

# STAY Tuned Ep. 30- My Therapist Has Paws- A Path to Better Mental Health and Social Connection with Jamie Yang

[00:00:00]

**Gillian:** Welcome back to Stay Tuned: Supporting Transition Age Youth. This podcast is brought to you by the Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research at UMass Chan Medical School, Department of Psychiatry, and in partnership with our research sponsor, the National Institute for Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research.

I'm Gillian. I'm one of the co-hosts on the podcast.

**Mei:** And I'm Mei. I'm your other co-host. And today we have on, uh, for the second time now, Jamie. If you haven't heard their earlier episode called Body Talk and Belonging: Eating Disorder Recovery in a Social World, please go ahead and check that out. Uh, but today we're going to be talking about a little bit of a different topic, or a much different topic I should say, um, about how pets, um, can really- Facilitate connection and community participation for folks, um, get people out there in their community, and foster better mental health in general.

So we have on Jamie again today to talk about their amazing, adorable dog. Let's hear about their experience today. So Jamie, I don't know if you wanna re-introduce yourself to our audience.

**Jamie:** Um, hi, I'm Jamie. I am young adult. I am on the Young Adult Advisory Board, uh, and I'm a pet owner. I'm a dog parent.

**Gillian:** And I think you have your dog there now. Yes. Will you introduce us to your dog?

**Jamie:** Yes. Okay, so this is Mendelssohn.

He is almost seven years old, and I've had him since the summer of 2019. Um, and he's the most important being in my life. Um, well, other loved ones should cover their ears when I say this.

But he's... uh, I've been in grad school for most of this time, and lots of things changed in my life, lots of challenges, and he's one of the only staples, anchors in my life. And he's awesome.

**Gillian:** He seems awesome. Dogs can be such great companions.

**Mei:** Yeah. Yeah. Even the way he's, like, all nestled up under your chin right now, I can't.

**Gillian:** Yeah.

**Mei:** This is, this is so cute. I feel honored to be blessed with the presence of Mendelssohn right now.

**Gillian:** Agreed.

**Mei:** What breed is Mendelssohn? Like, what made you choose him in particular?

**Jamie:** So he is a purebred, I think, Maltese. I was, [00:03:00] um, I was going through a very rough patch with mental health, and I was spending a lot of time at home on my own, and also needed to, um, get some work done to graduate from, um, a degree program at the time.

Um, but I was totally, um, not succeeding at self-regulating and, uh, yeah, just a very hard time, and I've always wanted a dog. And at that point, I had moved from one state to another state, uh, in the US, so, uh, was contemplating whether I should adopt a dog, foster a dog, or just try to get my own dog. And here's the thing about me.

I find it really hard to- Open myself up to someone, a, a pet, anything, and then had [00:04:00] to let them go with a, you know, clear, known endpoint. I think that's heartbreaking. Separations are always hard for me. So I thought one, now that I'm ready to commit and invest in this connection, in this relationship, I want this to last as long as possible.

So I want to get my own dog. I want to get a, a puppy. I want to get a s- small dog because word has it that they have longer lifespan than larger dogs. So

that's kind of what guided my search, and then I, then I came across Mendelssohn. And I also like that his breed doesn't shed as much, which is more friendly to s- someone who's allergy-prone.

**Mei:** Thank you so much for sharing about all the different factors that led to your decision of adopting Mendelssohn and his particular breed, and [00:05:00] I have felt very similarly that in times of really difficult patches with mental health, that having an animal or a pet could be so therapeutic and so helpful in navigating recovery.

I think, like, I mean, it really forces you to leave the house, for starters. They need to be walked. They need to be let- Yeah ... outside at a minimum, you know? And, um, get up out of bed to even, you know, refill their food bowl, make sure they have clean water. And I think it's easier to, to care for another being than it is yourself at times, um, and find, find strength in yourself.

Maybe caring for yourself is not enough motivation to get out of bed some days. Maybe it is finding, [00:06:00] um, enough love for another thing outside of yourself, such as a pet, to motivate yourself to get out of bed and do the basic things you need to do in order to care for this creature.

**Jamie:** I think I can totally re- relate to that. I somehow, having to take care of him has, uh, instilled into my life a good routine, s- some habit of, of walking, eating at regular times.

And, um, I had a therapist who once said to me that when, um... That the therapist wanted me to model my relationship with myself after my relationship with my dog, and I, and I was like, "That's bizarre. How does that work?" And so that's how it goes. There are lots of things that I wouldn't say to my dog, I wouldn't judge my dog [00:07:00] for.

I would show endless compassion and patience for my dog that I wouldn't necessarily to myself. Um, and just to s- observe how I interact with him and what are the initial responses, um, emotional responses that came up for me when it's my dog doing something versus when it's myself, and I think there's a lot of wisdom in that.

**Gillian:** Yeah. I really like that idea. This is the first time I'm hearing about this, and I'm more familiar with the inner child-

**Jamie:** Hmm ...

**Gillian:** um, where you think back and talking to your inner child, yourself as a younger-

**Jamie:** Yeah ...

**Gillian:** person, and how would you talk to them, and you wouldn't say such mean or negative things. Um, but I think saying that to my [00:08:00] dog actually would be more beneficial for me.

Um, but I absolutely love dogs, so.

**Jamie:** I think there's something about this externalized actual warm, fluffy being in front of you that really draws out our love and, and empathy. Uh, v- versus if it's just me and my younger self, sometimes I can still be a little harsh. Uh, and it, it's not always- fast or e- effective if I were try to, um, elicit empathy for my younger self, because I might still be jud- judging.

That's deeply ingrained, like internalized, a system of, of thinking and being. But when it's him, I'm like, "He's a dog. He's just a cute dog. He, he a baby. He doesn't know any of this, [00:09:00] and it doesn't matter."

**Gillian:** That's so true, and it's like when you come home and the dog is just so happy and non-judgmental and not gonna yell back at you.

I was curious too, going back to when you said that you were struggling with your mental health when you got your dog.

**Jamie:** Yeah.

**Gillian:** Was it challenging to take care of your dog at first? Like, to, whether it's like, if maybe motivating yourself to or something else.

**Jamie:** That's very spot on. It's almost like you, you knew what happened.

But the, the story is at first when I got him, it was all ex- excitement, right? And he would cry, um, at random times of the day, at night, and I would, like, have to cuddle with him, [00:10:00] pet him, check if he needs to, to go potty or if he needs food.

And for a, I think a good couple weeks, he didn't want to eat food from the bowl. So I had to put them on my palm and actually pick each kibble up to feed

him. Um, and that was an amazing bonding experience for me. However, when the, like, so-called honeymoon phase went over the first couple weeks or, like, months or so, my mental health, um, I would just say, like, everything dropped back to my previous baseline where my mental health was s- still struggling, and he was a rambunctious, naughty- strong personality, willful puppy that was not trained, that was not house-trained, that was not trained in any sense.

And that, that [00:11:00] was so frustrating for me for a good while. And I had, um, I definitely had temper tantrums where I just couldn't put it together, and my partner then recorded videos of me having a fight with my dog. It almost like we, we were having an actual conversation going on, but it was not, right? It's dog talk and human yapping. I also observed some bad patterns, uh, that I probably inherited from my own parents, uh, when I was trying to parent my dog, um, like lack of patience.

I think it was maybe, like a couple years in and then I recognized that, okay, my mental health was horrible and that impacted my dog. I need to do something about it to be a better parent for my dog and to use that opportunity to [00:12:00] heal my younger, my inner self.

And yeah, I think that served as a drive, as a motivation for me to improve my overall wellbeing over the years.

**Gillian:** I love that.

**Mei:** Ugh, I really think, like, it's so true what they say. Like, the older you get, the more you realize, oh my God, I really am just like my parents sometimes. And like-

**Jamie:** Yeah ...

**Mei:** as much as we try, sometimes it just escapes us in ways that we really don't intend for it to come across, but, you know, our upbringing is our upbringing, and some of those patterns we picked up as kids just really sneak their way into your psyche, I suppose.

And I'm not speaking from experience at all right now, uh, but as you were talking, I'm thinking back to, like, even ways that, like, I've interacted in my romantic relationship, ways that that snuck [00:13:00] up on me. Totally. Um, it's, it's wild, it's bizarre, it's this out-of-body experience. And so I can only imagine what it was like seeing the recording of yourself, let alone, like, me thinking back to the memory I have of myself.

Oh, it's, it's so interesting the ways that the smallest interaction can just pick at these wounds you've, you ha- you've developed from childhood from the way you were parented, so. Yeah.

Yeah, but with that, um, we've talked a lot about how, you know, your dog has impacted your personal mental health, and we've talked about on, about your one-on-one connection with Mendelssohn.

Um, but we would love to know since having a dog, has it facilitated or increased your level of community participation? What are the ways that you find yourself engaging more in your community?

**Jamie:** Hmm. [00:14:00] I... First, I think it didn't change me as much as I thought it would. I'm still a big homebody. I am antisocial most of my waking hours, but I think there were cute little encounters or connections that got deepened because of my dog.

I'll give you a couple examples. Um, sometimes it's like you met someone at work or at some social thing, and then you mention that you have a dog- And at some point it would become, this opportunity that I invite a person over to say hello to my dog or to play with my dog, and that could turn into a longer, like, movie hangout together, and that's time that my dog brought into my life.

Uh, and then [00:15:00] sometimes it's, it just becomes such a convenient cause to say like, "Oh, do you want to go on a dog walk together?" Or, "The weather is nice, I'm going to take the dog to the park." Uh, whether the other person is a dog owner doesn't terribly matter. Sometimes if they have a dog we can do like a double date thing with the, with the dogs.

And if not, I think people usually, um, are warm to the idea to do something with a dog and, and they'll tolerate me and that gives me some quality social time, uh, as well. And yeah, and I've, I think I've had interesting conversations at the dog park too, the local dog parks, but I don't think I've, any of those connections turned into, uh, like meaningful long-lasting ones.

But while we were there, [00:16:00] people see that you have a dog, and they are dog owners too, it's, it's just a, a conversation starter. They'll ask you, like, about your dog and they'll talk to you about the local groomers that they like and how do you keep your dog's white fur clean and tear stains and all of that technical logistical dog owner stuff.

And I find those, um, enjoyable just because it's... I think there is something to be said about having a dog makes me, like, I am socially perceived as a warm, somewhat warm, somewhat responsible, somewhat open-hearted person than if, if I were stand, to stand there on my own, I don't send off the energy that, you know, invite people to come to me.

But if my dog [00:17:00] is there, and he's adorable, and he has like a face and, um, a, an appearance like that, somehow I think that softens the energy that I, you know, exude out, and people would talk to me. Um, and I gladly, uh, receive a lot of those.

**Gillian:** And to add on that, as the person that's going up to the dog and the dog owner all the time, um, I feel more comfortable doing it because it's more socially acceptable and I kind of know that they'll probably be okay with it, and I know I can just say, "Hey, can I say hi," or, "Can I pet your dog?"

Or just kind of feel it out and be like, "Oh, you have such a cute dog." And like the subject is on the dog, ne- not necessarily like the owner, which might be- Yeah ... a bit more intimidating [00:18:00] to me.

**Mei:** Yeah. Um,

**Gillian:** and you're so right too with like getting to know people, having people over to meet your dog. I feel like the majority of the neighbors that I know in my apartment building, it's because of their dog.

Like, I've gone up to them, did what I just said I did and now- Yeah ... like, I don't know, I go over there and we'll watch TV together, and I love hanging out with their dogs and the dog- It's a social

**Jamie:** lubricant.

**Gillian:** Oh, yeah, yeah. Totally.

**Mei:** Oh. I also think like, um, we are so divided as a people, right? That is not something new whatsoever.

We are so divided politically right now, socially, in so many ways, and pets or dogs specifically are one thing that is universally loved for the most part. It's neutral territory, [00:19:00] and I think like people's love for dogs, um, it's like it's a safe topic, you know? Like, it... If there's one thing in this world that's going to bring world peace, it might just be dogs.

And of course that's like, it's a joke, right, of such an simplification of, of very serious issues. But I think it does help knowing that like when I go up to someone, I can put aside whatever, you know, whatever ideologies I have and that person may or may not have. I'm not thinking about that.

I'm thinking about my love for that dog that I see in front of me, and I wanna pet it, and most likely you're really happy that I'm showing interest in your dog or I get really excited, you know, when I'm walking my dog and, and someone compliments me on him or like wants to show him attention. Like, that makes me happy, right?

And I think it's just, it's nice to be able to bond and [00:20:00] have, albeit, you know, these, these very fleeting interactions.

**Gillian:** Mm-hmm.

**Mei:** They stick with you, you know? Like, I, I'll think about that interaction throughout the day and like- And I'm, it might make me more excited to take him on more walks later on, and like, they...

Those small interactions really do matter. And so I'm, I'm totally on a tangent now from my initial point. But I, I also think, like, in a lot of ways we think of community as the clubs we go to over and over again, like run club. We were talking about that earlier before we started recording. Um, or, you know, spending time with family or being- going to work.

We think of those as parts of community, but I think just kindness, receiving kindness from strangers from those fleeting interaction are also really important parts of community, too. And, um, some days, like, that's all the [00:21:00] interaction I have, you know, is, like, I head to the grocery store, and that one cashier who showed some interest in my groceries that I picked up.

Those are the types of conversations that make my day, you know? When, when, uh, when I'm feeling especially lonely, like, those, those things matter.

**Jamie:** I think that's very real. I am there with you that when I was living alone, there were days that those were the only interactions that I had during that day.

And somehow a, a dog really invites these tiny acts of kindness, tiny messages of warmth from other people that otherwise I would not get, and that does give me a sense of community or a sense of [00:22:00] s- safety or

security. Like, the world is not hostile to me, and they are saying hello to me, to my dog.

They're smiling at me, uh, I- I think largely because my dog is cute and they see me petting my dog or walking wi- with him. But, um, yeah, I think I live my life through my dog and to receive those kindness and warmth that were sent out to him, but that, those really benefit me as well.

**Gillian:** Yeah

So based on what you were saying and dogs providing a sense of psychological safety, you know, they provide unconditional support and non-judgmental companionship. Um, you mentioned one way you've experienced this. Has there been other ways too?

**Jamie:** I'll share [00:23:00] this I- one thing that I do. I sometimes talk to my dog, say things out loud, or I imagine talking to my dog. Uh, I s- talk in my head, but he's lying next to me, and I feel like we're, we have telepathy or something. Um, I use that as a way to process my feelings or to narrate through my day. In psychology, there is this, um...

Like a lot of therapists will tell you that mental health healing a lot of times come from having an empathetic witness, having a sense that somebody witnessed that, somebody acknowledged that you went through all of it and commend you or give you company, give you understanding.

And m- maybe a lot of this, uh, exists in my imagination, but I think my un- my dog [00:24:00] understands at least the emotional tone of what I've been through, and I lean on him for that. I would say to him, like, "This happened," and, um, and he will see that I'm crying, I'm sobbing, I'm upset, and he would come to be with me.

During my, uh, most depressed times, um, especially during the first year in my life when he, uh, when he was in my life, when he was a puppy, there were times that I would I- literally just lie on the carpet for multiple hours in the afternoon and not moving, not doing much, and he will come to check on me to see that I'm m- I'm still alive, that I'm still there, but he will stomp on my stomach in the most clumsy puppy way.

Uh, and there were times when I would be doing a workout on my... M- I think my, um... A [00:25:00] very close friend of mine who did Zoom workouts with me during COVID years had screenshots of me doing workouts, and my dog

will be just sitting on my belly where I'm doing, like, uh, the glute bridge or something, or he'll be on my, uh, on my back.

But he was tiny, so he was like five pounds or s- five, seven pounds. That was not too much weight while I'm holding a plank. Um- And that's such a lovely little friend who's there to go through everything with me. And does he judge? Does he, does he actually know what's going on? I'm not sure to what extent, but I think he really just appreciates me being there.

Like right now, I'm re- talking to all of you, and he has no sense of, of a camera. He doesn't know how to respond to [00:26:00] sounds coming from the camera. He doesn't look at the, the screen whatsoever. Uh, even when I... If I'm on the other side of the camera, he wouldn't respond. But he can... He knows that my physicality is here, and he's just quietly, uh, curling up next to me, and that's a lot hours, of hours of our days, uh, that I'll be doing my work, uh, and he'll be next to me.

Mm. That makes me feel like life is good and peaceful.

**Mei:** Mm. Aw. Uh, that warms my heart so much. And I think there's also something to be said about having an animal who, to your point, doesn't really, can't really comprehend, you know, our day-to-day life and what we're up to, but all they know is they trust you enough and they love you enough, and they feel psychologically safe enough to curl up next to you and just vibe out there, and [00:27:00] let whatever happen happen around them because you've cultivated that safety.

Yeah. And I think sometimes when... I'll speak for myself, but sometimes when I'm struggling through a particularly difficult mental health period, I struggle to trust myself with day-to-day tasks and, you know, trusting that I have my back. You know? Like, I struggle with a lot of anxiety, and leaving the house can be very difficult because I don't trust myself that I'll be okay.

I, I'm gonna take care of me. That, I think, is maybe not, like, the most obvious realization that I have, but when I stop to think a- about it, I think there is a level of, of- Trusting yourself, that goes into being okay being by yourself as well and, and going about your day and feeling mentally well. And so I think when you have [00:28:00] this pet that trusts you so dearly, and you are their lifeline in, in many ways-

**Gillian:** Mm

**Mei:** there's a certain healing that can come from that, uh, that realization as well.

**Jamie:** Absolutely. I, I do think a lot of... I think the life we live is largely the story we tell ourselves, and a lot of the narratives are mental habits. And I think because of neuroplasticity, I think w- there is potential to rewire those neural pathways, to change how I feel about myself, how I do things, how I talk to myself.

And during times at sta- uh, stages when I can't do that for myself, doing things with my dog and for my dog still [00:29:00] practices that. It's like that mental muscle of, um, getting myself out of that slump and get up, do things, take a walk, uh, feed him, feed myself, check on him, whether he's hydrated. Um, I think that's meaningful practice for caring for myself.

Um, yeah, and I think I had significant progress. I've improved a lot in that regard over the years that I've had him.

**Mei:** It's interesting how it's self-care in a way. Uh- Yeah ... caring for something external to you, but it has so much internal benefit as well.

**Jamie:** Yeah. Absolutely. When I walk my dog outside, I don't really think that it's me walking him. I think it's him walking me. If I don't have that, dog leash in my hand, [00:30:00] and if I don't have him, I would feel a lot more disoriented and lost.

And once in a while, negative thoughts might come up to, to make me feel bad, but if there is him, I will talk to him, and I will actually text my friend that, "Oh, okay, I'll be back t- 30 minutes later than planned. Uh, Mendelson's taking me on a walk. He wants to go to that direction today." And that feels accurate, shockingly, and it, and it's very helpful.

I, like I said, I don't, I, I don't think I can walk myself as well as he can walk me.

**Mei:** That's so funny.

**Gillian:** Yeah. I think I can navigate the world better with a dog too.

**Jamie:** Yep.

**Gillian:** Makes it easier.

Comes with a lot of responsibilities too,

**Jamie:** That's true. And, uh, [00:31:00] I've, um, I think I've had friends ask me, like, if you are already a busy person and there are other things, uh, fighting for your attention, and you are in recovery from everything, then how do you experience having these responsibilities, taking care of a little dog?

And my dog is a very high maintenance one. He's emotionally needy. He's, like I said, he's willful. He creates a mess, uh, sometimes. Um, and I, I think fundamentally it's, I think whatever bond we have, whatever hormones that oxytocin that gave me, made me not feel like that's a burden. I would almost think that if it weren't for him, I'll be sitting down, I'd be sedentary for too [00:32:00] many hours in a row, which is not for my chro- uh, good for my chronic health in the end.

But because of him, I need to get up and play with him, take him out on a walk. I have to stop him from, uh, attacking my laundry basket, uh, from climbing onto the stove to eat the, like, two pieces of eggs that's spread out on the counter. Um, that gets me up. That makes me moving, and that gives me interactions with other people that's not a screen and a keyboard.

Um, yeah, somehow. I think this is completely love talking because it's a hassle having to take care of all of that and keeping an eye on, like, there is a, there's a little dog doing his shenanigans somewhere in the house. Um, yeah, but it feels all right. It doesn't feel like a burden.[00:33:00]

**Gillian:** Yeah. It sounds like it's more than worth it.

**Jamie:** Yeah.

**Mei:** I know

**Jamie:** we're- He's grown a lot.

**Mei:** Well, thank you so much for coming on today. It's been so, um... What's the opposite of disheartening? Heartening. It's been, it's been amazing speaking to you about Mendelssohn and having some of these deeper, conversations about the ways our pets can really improve our lives when it comes to our mental health, and engaging with our communities and having some of those hope-inspiring one-off interactions with people.

Um, yeah, it's been a really enjoyable conversation.

**Jamie:** Thank you. It's my pleasure.

**Gillian:** Yeah. Thank you, Jamie. It's always good chatting. Mendelssohn is adorable.

**Mei:** He is. So cute.

**Gillian:** If you would like to contact us, you can email us at [00:34:00] [staytuned@umassmed.edu](mailto:staytuned@umassmed.edu) and check out the Transitions to ACR website at [umassmed.edu/transitionsacr](http://umassmed.edu/transitionsacr). Thanks for being here, and be sure to stay tuned for next time.