

Dr. Nancy Gee ([00:00](#)):

Hi everyone. I'm Dr. Nancy Gee I'm a professor of psychiatry. I'm the director of the Center for Human-Animal Interaction at VCU School of Medicine, and we're located in Richmond, Virginia. I'm really excited to be here. I am thrilled about the opportunity to talk about this great new book.

Dr. Laura Roberts ([00:39](#)):

Hi, I'm Dr. Laura Roberts, editor-in-chief for the Books Portfolio of the American Psychiatric Association, and welcome to the APA Books podcast.

([01:01](#)):

Welcome back to Psychiatry Unbound. I am very pleased to welcome to our show today, Nancy Gee, who served at the editor of a new amazing book in our portfolio. It's titled The Role of Companion Animals in the Treatment of Mental Disorders. It just came out in 2023, and Nancy is a professor in the Department of Psychiatry in the School of Medicine and Director of the Center for Human-Animal Interaction and the Bill Balaban Chair in Human Animal Interaction at Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine in Richmond, Virginia.

([01:34](#)):

I have to say this book is fabulous. It came through even better than I hoped, and I was very excited the first time I talked with you about it. So I'd love to know what you think about this book that you've put together and whether it fulfilled your hopes for us?

Dr. Nancy Gee ([01:53](#)):

First of all, I'm delighted that we were able to do this book. I mean, this is a passion project for me and for my co-editors and for the authors involved in this book. It's such a wonderful opportunity to be able to bring together so many people who are really interested in this topic and have them work collaboratively.

([02:13](#)):

So we had the opportunity to bring psychiatrists together with experts in the field of human-animal interaction, or HAI, and it was such an amazing meld, in that these people were able to really bring their interest together and produce some chapters that have some great science and some great application. And I love it. I couldn't be more thrilled with this book. I am absolutely delighted. I can't wait for it to land on bookshelves so people can get their hands on it. I want to hear what other people think about it.

Dr. Laura Roberts ([02:41](#)):

Yeah, that's great. It is unique. It's an amazing book. We did have this idea, literally during an editor meeting where I had my dog Pooky on my lap and we were thinking, "Wow, we ought to do a book on this," and then we looked and there you were.

([02:57](#)):

And I don't know if you're truly unique, but you might be truly unique in that you're in a department of psychiatry but with a really different disciplinary background. So what's that like? What's it like to be surrounded by psychiatrists with your background?

Dr. Nancy Gee ([03:11](#)):

Well, I think I fit well with them because my background is psychology, so we're not too far off the mark. So I think that part's great. The center that I run, the Center for Human-Animal Interaction, it is unique in it in that it's the only one situated in the School of Medicine. Most of them are in veterinary schools. And so the focus does tend to be a little bit more on the animal side. And we're really interested in the human side, but we never leave the animals out of the equation.

[\(03:40\)](#):

That's one of the things that I love about my role, is that our animals are our partners in this process. We don't... In fact, one of the things you probably noticed in the book is we don't use the language of animals as tools, but instead as partners. So we never say, "We use the animal to do X, Y, and Z." Instead, we involve the animals in the process. And the animals are given agency so that they could, if they want to, walk away from something that is stressing them. And we want them to be able to do that because one of the things we found is that when these animals engage willingly, they're excited about it. They're not stressed about it, and the humans can sense that.

[\(04:16\)](#):

And the interactions that we see are, I think, much more, and I don't know, impressive, impactful. It's challenging to put the words on it, but the idea is that we're looking at both sides, both the human side without leaving out the animal side. And I am thrilled to be leading this center to have been given this opportunity to work at VCU. One of the great things... And I'll stop because I know I'm nattering on.

Dr. Laura Roberts [\(04:45\)](#):

No, keep going. Awesome. I'm totally inspired.

Dr. Nancy Gee [\(04:48\)](#):

But one of the great things that I love about VCU is that VCU has been very forward-thinking. This center was started in 2001, so we're looking at 22 years of operation, and the Dogs On Call program is so uniquely integrated into the hospital. Our dogs, these are therapy dog teams that go with human handlers, they go anywhere in the hospital except, and these are our limitations, where food is being served. So we keep them out of cafeterias just so we can keep them focused, and they don't go into operating rooms, But otherwise they go everywhere and they get requests all over the hospital by patients and by staff.

[\(05:29\)](#):

We get a ton of interest from staff, and we see some really unique and interesting results in terms of the animals helping healthcare workers to de-stress. And especially during the pandemic, we were the first program to restart after the pandemic. Well, I mean, the pandemic isn't over, but the very first program that was allowed back in the hospital, and that's a testament to the importance of having the animals in the hospital. People couldn't wait to see them.

[\(05:57\)](#):

And I'm not kidding you. When our animals went back into the hospital, we actually had to have escorts there because they were being swamped by people. People were just running. Healthcare workers were running to the dogs because they needed that connection. And that is so powerful to me. There were times when you'd see a nurse just wrap her arms around a dog and just cry. Just, "Thank God we finally have the dog's back." And that again is a testament to that human animal bond and its impact in so many ways. And I'll stop now. I'm sorry. I do tend to go-

Dr. Laura Roberts ([06:28](#)):

No, I have two thoughts have crossed my mind. First of all, we have six kids and we've got elders. We have this lovely good fortune to have a four generation family, but really different interests, really different life experiences. And there are times when there are disagreements, but then the puppy walks in the room and we're all, everybody's aligned. Everybody loves everybody, and everybody loves the puppy. And it doesn't matter these other kinds of issues just don't matter. They just disappear. And so I appreciate what you're saying about the connection, the connection not only with the partnered animal, but the connection that it just inspires across people with the presence of an animal. It's just really amazing.

Dr. Nancy Gee ([07:15](#)):

You raise a very important point. Animals really are sort of a leveler, if you will. They transcend other boundaries. It doesn't matter for that moment what your age is or your race or your political beliefs. For just that moment we can just focus on this dog, and we can just talk to this dog and pet this dog. And guess what? Everybody there shares the fact that they enjoy interacting with a dog.

([07:41](#)):

And it's kind of amazing at times when there's so much political unrest and so much, I don't know, dissension or contention, to have a dog walk into the room. And as you say, it really is a bond. It really brings people together when so many things tend to be dividing us.

Dr. Laura Roberts ([07:58](#)):

Yeah, that's amazing. So the second thought is one of the things that's really fun about your book is you talk about all different kinds of animals partnering with all different kinds of animals. And I wondered if you could just talk specifically about partnering with different kinds of animals in the context of mental health.

Dr. Nancy Gee ([08:15](#)):

Yeah, lots of different animals are involved. I know one therapist out in California who involves a large variety of animals, from dogs to cats to essentially what are sort of pocket pets, lizards. And he works with children. And one of the things that he found is that some children tend to be more drawn to one type of animal than another. But if you can get the child to talk to or about the animal, it's an inroad. It's a way, it's kind of a social lubricant so that you can now open up that channel of discussion, so that you can deepen the conversation. And so many times the kids come running in and, "I want to see this animal." And they know the animal's names and they know the rules, too.

([09:05](#)):

That's the other thing that's really important is that children learn to respect animals and how they can appropriately interact with animals. And I think that one of the neat things about this is that I think it helps children to develop compassion, because they can talk about this animal, and yes, this animal also feels pain and stress. And how can we help that animal to be really comfortable and enjoy this interaction?

([09:32](#)):

And one of the things that we do with animals is we do what's called a consent test. And so you want to see if the animal actually wants to interact with you. And we always respect that. And one time I was

given the opportunity to interact with an ostrich. And in my case, the ostrich said, "No, I don't want to interact." And as much as I was disappointed, I respected that ostrich because it was huge, for one thing.

[\(09:59\)](#):

But for another thing, it is important to teach kids, and literally people of all ages, that animals also should be given that ability to provide consent. And when they do, when the animal approaches, it really leans into the interaction, there is something unique and special there.

[\(10:18\)](#):

But back to the idea that there are lots of different animals involved. There are. So for example, there are fish tanks or aquariums that have been set up in sort of research settings, where we're looking at things like the amount of caloric intake for older adults in nursing homes. Well, it turns out that if there's an aquarium with fish swimming located where they eat, they will stay longer and they will eat more, because it can be problematic to get older adults to consume food. But the aquarium captures their attention. It keeps them in the room, and they will continue to eat a bit more. And so we can increase their caloric intake simply by having an aquarium there.

Dr. Laura Roberts ([11:00](#)):

Talk about an amazing cost-effective intervention. My gosh. That's amazing.

[\(11:05\)](#):

I know the work with traumatized individuals with horses is a kind of big thing in California, and I've often speculated that just the size of the animal and feeling a connection to this beautiful large beast is just incredibly powerful for people who've been traumatized and have been felt kind of diminished by that experience, being in relation to this large animal. I know that's just kind of an intuition, but is there any validity to that idea?

Dr. Nancy Gee ([11:35](#)):

It's absolutely true. And what's interesting is for those individuals to recognize that horses are prey animals. They don't eat or harm other animals. They eat oats and vegetation and such. And so they can have the opportunity to relate to this powerful beast is really not a predator, but rather is prey.

[\(11:59\)](#):

And they can learn that with a horse, for instance, your behaviors toward the horse have to be very different from your behaviors towards a dog. A dog, when you open your arms and say, "Come here, buddy," they get the idea and they'll come to you. But with a horse, when you behave that way, it often pushes the horse back. And so you have to learn the appropriate kinds of behaviors to interact with a horse to get them to want to come close to you. But when you do what a huge compliment, that this horse now trusts you enough to walk forward and want to interact with you. And it's this big, powerful animal.

[\(12:34\)](#):

And a lot of that work is all done on the ground so the person isn't necessarily on the horse's back. So some of it does involve actually getting on the horse, but a lot of it is about just interacting with this incredibly powerful animal that also has similar fears. And how do you deal with those fears and developing that relationship? And it can be quite powerful.

Dr. Laura Roberts ([12:58](#)):

Yeah. So you mentioned earlier that your background is in psychology, but it's a really kind of a specific area in psychology. Can you just describe a little bit about your own academic background?

Dr. Nancy Gee ([13:11](#)):

Sure. So I was in the cognitive and neurosciences program in my PhD program. And so my research has been... Started out sort of really focusing on issues of cognition, human memory, executive functioning, those sorts of things. And that's how I actually transitioned into working with animals, believe it or not. It was a hobby of mine to train ab animals. So I was doing various dog sports and dog related activities, and one of my dog friends said, "You know, your dogs would make really good therapy dogs. We're going to do a therapy dog evaluation this weekend. Are you interested in coming?" And I said, "What's involved?" They told me and I showed up.

([13:53](#)):

So now I have these two therapy dogs, and they've both passed, by the way. They're incredibly well-trained to do dog agility, which is where they work off leash and can do things at a distance "on command." So I'd say, "Turn right." They turn right. "Take the jump," that sort of thing. And so they passed. Now, they're therapy dogs, so I need to go actually start visiting.

([14:15](#)):

And it turns out there's a preschool in the building where I worked and they wanted me to come and visit there. So that was just a hobby. I'd bring my dogs in. But it's interesting because the researcher in me said, "I'm seeing a lot of anecdote evidence here. Teachers love it. Parents love it. The kids obviously love it, but is there something real here?" And so I started out doing experiments on cognition.

([14:38](#)):

I was looking at the degree to which preschool children could follow instructions or do categorization or perform simple memory tasks and motor skills. So I looked at a wide variety of these different kinds of aspects of cognition, and that's where it all began. Because my background in psychology is as a researcher, so I was trained in the scientific method. I knew how to do a good study. I knew how to develop a really nice tightly controlled study, and nobody was really doing that yet. And so my work was very unique in that there just wasn't a lot of really sort of solid science. The field was young and still kind of growing. And so my work came to the attention of a think tank over in the UK, and my story just went on from there. But that's how I originally got involved all those many years ago.

Dr. Laura Roberts ([15:30](#)):

Isn't that wonderful. That's great. So I'm thinking about, who's going to buy your book? I think it'll be really broad in its appeal, but what do you hope people will learn from it? What, if there's one or two things that you hope that they'll take away from reading your book, what would it be?

Dr. Nancy Gee ([15:49](#)):

I think there are a few things that I hope people take away. For one, there's a lot of information out there in the popular press about the wonders of animals, and some of it is accurate, and unfortunately a lot of it is not. So I'd really love for people to learn the difference between fact and fiction.

([16:10](#)):

And this idea of Lassie saving Jimmy from the well, right? That's fiction. And we need people to respect the animals for who they are. They're unique and impressive, and they can do a lot of really incredible things, but they're not fictional characters. And so really understanding the power of the actual animal,

the reality of the actual animal, and respecting the animal for what they bring to the table. I think that, if nothing else comes out of this book, I think that's very important.

[\(16:45\)](#):

I think the other thing that is important is we've got some great evidence of efficacy for animal interactions, but we need more research. The field is still growing and it's amazing. I recently did a Google Scholar search just looking for randomized control trials on animal assisted interventions, and it is literally a power function in terms of how much the field has grown in recent years. It's absolutely impressive, and I think it's going to continue to grow.

[\(17:14\)](#):

We're seeing more and more jobs in this area. We're seeing a lot of grant funding, well, not a lot, but more grant funding in this area. We're seeing centers of human animal interaction opening up all over the United States, and the world. The field itself is very international, and I love that. I collaborate with people from all around the world. And so there's a lot going on here, and I hope people will go away with just some of that, just broad strokes of what the evidence is like and where we're going. And then sort of end with a, "Stay tuned. There's more to come. There's more to come every single day." Every single year we're seeing advancements in this area, and it's really impressive. It's an exciting time to be involved in research and practice in this area.

Dr. Laura Roberts ([17:58](#)):

Well, that's great. Well, I can't tell you how pleased I am to speak with you today, how thrilled I am that you took on this book when I know you've got a lot of responsibilities and really are very, very busy. But you built a beautiful book for our field, and I just really want to thank you for all of that.

Iain Martin ([18:29](#)):

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