament and personality and preferences that that breeder would be willing to relinquish to a good home. And that kind of splits the difference a little bit between a new rambunctious puppy and a shelter where sometimes you're really not always getting the full history. There are wonderful shelter dogs. Many, many shelter dogs are just the best ever, but some shelters are under so much pressure to move the dogs out or simply don't know the history that you have to be just a little more cautious.

Karen: Right. And are there specific trainings that you would recommend that an older person pay attention to for their pet, things that are really essential for them to make sure their pet understands?

Ellen Shapiro: Yep, absolutely. I think probably the walking nicely on a leash, sitting and staying. And if the dog will sit and stay for everything, that is a value going through the door, having a treat, if you're letting them on the couch, getting on the couch, then you're not in a situation where that dog is going to push you over. The other thing too is that if they're not jumping up, they're much less likely to scratch you. And scratches and wounds are much more serious in older adults because our immune systems are not what they once were. The skin is thinner and more vulnerable to tearing, and so if you do get a wound, it's very, very important to have it addressed by a physician promptly. Even what seemed like minor wounds should really be checked into.

Karen: Right, and handling the animals, that seems important as well.

Ellen Shapiro: And that's again early training, so that that dog or the cat is really comfortable with you. For example, trimming their nails.

Karen: Or the bunny.

Ellen Shapiro: Or the bunny. Yes. Absolutely, the bunny. And guinea pigs. Guinea pigs are great pets. I love guinea pigs. They don't have a lot of deep thoughts, but they're really cute. And they greet you, they love you. They greet at you when you come in or you open the fridge. But trimming the toenails, taking medicine, because at some point your pet may very well need medication. So being used to them having their mouth open, looking in their ears, combing them, those sorts of things are really important early on. There are actually, apropos of scratches, there are some very cool products that are available to help reduce the damage that's caused. There's something that are, they're like little rubber caps that can be put on the toes of a cat or of a dog. They make them for dogs as well. They're called Soft Paws is one of the companies, and they would at least reduce the effects of an inadvertent claw.

Melissa: But will they keep them on? Will they keep them on?

Karen: My cat did.

Melissa: Yeah?

Karen: For a little while.

Ellen Shapiro: Yeah, many cats do. I'm actually kind of surprised. Once in a while, you'll get a cat who just tugs them off, but they're designed so that they're put on with a super glue like product. And as the nail grows out, they shed off naturally and they need to be replaced every six weeks or so.

Melissa: Kind of like they're getting their own manicure.

Ellen Shapiro: Yeah. And they come in cool colors.

Karen: Yeah, I've seen some of the colors.

Ellen Shapiro: They're really slick. They can be very, very useful. Another thing that sort of is a useful thing is to teach your dog to, for example, use a piddle pad, if it's a small breed dog. That may save you from having to rush out in the dark in the night, in the middle, to toilet a dog who's in need and avoid the fall for you. Dog doors also, as long as it's going to a safely fenced confined area. It's not an alternative to proper exercise. It's not an excuse to ignore your dog, but those can be very helpful. There's some really cool new cat furniture that's available. People suddenly woke up one day and said, why is cat furniture so hideous? And even Ikea is getting on board with this. You can get some pretty cool looking Swedish furniture for your pets.

Ellen Shapiro: These are some things, they often are wall-mounted and it's almost like a maze and a climber for your cat that's on the wall. You can change the configuration, and some of them are actually really quite graceful and beautiful. They're made out of natural materials. That's a very, very lovely thing now that's available. There are self-cleaning litter boxes, which can also be a godsend if it's hard for you to reach down. You can also put your litter box on a higher surface, as long as the cat can get to it easily. There's nothing that says a litter box has to be at floor level, and that helps with the leaning over and scooping of the heavier litter.

Karen: While we're on accoutrements for pets, there is one thing I want to see if you have an opinion on. I know I have an opinion on this: extended leashes for dog walking.

Ellen Shapiro: Hate them.

Karen: Yeah, me too.

Ellen Shapiro: They're actually really dangerous, on each end of the leash. On the human end of the leash, certainly we have the trip hazard, but we also have a lot of times that people will get the string part wrapped around their finger and then the dog hits the end of it, and they can get really serious hand damage. From the dog's end of it, it's very confusing. The dog doesn't really know where they're supposed to be in physical space in relation to their owner. Am I supposed to be right next to you at four feet, or am I 15 feet out there ranging around? So it gives the dog a really mixed message.

Karen: Right.

Melissa: You were talking about furniture, and I love this because furniture doesn't have to be ... you said cats didn't have a lot of furniture. Now Ikea's coming out with it. It reminds me really even of adults of aging in place where we look at homes and we think, "Oh, this has to look a certain way because they're handrails, or this or that." But I want to go back for a moment and talk about some of the different stimulating activities and things that people can do. Let's say I'm aging and I don't have that youthfulness that I once did and can't walk the 10 kilometers, can't walk the five kilometers. What are some things that I can do with my pet if I can't be as active as I used to be?

Ellen Shapiro: Again, delegating, really important to find other people who can give, especially if you have a younger animal who really needs a lot of activity. There are toys for dogs, for example, that will help you throw the ball farther. It's kind of like a scoop on a stick. Those are really, really useful. I find that that helps me wear out a dog pretty easily.

Melissa: I see those all over the place. Everybody's got those. They're so great.

Ellen Shapiro: They're great and you don't have to pick up the slimy ball in your hand either.

Melissa: That's true. That's exactly, exactly ... when it's all wet and gooey.

Ellen Shapiro: If you have a swimming breed, that's a great way for your dog to get tired without you having to put in a whole lot of steps. With cats, there even are electronic laser toys for them, if it's hard even just to move a laser pointer.

Melissa: It's like put it on one of those vacuums that is on the ground and just let it go.

Ellen Shapiro: The cat's not getting exercise when they're riding on those.

Karen: That's funny. That's funny.

- Ellen Shapiro: No, but it actually spins around and shines the light in different directions. It's kind of clever. And there are treat dispensing toys, which are really, really good for cat brains, so that the cat actually has to mimic the hunting behavior to acquire their calories. And that's really what cats are designed to do is to hunt for 20 minutes and get a few calories and then take a nap and then do it again. And so those can be really good things.
- Melissa: Talking about older people and their pets and the fact that maybe they can't exercise them the way that they would have 20 years ago, some people are also afraid to get a pet for fear that the pet will outlive them. And it sounds like your advice about planning kicks into gear with this piece too.
- Ellen Shapiro: Excuse me? Oh, as far as the exercise.
- Melissa: Well, just about getting a pet who is younger and might need more exercise.
- Ellen Shapiro: Yes. And that's really why I encourage everybody actually to consider a mature animal. There's so many lovely animals out there who don't have homes that might be the perfect pet for them. And if we immediately want that cute puppy or that cute kitten or that cute baby rabbit, they all turn into mature animals pretty quickly. And then we have another 10, 15, 18 years of having a mature animal. So maybe we could get a three-year-old or a six-year-old or a 10-year-old animal and have some wonderful, wonderful years with them, and avoid some of the early life expenses and craziness.
- Melissa: Some people say that about their children too.
- Ellen Shapiro: That's why they make them cute.
- Melissa: Exactly.
- Karen: But if you do want that cute little thing and you are reluctant maybe because you fear that the pet will outlive you, it's just all about planning and having that contingency plan in place. You can write plans into your will.
- Ellen Shapiro: And the other thing also is that some of the things that as our pets age are really going to be pretty similar to our own needs. Floor level lighting, that's going to be great for our pets as they get older. Ramps, that's going to be great for our arthritic pets.
- Karen: Getting in and out of cars with ramps. Yeah.
- Ellen Shapiro: Well, and how are you going to access to your backyard? Maybe you wanted to put in a beautiful curved ramp-like structure rather than five steep steps.

Melissa: This brings up a great point, even with working with a contractor or renovator, bringing your pet into the process as well. It's not just about you, but the whole family, including your loved one, your-

Karen: Good point.

Melissa: ... furry friend, about their needs and what they need and what they can and can't potentially do too, depending on an illness or mobility or lack thereof.

Karen: For sure.

Ellen Shapiro: Absolutely. There's no reason that older people can't have pets, and we don't want to be kind of naysayers and go, "Oh, you could fall or your pet will outlive you and have a terrible rest of their life." A lot of it is really just being prepared, making the connections that you need to make it safe and happy for everybody in the whole family.

Karen: So your advice, the big takeaway from here is plan.

Ellen Shapiro: It's to plan and, to some extent, kind of common sense. Don't get pulled into somebody else's needs to place that poorly socialized dog or to acquire that cute short-faced puppy that can't breathe well, or for your 20-something kids who give you their five cat collection. Sometimes you have to say no.

Melissa: Yeah.

Karen: Right.

Ellen Shapiro: And it's also things like hand-washing, right? Dogs and cats don't use toilet paper. Wash your hands. Don't kiss them.

Karen: Aw, really?

Ellen Shapiro: On the lips anyway.

Karen: Oh, no, I do.

Ellen Shapiro: Well, then wash your lips.

Karen: Wash your lips. Have you got any final advice for us as we wrap up?

Ellen Shapiro: I think one of the really good resources that we really haven't touched on is have a working relationship with your veterinarian. They're a great source of all kinds of suggestions and information and resources that might be in your



neighborhood or what might be appropriate places to look online, and don't be afraid to get a pet, but make sure it's the right pet for you.

Karen: Perfect. Well, thank you for taking the time to be with us today, Ellen. We'll post some terrific resources that Dr. Shapiro has given us, including the house rabbit society in the show notes for you.

Melissa: I love it. Thank you, Ellen.

Karen: Thank you-

Ellen Shapiro: Thank you so much. I appreciated the opportunity.

Karen: Thank you for joining us today. We look forward to seeing you again for our next podcast episode of Real-Life Renos.

Speaker 1: You've been listening to Real Life Renos with Karen Brown and Melissa Schenk, the show that gets real about your life because change happens to more than just your home.