

FLIPSIDE

The Association of Participating Service Users



our animal friends

No. 49 Spring/Summer 2019

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p. 13 'Lime and me' by Sarah Wise

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Editorial

The internet is taken over by animal videos. Cats and dogs are definitely winning, but parrots, koalas, owls, monkeys and others have their fair share too. The numbers about animal content on the internet are pretty staggering. Subreddit "r/aww", dedicated to cute animal content, currently has 23 million members, ranking it as the 7th biggest subreddit. The Dodo, a media company dedicated to animal content, has around 2.5 billion video views every month (1). These numbers seem to indicate that we crave cuteness and tenderness provided by animals. Indeed, Jessica Gall Myrick's research from 2015 reported that people experienced more positive emotions and had higher energy levels after watching cat videos (2).

According to Beyond Blue, the bond between a person and his or her pet benefits that person's mental health (3). Pets motivate their human companions to look after them and require a routine, which is also beneficial for humans, giving their days structure and purpose. In The Guardian article (4) about homeless people and their pets, four homeless people shared how having to look after a pet motivated them to find ways to increase stability in their lives, and benefited their mental health.

Most importantly, our animal friends don't judge. Around them we can relax and be our true self – they love us for who we are. That's the one relationship a person can count on whether they use drugs or choose abstinence.

We hope that you will enjoy reading the stories in this issue. They are about pure love, support and complete absence of judgment. We thank our contributors for taking the time to share them with us.

Edita

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A conversation with my dog

It's those too often moments when you are awake at 3am wondering what it is that makes you feel the way you do. I walk past the front door and there you are, looking at me as though you were waiting for this conversation to happen and so we talk, well I talk and you listen.

I don't know where to start, but seeing you here and awake I guess I'll just begin. Like you, I can't sleep and my thoughts just trace circles over and over in my mind. Then I stop and think about how things are, how you and I got here, what we've achieved and what we've learnt, it's easy to dismiss the things of importance, your love of walks and my no longer love for drugs. I tend to focus on what I've lost, what I fucked up or didn't achieve. You've lost most of your memory and can barely walk, yet I've never thought of you as someone who quits. I've rarely done anything great and I've never been one to celebrate milestones or occasions as I generally downplay their significance, my significance. You've lived to over 100! It's 19 human years and counting, unlike the countless times you've just stayed by my side, silently filling me with your quiet love, those at times feel like more than I've deserved.

That is the issue in a nutshell. The dismissing of my achievement, what I mean to others and my own potential. As I spend so much time on my own, it's easy to believe that nobody cares for me, nobody will miss me, nobody wants to hear of my struggles. I think that being isolated increases this pressure upon myself, to keep a positive mindset. I at times have these crushing feelings of despair. I gasp almost literally as this wave of defeat crashes upon my head and I frantically struggle to get to the surface before it drags me down again. I try and shake it off and think of something else, a pleasant memory, my son's face. Then you come over and sit beside me, I stroke the soft hair around your ears and I forget what it is that makes me feel this way, you don't say a word, nor do I, your silence reminds me of the strength I gain in keeping those thoughts at bay.

I don't understand why this is something that occurs to me, yet it's just part of life. I get opportunities, I'm happy, then I fail when I try and do what's required. It's not that I'm not skilled enough, nor is it that I'm incapable of getting past this crushing anxiety. I flounder for a while, treading water as I try and regain my strength, but what usually occurs is that somebody else ends up catching the wave instead of me. I wake each day, often alone and like you I feel deserted, as though everyone has a life outside the front door but me. I sit there in silence, as do you and I forget what it is that makes me feel this way as I think of how you love me and how we continue to look after each other.

It's not that I can't do it, I just can't do everything I'd like. I don't know what I'm capable of, but I'm learning and it's more limited than I'd like it to be. I still have opportunity, I'm encouraged by that and I know that if I keep trying things will work out. You look up at me and say nothing and though I know not what you think, I know that you being here has kept me strong, keeps me strong.



I take strength from others and I take strength from myself. I'm still here and that's not by accident, it's because I've had to work fucking hard to get here. Your life seems more simple as others make decisions for you, you're more alone than I am, as I have a choice to leave. I don't think of you as my prisoner and I hope you don't see me as your captor. I see you as my friend, one that's always been there for me, well for almost 20 years. You look at me and say nothing, yet your silence says so much and as has done so for so long.

We just need to keep supporting each other, well for what time we have left together, more kindness and less judgement from me and less soiling inside the house from you. I know you care, though now it's harder to see as the lights are slowly dimming behind those dark

brown eyes. I wonder how I'll live when you've gone, I know I will, you've helped see to that, that quiet strength that shows me that just being there for those that matter, well, it matters. I just don't know if you understand how much you mean to me, how much you've done for me and how much I'll miss you when you're gone.

I get up to try and sleep again, you watch me walk away and sigh as you drop your head to the ground, you close your eyes and I wonder if you understand. I know that you're old, that your mind no longer works as it did, that perhaps even that I don't need you as much as I once did. I tell myself that anyway, to try and help

reduce the burden for when you are gone. I don't believe it though, I've always needed you, I do now and will for more time than I'd care to admit. I guess I'll just have to rely on the strength that you've given me and I know that though I can't replace you, you'd want me to find another, one day. They won't be like you though, like the 'us' that we've shared, for the simple fact that those times cannot be repeated. That's why you are so special, as I never thought I'd make it through them and perhaps without you I'd not be here today. So thank you and I'm sorry for the times I've been less than kind, for when you were on the wrong end of my frustration. I'm sorry also that our lives together will soon come to an end, I will never forget you and I hope I've given you some of the joy and comfort that you've given me.

Two weeks after this story was submitted, the author's dog had sudden health complications and, due to his age, the only compassionate option was to have him put down. The following prologue was added after his passing.

Prologue

You've now left, that day came when your body caught up with your mind. I struggled to see you like you were towards the end, yet I felt that as you kept some signs of what you were that I shouldn't let you go. I cared for you with more tenderness than perhaps I did in times past and I take strength from knowing that I gave you everything I could to ease your suffering. It seems I've lost you in parts and so this last one isn't as sharply felt as it might've been, though I still weep for what I've lost, for what you were and what you gave me. You were not just a 'dog', you were my best friend, my comfort, my companion and someone I could always rely upon. I'll miss you and I'll never forget what it was that made you so special. Goodbye my friend, goodbye.

Anonymous



The true essence

My dog hangs her head out the car window taking in gulps off air with pure delight. I watch her in the rear vision mirror, tongue hanging out, ears pushed back and I can't help but smile. Life for my dog is uncomplicated. Food, water, sleep, games and barking. She needs very little more.

Her love is unconditional. She wags her whole back end when she sees a family member. Somehow she knows who needs a nudge with a wet nose or to throw a ball.

She reminds me that beneath the surface, lies the true essence of the person. This is all she sees. This lesson from her is one I have learnt. Often in the throes of addiction with our loved ones we stop seeing who they really are. We forget. We become caught up in the drugs, the chaos, the pacing and hanging out. I get angry and unreasonable, but this is not really me. I hope she showed my son that beneath my surface I was his same mum.

She sees him, the one who pats her, and the one who leans against her when he is exhausted from his struggles. Dogs know when to stay or when to go.



Those days when the chaos was rampant and my ability as a mother challenged to calm the situation, a nudge from a wet nose, a tail wagging or bringing a toy to play, broke the tension.

The soothing effect of the touch of fur on the palm of a hand can be seen almost instantly. Breathing slows down, muscles relax, the grimace on a face can release and eyes suddenly sparkle when unconditional love is present.

Our dogs give great comfort in hours of loneliness or discomfort.



My distress is eased by the sight of a wagging tail, my need for comfort is soothed with the feel of soft fur against my cheek.

When the cat walks over me, he seems to know at that point my reserves are low, my hope is slipping away. His healing purr as he stretches on a knee releases pain and soothes the soul in a similar way to the sound of rain on a tin roof.

The same cat was often found on my son's bed. He used the cat as an excuse for his red watery eyes claiming allergies, but he never pushed him away.

Pets keep us connected. I believe we all need to feel connected and no more so than when addiction has someone in its grip.

Loving a pet and loving a person with addiction issues aligns with loving unconditionally. Being loved by a pet and being loved by a person with addiction issues is also bound in unconditional love.

Marg

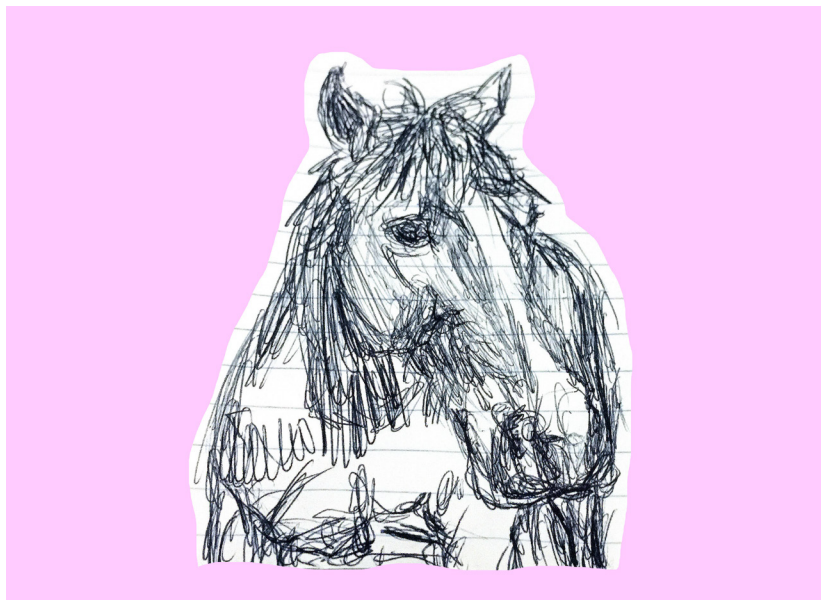
Burry my face in your fur

I wouldn't be alive today if it wasn't for my furry friend. My horse, my guardian angel.

Growing up, when most of my family left me and my lonely heart overwhelmed me, knowing that I could see his furry face at the end of my day kept me hanging on. He loved me when no one else was around to. No matter how I arrived, hungover or still drunk from the night before. We were a team! Nobody understood me like he did. We built each other up and gave each other courage to jump over our fears.

Addiction took over me and I walked away from him, as I walked away from everything, because I was so ashamed of who I'd become. I used and tried to forget the pain of leaving him. My hero, my main man.

I have always wanted him to know, that he saved my life, so many times. He was the warm body to burry my face into when the world was cold and harsh, and I



couldn't stop crying. He was the reason I woke up every morning and the only reason I tried to stay alive. He listened to me when nobody else would and he was always there, unconditionally, no matter what wrongs I did the night before. I am standing on my own two feet because of him and he gave me a skill to use in recovery, which helped bring me back to my heart. My burning love for him shone through the darkness of my rock bottom to help pull me through. I learned to live again sober, with the lessons he thought me.

Where is he today? I don't know. I ran away from the pain of leaving him, so far away, I can't even find him again. This used to eat away at me, so I decided to make amends to him by giving all the love I gave to him to all the other furry creatures in my life. My heart is full and the love is uninterrupted. Today I can show kindness to a horse, by helping her overcome her fears, or finding their favourite spot on her neck, followed by spending most of my riding time, just scratching that spot. Today I can walk my housemate's dog, even if he runs to chase birds instead of listening to my frantic calls. Today I can give a frightened cat all my love, until she has the courage to come out from behind the couch and receive the cuddles and affection that she so deserves. Today if I need tears to heal and haven't quite learned how to show them yet, I can still burry my face in their fur.

I can do that today, because of him.

Jenny

Lime

Lime has been a blessing of life, lesson both of pain and joy. When I first got her, I was in a dream rather than reality in which I was barely capable of looking after her.

She and I were lucky to have such kind housemates who loved and fed her.

Lime is a princess super star, but also happy to bash the cats next door if they are coming into her territory. Sometimes she has been bashed badly by devil cats and she would sit on me growling. I pamper her back to health.

She loves being social and hanging out with people, but she hated the smoking, parties and loud music. Often she would come to climb on my lap and I would be smoking, so then she would get off again.

My mental health issues and inability to cope with life were so bad at one stage that I spiralled into a summer of meth abuse and crazy bedroom antics with fuckwits from craigslist. Lime sat in my bed the whole summer watching over me. She was my guardian angel.

I got sick from the drugs and went to ReGen to start getting counselling, and at the same time managed to start looking after Lime more. Ironically this meant I also had to start looking after myself.

I hadn't been feeding Lime on time and kept running out of money because of drugs. She would swipe my legs hungry for food and I felt terrible scrapping around the cupboard for some horrible human chilli tuna or whatever was available. It must have been horrible for her. I try to make up for it these days with raw chicken thighs and those animal paste things I call cat crack as a joke. She goes nuts for them.



Lime

Years ago I had read a book on massage which also talked about the importance of massaging animals. Lime started getting pampering sessions and she loves it. As we started spending more time together, I got to read her more, and she me. She had a keen eye for spotting people with a fake self up. I feel this is naturally built into her.

So many hard times occurred with homelessness. As I was recovering I kept having to disconnect from old people and move into new places, but there were always times in between where we were in a tent for 3 months going into winter. It was out at the back of a friend's house, but all these times were hard on Lime.

Some magical things have happened after I got off the meth, I had this massive healing journey to go on. All my adult life my heart had been closed and I had defence mechanism up. One afternoon Lime came to sit on top of me during meditation and I felt self love for the first time. This sensation occurred in my heart and I felt this opening... then I started crying. In my head I said 'why me?' And a voice of my pure love said 'why not you?' Then I cried so much because I had hated myself my whole life.



Beautiful Lime had brought such a joy and pure love into my life. For her to stick through everything and still lay in my arms every day is a standpoint example of unconditional love. She taught me self-care, loyalty, consideration, duty, money management and to keep up with the mediation and yoga. It's like in those posh adverts, except Lime just joins in in the backyard to peace out.

We just moved into a house with fresh air and a massive backyard. She'll soon have chickens and a rabbit as friends. I'm hoping she doesn't eat them. My friends have come to visit and Lime loves them because they are kind and happy people. She snuggles in with them when they watch movies.

Even when Lime chooses to walk into another dimension, I know I will see her again because we are soul travellers and will meet again every time. She is a god. She has guided me to let love in.

Sarah Wise



Little ginger fluff

Our son Steve moved interstate. He was in early recovery and doing well.

He was living on his own. One day I got a phone call to tell me he had bought a kitten. I always said I did not like cats. I never owned one and I didn't even know anyone else who owned one. I especially didn't like the ginger ones for some reason.

I went up to visit Steve and this little ball of ginger fluff was bouncing off the walls. He was jumping up and clinging to the wire door. He had so much energy.

I watched him with Steve. He would come when he was called and just lay next to Steve when he was sleeping. I could see they had a great connection.

It gave Steve a reason to get up, someone else to care about besides himself.

Fast forward a few months and Steve was moving back to Melbourne. The new place he was renting would not allow pets. I was faced with a dilemma. I didn't really want the responsibility of another pet. Our dogs had died a few years ago.

But, this little ginger fluff got into my heart. He is now the most important person in our household. He is fed the best food I can afford. Once a week I go to the market and buy garfish for us and one for him. He only eats it raw. He doesn't like other types of fish, only the garfish.

We love him so much.

Steve now lives in the country with his partner and she has 3 cats.

I read somewhere that owning any pet is good for your heart. Cats in particular lower your stress level—possibly since they don't require as much effort as dogs—and lower the amount of anxiety in your life. Petting a cat has a positive calming effect. It's true in my experience.



Anonymous

When things get dark

by Brendan

The smell of dirty wet socks assails my quiet, the one I'm yet to reach.

With darker eyes than the bleak long nights of my failed sleep.

The quiet tapping upon the wooden floor of circles formed and reformed.

A glance, not fleeting and not of indifference, but of contemplation.

You've seen me at my worst, comforted me in my too frequent moments of uncertainty and despair.

It's not that you don't care, it's that you cannot soothe my suffering with words.

The moments extend and you're still with me, the comfort of close companionship.

I realise it's not the words that matter, it's the uninterrupted moments of quiet.

I return and I'm not faced with accusations and recriminations, it's joy, a welcome to strengthen my resolve.

We eat together and apart, we explore, I care for you and you for me.

I learn to think of others, to plan, to see worth in life and of living for others as well as for me.

We age, we change in ways neither of us expect and we remain together throughout the turmoil.



The softer self

Pets are the glue that hold families together. Especially when there is addiction in the family. I know families without addiction and the mum and dad talk often through the pets to convey messages to each other "Go tell Mum that we don't like that curry she has made for dinner". Poor puppies get all the tricky jobs.

In my family our animals have been paramount in not only connection with 3 way conversations, but with the healing they promote with their unconditional love for everyone. They don't take sides on any issue, they love everyone. When my son was in active addiction and I bought our dog a new jacket with a pocket, he quickly suggested he could keep his "stash" in there to share with friends when he took her walking. What could I say? I knew he was joking by the look on his face, and we all had a laugh. In my son's difficult days the pets slept on his bed and gave him comfort as they do for everyone.

Our puppy has been trained to go to groups in hospitals, rehabs and detoxes as a therapy dog. The room is always calmer and works better when there is a pet in the room. She has also worked for many years in an Acquired Brain Injury therapy setting. People coming to the groups always looked forward to her presence in the room. She sat on the tray of their wheelchairs and gave great joy. They also gave her many treats, lots in fact. She never refused. Her waistline grew, but they were not about to stop feeding her. And she was never going to refuse. We just made allowances to accommodate it and walked her more.



She also visited Caritas Christi to visit a friend that was in the last stages of cancer, and all the other patients in the hospital wanted to pat her and talk to her. Pets are a wonderful asset to all our lives, as Pena Chodron, a Buddhist Nun and author, wrote in her books talking about how to connect with even the toughest of people often in prison, no one can resist smiling when holding a puppy. It connects us with our inner softer self.

Anonymous

Floyd

The year was 2002 and I was barely 3 months clean and sober. I had just entered a transitional property in the outer outer suburbs after completing a stint in drug and alcohol supported accommodation in the inner inner suburbs. I was devastated. I surveyed my new digs. I turned around to voice my protests to my support worker and found he was already heading back to the safety of his inner inner office. I sank into the spongy pre-loved two-seater couch and cried.

When the pity party was over I armed myself with all the early recovery mantras I could muster "God grant me the.....Chop wood carry.....Turn your lemons into..... blah, blah, blah". I made the best of the situation and continued with my recovery. This was a transitional property and I was indeed transitioning.



Within days of being at the property I heard meows and bangs at the front door. Upon opening I saw a big ginger cat clingy furiously to the fly screen using the force of his body to create the banging noise. He was wet and desperate. "Oh no" I thought "I need to take care of myself, no stray people, no stray cats". The big ginger cat spent the next few days going from window to window in his pitiful attempt to get in. Resistance is futile hooman, let me in. The neighbours informed me that he had been left there by the previous tenants.

Floyd lived with me for 6 years. We moved 4 times, from transitional, to commission, to private rental, and eventually to home ownership. I don't think Floyd took much notice of our improved circumstances. At one point I lived in a third story flat. There was a tree whose branches nearly reached the balcony. I had already resolved that I would need to let Floyd in and out of the building using the shared internal stairs. I opened the balcony window of my flat and Floyd ran and leapt on the branch and scampered his way down the tree. Problem solved.

One day I noticed Floyd was walking with his head turned to one side. The vet said

he may have been hit by a car, and although not in pain, had probably received some neurological damage. Over the months his health declined. Unable to clean himself he began to get matted on one side. His judgment of space and distance was compromised, and he would increasingly get underfoot. I sent him to live with my sister in the country where it was safer.

Floyd lived out his remaining few months in country comfort. As his condition worsened the time eventually came for the big sleep. Because of his declining health I reckoned that it was better he was put down than be killed in an unfortunate accident.

Animal funerals are a big event in my family. Dead cats have been sent down river in boxes to the chorus of "Bye, bye Play Cat, we love you!" Handmade tombstones, loving poems, the family staring at a dead animal in a hole with readied flowers for laying. This one hole was occupied by the newly run over family cat, or so we thought. As we stood around with our little possies the family cat sauntered up and joined us. He stared at the dead cat in the hole then at us. We stared at him and then back at the dead cat in the hole. That's what happens when you find and bury the cat at night time! Once the family dog turned up to the Xmas table with



someone else's fully baked Xmas ham in his mouth. On this occasion the ham got buried...quickly! I wonder if we buried the neighbours Xmas ham next to their cat?

When I was in active addiction I would thoughtlessly bring animals into my life and then leave them with family and friends when I moved on. My mother was not particularly fond of animals, but would usually bear the brunt of my selfishness. Part of my amends is being a responsible animal owner, or responsibly not being an animal owner.

Now with 110 acres at my disposal I have 3 dogs and the capacity to foster others. A bit of tough love ensures my dogs are behaved enough to be included whenever possible. Once my boys are gone I will wait until I retire before I get a new mate. Maybe a homeless old soul?

Emma



Regina Brindle Foundation

Heather Pickard, the SHARC CEO, announced at the SHARC Annual General Meeting in November the inauguration of the Regina Brindle Foundation.



Regina

On 6 December 2018 our community lost Regina Brindle, a vigorous advocate for consumer rights. This foundation has been set up with the aim to honour Regina's tireless efforts to have the voices of AOD and mental health consumers heard and involved in shaping of policy, service delivery, research and education.

The Regina Brindle Foundation will provide \$5,000 annually in grants to Victorian consumers of AOD and/or mental health services (both service users and family members) for projects that aim to do any of the following:

- ◇ Promote consumer voice
- ◇ Promote community engagement and inclusion
- ◇ Promote human rights
- ◇ Promote overcoming of the barriers for AOD and/or MH consumers
- ◇ Reduce stigma
- ◇ Reduce disadvantage

Grant applications can be submitted by 25 January 2020 by completing the form at <https://www.sharc.org.au/application-form-web/>

If you wish to find out more about the Regina Brindle Foundation or the application process, please contact us on 03 9573 1776.

Meet Sam, APSU's new team member

Tea or coffee?

Both!

What is your favourite book?

Another impossible choice, but today it's Cat's Cradle by Kurt Vonnegut.

What is your spirit animal?

I try to be a quokka, but cat is probably closer to the mark.

What is your favourite colour?

Has to be blue.

What is your favourite movie?

The only way I can settle this in my head is most-watched, and that's The Big Lebowski, no contest.

What super power would you choose to have?

Having watched a lot of sci-fi, I'm not going to start messing around with time travel or anything else world-changing. Invisibility would be fun.

Who is your role model?

I don't have one, but George Orwell had a lot going for him.

What music do you listen to when you feel happy?

Bluegrass! Don't knock it till you've tried it.

If your biography was to be published 30 years from now, what title would you like it to have?

Still Here

Do you have a pet?

Bruce, the butchest poodle cross in Australia.

What do you think about our relationship with animals?

We have a lot to offer one another.



Sam and Bruce



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Self Help Addiction Resource Centre

APSU believes that people who use alcohol and other drug treatment services are the reason the system exists; their needs, strengths and expertise should drive the system. APSU is run by service users for service users and has an active member base. We invite you to join us in having a say. APSU membership is free, confidential and open to anyone interested in voicing their opinions and ideas on the issues facing AOD service users today. We need your help to give us all a fair go. To become a member please fill out the form below and post to: 140 Grange Road, Carnegie VIC 3163 or fax to: 03 9572 3498 or go to: www.apsuonline.org.au to register online.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

I wish to become a member of APSU. I understand that by becoming a member of APSU I will:

- ◆ Receive the quarterly APSU FLIPSIDE magazine
- ◆ Be sent information on how to become involved

I am a: Service user Service provider Family member Other

How did you find out about APSU? _____

Language spoken at home: _____

Cultural identity: _____

Age: 16-25 25-35 36-45 46-65 over 65

Other issues: Physical disability Mental health Visual Hearing

Speech Acquired brain injury

Name: _____

Address: _____

City/Suburb: _____ Postcode: _____

Phone: _____ Mobile: _____

Email: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

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Self Help, Addiction Resource Centre



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