

Courtyard Conversations S3E4 - Dr. Dana Litt - Healing Together: Mental Health, Animals, and Advocacy Transcript

Doughlas: Dana:

Welcome to Courtyard Conversations. I'm your host, Doughlas Gutierrez, and today I have a very special guest, Dr. Dana Litt. How are you doing?

Dana:

Good. How are you?

Doughlas:

I'm doing well. Doing well. I see you brought some additional guests with you today.

Dana:

Yes, this is Fred, and this is Ethel, and they are about nine weeks old. And they are from the Fort Worth Animal Shelter.

Doughlas:

Dr. Litt, to start us off. It is Mental Health Awareness Month. Could you share your perspective on why individuals need to take an active role in maintaining their mental health? And what are some practical, everyday steps people can take to support their emotional well-being?

Dana:

Yeah, and so I think it's really important for people to, really be like, aware of and really kind of be like empowered to think about their own, like mental health. We know that when that, when, like, engaged and, like empowered, that you are more likely to be able to like, recognize maybe when things don't like, feel as good, when things are off, when like you're not yourself.

And so the like sooner that you're like aware of that then that's like more likely that you can like reach out to like, friends, family services and get the like resources that you need. In terms of like steps to take, I think one is just kind of like mindfulness and just like, really like being thoughtful about, like, what are like the ways that I'm feeling like right now, is this is like this the way that I like, want to feel, you know, is this maybe, like, not a way that I, like, want to be feeling.

And then from there, that's when, it's like really ideal if you can like, like find someone to, like, speak with, whether it's like, like friend or like family. And I think part of that too is really trying to stay like connected. And so that way, so connected to your like friends, your family, community, people like around you.

It's a really important way to like, support your, like, mental health. You know, there's a lot of, like, research to show that people that have like, more like, social support are then more likely to feel better, but they're also then more likely to like, seek out help.

Doughlas:

Right. Because they're surrounded by immediate people. They can see, you know, if body language speaks a lot.

I think it actually the Nonverbals speak more than the verbal sometimes because anyone can lie and deceive. But if you can see in someone's eyes, you can see in their mannerism. If you can just tell by their attitude that they're not having a good day, you can kind of pick that up.

Dana:

Yeah. And I think sometimes like, maybe like we don't feel like we like maybe like need the support, like we aren't sure and just kind of like speaking of someone can like sometimes be the like thing that you need to really, like, empower you to say, you know what, like, I like should go like, speak to someone.

Doughlas:

I remember one time I was, going to one of my little rough patches, and it was actually a stranger, some random guy I met at a Buffalo Wild Wings. But we had a watch, a fight. It was one of the one of the UFC cards, I think Tom Aspinall was fighting, and we could only get inside if we got a table, and we both kind of looked at each other and was like, hey dude, want to share a table?

And never met this guy ever in my life. And after about a good five ten minutes of just kind of sitting in the same proximity, we started talking and he started talking to me about some marital problems he was having,

and it was just pretty interesting how a complete stranger can say the right thing at the right time, not have it planned, and it's just... no, I don't believe in coincidences, but I do believe everything has a purpose.

And just to have someone to hear me and believe for him, as well as to have someone listen to him and give them honest feedback from the outside in or outside. Looking in, I think plays a huge role in terms of, you know, that connectedness you were speaking of. I think it's interesting that sometimes it doesn't come from your inner circle.

It comes from a random thing you see on the internet, something on the street or a stranger, a movie, a show. Yeah. Anything like that.

Dana:

Yeah. And I also think that, I mean, for your story, I think it's fantastic that you felt that you could like, speak like with the like, stranger and like the same for him because there is like stigma, you know, about.

Yes. A lot of people and I, I would say it's getting like better especially with like like newer and like younger like generation that are like more like willing to like speak about it. But I think that more that we can like normalize we all go like through things and yes, there's like various like levels and like, not, you know, that like that, like really like we've all experienced things that are like not the same.

But, you know, I kind of think of it like physical health, like we go like we do like checkups and physicals and, we kind of see it as a like journey for, like, physical health. And I think that if we think about that in the same way as, like mental health, that it's kind of a totally like normal thing to like that, like get help and to, like, seek help.

And my dad, he's actually a, like, social worker as well. And I remember years ago, like I'm saying, like, sometimes, like, we all just need a tuneup and, and I like that because it's like, you know, it's the, like, stigma of there doesn't, like, need to be like something that's like, wrong with you or like you don't need to be like, well, I'm not like bad enough to get help.

Like sometimes, like we all just need some help and it's, you know, it can be as simple as, like, speaking to a therapist or a friend. So,

Doughlas:

I love that answer.

I want to dig into the heart of your work. What inspired you to co-found Cowtown Friends of Fort Worth Animal Care and Control, and how does that tie into your personal and professional journey?

Dana:

Yeah. So I actually started volunteering at shelters in 2008.

So I adopted my, like, first dog, like from the shelter. And this was, this was like at a, like, large shelter in Virginia. But it became very clear to me, I mean, and to be fair, I had never really stepped foot in, like, into a, like, shelter before. And so when I, like, went to go, like, find a dog, I was completely, like, overwhelmed by the number of, like, dogs and like the number of, like, cats and things like that.

But also just by the, like, staff and like, volunteers who really have, like, so much heart. And so I've been like, volunteering, like, very steadily since 2008. I've fostered probably over like, 50 dogs. Wow. I've adopted, like, three dogs, like, from the shelter. And so it's really been like a large, like, part of my life for years.

And so I moved here to Texas in 2018 at the in like January and probably by like February, I like showed up at the shelter and I was like, what are the ways I can help? And so I started like once again, like learning the shelter system and like volunteering. And that's when, like, I met, like several friends, two of which.

And I just kind of like, very, like, quickly started to speak about the like shelter staff is doing like so much with frankly, like very little. And so trying to think of like the ways that like we could support them, and it just kind of fell together, in that we're like, we should start like a group, and we're like, we should start like a nonprofit.

And we didn't really know, like, that much about it. But like, you know, like, we were, like, savvy, like, we like, we're very, like, motivated.

Doughlas:

The drive was there. X2

Dana:

The drive was there. And so we spoke to the shelter of, like, if we were to like to, like, form like a group, like what would like you all want.

And they said that there were a lot of, like, rescues which were fantastic at, like, taking like the dogs, like from the shelter so that it was like less like overcrowded. But they said, but what we like really need sometimes is that the like city there are like certain things that like they can do and certain things that they can't or if they like, want to like go and like buy something.

Sometimes it's a like six month process for an adoption or no, just to like, you know, if they are like like we want to buy like ceiling fans. So it's like not as hot, okay. They have to go through like city like vendors. They have to get like multiple quotes. It's a process. Okay. And at that time we also found out that if you like, if you were to like, say, I want to donate to the like shelter and you like, went online, it actually goes to a fund for the like city.

And so there's no real like guarantee that your like donation would really go towards the animals specific. Yeah. And so kind of with like all of that, we formed Cowtown Friends. And like what we do is we are the like, fundraising like partner like for the shelter. So we like, just work with the, like one shelter.

And we do like fundraising, like an outreach. And that way when the shelter staff comes to us and says, like, hey, like, we need this, it's not in the like, city's like, budget line. Like we can say, sure. Like we got it. And so we've been able to be very like responsive. And I think that's in part because we formed like really like strong relationship, with the like, shelter staff.

Doughlas:

I want to also speak on to when you first went into this giant shelter and you saw these dogs and saw these cats, what was that feeling like? Was there a feeling of, I want to take all these animals home with me? Was there a feeling of I want to be the hero and kind of get these animals away from this environment at least?

Dana:

I think at first it was just shock. You know, I think that if you like, never stepped foot into a, like, city shelter, I think you should.

Doughlas:

It's a humbling experience.

Dana:

It is. But. So at first it was just kind of shock. And I will say, I had come from Seattle before, like, here, and, like the animal crisis was like, not as, like, severe, like the shelters are, like, not as full.

There's not as, like, many animals. And so when I like, moved like here, it just was really like new experience. And yes, at first I'm like, I need to like, save them all. But I also know that I'm like one person. And what I've actually found is that and I mean, this is like starting back from like 2008 when I started that.

Actually volunteering in the shelter makes me feel less like obligated to like, adopt them all because that's like my, like way of, like helping and serving. Yeah. Without like necessarily like living at home with like 600 animals. Okay. And so, you know. Yeah. I mean, because I would. Yeah. And so I think like the ability to see that there's like lots of, like ways to help.

And it's not like necessarily that you need to like, adopt or like foster, but you can like volunteer, like you can go in and like you can be like a photographer and like videographer, things like that. There are so many like, like ways to help that if like you're someone who is like, I don't need like more like animals at home, there's so many like ways to help.

And so I think for me, like, that's what kind of keeps me at bay at least.

Doughlas:

I love their response. I ask that as a precursor to this question about the relationships people have with animals. My next question for you, doctor, is what's the science or theory behind the human animal bond when it comes to emotional regulation and psychological resilience?

Dana:

Yeah. So I mean, I would say there's not one like solid like theory on it, there's like lot of things that can go on. And this can be just from like kind of more like chemistry in the brain. So when you are like around like animals, research shows that, that like, you release, more like oxytocin, which is a very, like calming and relaxing. Yeah. It's kind of like, like love and, like, calming and things like that. I mean, you can see now like, oh, they're like, they're asleep and like, I feel like more relaxed. They also show that when, like, you're with, like, animals, your cortisol, which is the like stress hormone that gets lowered. And so that's kind of on more of a like biological level.

But there's also like research to show that just the companionship. For sure. But also like the like need to feel like you or like need it and to take like care of something. Is very good for your like, mental health. And, I remember a study that I read in graduate school that, like, stood out to me where they gave, they gave just some sort of, like, houseplant to people, living and like, senior citizens.

Doughlas:

I think I heard of this one.

Dana:

Yes. Yeah, yeah. And just like, taking care of the, like, plant, they like, lived longer. They felt like, felt like happier things like that. And so if that can, like, happen because you feel like you are, like, responsible for the plant thinking about these guys, something like similar. You know, I think can happen. And then I would say for me to, because of like volunteering, like I've met some of my, like, very best friends.

And so it's also, I think, like way to form a community to which I'm kind of going, going to like what we're speaking about. Like when we started the sense of like, connectedness is there. And so I think a lot of people, when they like, volunteer, they can also like find that. So it's not just about taking care of like animals, but it can also then kind of like take like care of yourself too.

Doughlas:

That also speaks to just how we're kind of programed to be in communities, to be in groups. I am all for one about my personal space. I love my little doses of isolation. But, like over this past weekend, I got to spend some time with my family, and my brother came from Colorado, and it was also my father's birthday day.

And just, I don't know, a little bit of nostalgia just being outside, you know, we got the cookout going, we got the meat on the grill, got kids playing soccer in the yard, and we're all just kind of having fellowship and just talking and laughing. And I will say, the one little piece that was missing was my, my dog, Baby Bandit.

We had to put him down, two years ago due to cancer. But and in response to like the community aspect of it, all of my problems, they were still present. But I wasn't thinking about them. I was truly present in the moment that we were having together as a family, as community, as friends and as just people still kickin it.

We're still out here, you know?

Dana:

Yeah, exactly, I love that.

Doughlas:

Yeah. Leading into my next question in your experience and research. What are some common challenges people face when attempting to maintain their mental health, and how can social work professionals like yourself help bridge those gaps in access, awareness, and stigma?

Dana:

Yeah, I mean, I think you touched on three like, like super important things. There is certainly, for a lot of people, a lack of like access. And whether that's like, like physical, like access, or like knowing like where to like find like find the, like resources. It could be a, like financial, you know, sort of like barrier. So I think first we just need, need to like, acknowledge those that there are certainly people out there who like, want the help.

They just don't really like, know like where to start. And so I think that is something that social work is really fantastic at, is really like knowing what those like resources are and connecting people to them. You know, these and then you like, you mentioned like stigma. And we already like spoke about like that as well.

But I think it is so important, because a lot of people and some of it is like is, definitely like generational, some of it is cultural. And so yeah. Yeah. And so I think that as like, that, like that like people in like social work field, the more that we, that we can really like, like know that and like acknowledge it, then we can like be more effective at, like navigating that.

Because there are like, like, like so many ways that people who like, want care, like they can't necessarily go out and get it. And so I think just kind of spreading, spreading like awareness, like speaking about it. So there's like less like stigma and that's one for sure. Yeah. And just like really being like, willing to listen to, you know, to the like individuals about what sorts of like barriers like, are like there for them.

Douglas:

So in other words, being intentional in practicing empathy.

Dana:

Exactly. And compassion and understanding.

Douglas:

And I will say it's easier for some than others. Especially with the cultural upbringings. I know at least in my personal experience, sometimes people may want to help, but they have their own baggage that they have that doesn't allow them to be there for the other person.

So in their attempt to kind of hold on to their own the little bit they have left, it may come off as dismissive or it may come off as condescending at times. But I think it's I think you hit on something really critical that everyone that kind of is, has their own baggage in a way. Everyone kind of has their own.

Everyone has their own scars.

Dana:

some of it is just you're like family. And so there are certainly like people like that grew up in like families that are not very like open to like speaking about it.

They have certain like thoughts about how it's like weak if like

need, like help or whatever. And so giving, giving people a like safe space to be able to like learn that that's like not the case and like it is like something like we can speak about I think is very in like it's very like valuable for the field.

Doughlas:

I know you spoke about access, what are some ways that local agencies or institutions like UTA can better integrate or promote animal-based support systems in mental health work? I know at the beginning of this month we had a pretty cool puppy yoga event. Yeah. Could you talk to us a little bit about, the puppy yoga event and how other institutions like UTA can help with mental health?

Dana:

Yeah. I mean, I think that the like, yoga like event was, like so much fun, right? Because it's like it's like puppies and yoga and community. And outside it was outside it was nature. I mean, beautiful day that day too. Yeah. I mean, it's like fantastic. But I think at the like core of it, what it is, it's it's like one way to kind of make it fun to think about, like wellness and like mental health.

And so there's a lot of like people that like, may not necessarily take the time to like, slow down on their own, you know, and think of like, what do like I need, do I need to relax? But you throw in things like this and it's, you know, then you'll have more like people that are like, willing to, like, slow down and engage.

And so I think that, you know, things like that, I think even just, you know, there are like ways, for, like, schools or like organizations to, like, go out and, like, volunteer at the shelter, things like that, I think are like, really like, useful as well. Because, again, it's a sense of like community.

It's stepping away from your desk, like taking a break. And so I think that, you know, like the more schools can really encourage that and say it's like, fine to like, step away and I take a break and we like, want you to like, volunteer. We want you to like, relax. Like we want you to like, step outside at like three in the afternoon and just, like, get some fresh air.

Yeah. I think steps like that are small. But I think that they can be, like, really valuable in the long run.

Doughlas:

Absolutely. You couldn't have tied a better bow on that. I really love that. How can the broader public support organizations like CowTown Friends, especially during Mental Health Awareness Month?

Dana:

Yeah, I mean, I think, like I said, you know, we support the, like, Fort Worth animal shelter and they and I say they I mean, really it's it's like the entire like country like we're in like a crisis.

There are so many animals. And so we need so much help. And so yes, that can be like adopting, but it can also be like fostering. It can be like volunteering. So we need people to like, walk dogs to do, like photography. You can also go, go to the shelter and you can check out like a dog, like for the day, for a, like, field trip.

Doughlas:

I remember you telling me.

Dana:

And it's great because it's really fantastic for you. Right? So it's like, you can go out, you can get like a dog for the day. You can like go on a hike, you can like, you know, like be outside, like, and relax. But there's also like research to show that for the like, animals, even like one hour that they're like, not in the shelter.

They're like, stress hormones. Like they also like, like relax and go down. Okay. That's so it's mutually beneficial. Yeah.

Doughlas:

I remember asking that during a puppy yoga event when you mentioned that. And it doesn't, because I always came from the approach that it would have a negative effect to kind of tease the animal in a way that, right, we're going to let you out, but then we're going to bring you back in this horrible place.

Dana:

And I mean, I like certainly thought that as well. But like, there is actually like a science where they tested there, I think it was their cortisol. And they showed that even like one hour it like lowered it. They were like less stressed, like they felt better. So there's that. But also like the more that you can, like go out, even if it's an hour or three, they're more likely to get like adopted because like, they can be seen like not in a shelter environment.

You can stick like little silly things on them. And so we find that it's just like really like fantastic for like exposure. And to me that's actually one of the things, that I think we need, like the most like help with is just people being like aware like of, like what the like city shelter is like facing and what the like needs are.

And so I would encourage people to follow us, to follow countdown friends. We are on like Facebook and Instagram, like, we have like a website. We do at least like one event, like a month. And I think sharing that, just so that there's like awareness of that, and then like, like volunteering at the shelter, like we need people.

Yes. We need, like, money and like donations, things like that. But really, the most valuable resource is people.

Doughlas:

I love that. Well, we're coming around the corner of our episode, Dr. Litt. I have one final question for you. Finally, what's one story or moment that stands out to you that reminds you just how impactful animals can be in a person's journey toward healing?

Dana:

Yeah, I mean, I'm going to like, make this like, about myself. But so I moved here, like I said, in 2018, with a dog that I had had since 2008. He went through, let's see, he went through the last two years of like, my PhD with me. He then like, moved to, like Seattle for my postdoc and then like my, like, first job and then, like, moved here.

So I mean, he had so we spent 14 like years with each other and I mean, so a very like, like large aspect of my life. Oh yes. And he passed away in 2021. And it was very, very hard. And for about the first like three weeks, you know, probably like a month, I was like, I don't want to volunteer.

I was like, it's going to be like too sad. Like, I'm not like, ready. I don't want to like, adopt a dog, like just because I'm sad. And so I like stepped away. But I think my like friends and this is kind of going back to the like community aspect. There were like like you don't like seem like yourself.

You know, they're like we can tell that something is like missing. And so they kind of slowly encouraged me like, go back to the shelter, like step foot in. And I was really, like, skeptical, like, I'm not ready. And then the very first time, like, I stepped in, I ended up taking a dog home to, like, to, like foster.

She was terrified and skinny and scared and something just said, like, I need, you know, like like she needs to come home. And she ended up staying with me for about two months and she was great. And when I first took her like home, I definitely felt a little, like, detached, I guess I was like, this is like my foster dog, you know, like, she's over here, I'm here.

But then I was like, oh, yeah. Like, I really do like miss that. There's like a dog in my life. And that she was like making me like wake up and like, go on a walk, you know, things like that. It became very clear that she was not going to be like my dog. But she at least, like, taught me that.

I was like that. I was, like, ready again and that I could, like, love a dog again and that I like, needed like a dog in my life. And so once she was adopted, then I was like, I think I'm ready. And I ended up kind of like meeting a few dogs. That was right. And then, like, I ended up with my current, like, heathen.

Who is I mean, she was she was like, recently, like, pregnant. She was skinny, she was scared, she had scars. And so I think we actually like, she helped like me a lot heal. But I think too, like, I did same for her.

Doughlas:

It was like a two-way benefit. X2

Dana:

Yeah. Exactly.

Doughlas:

As you're describing these things Dr. Litt, it almost comes off as a, a sense of worthiness to be able to take care of another life. Let it. Yeah, a dog or something. But I don't know, is it can I ask, is it in some way that you kind of see yourself in this animal and an animal currently, and you and you both kind of took a chance on each other, you know, for lack of a better, like, a better word?

Dana:

Yeah. And I would say that, you know, because, like, you know, like, I mean, like that like first dog, it was like 14 years. And so I felt very much like really trying to, like, figure out, like, what is my life like, like without him and like, really like, who am I, you know, and so realizing that it was really part of my identity to like, volunteer and to like, be like dog owner.

I think I didn't realize, like, how much that had really been in kind of like, internalized for me. And so when I started to, like, volunteer again, like, you know, like an adopt, you know, I think there was just, like, something that I was like, I felt like felt very, like, whole again.

I love that, you know, and like I said, I had met, I had probably gone on like, five, like, meets with other dogs. And like, they were great, you know, and I was like, they're nice dogs or something. Yeah. It's like dating kind of. We're going out. Had a lot of like first dates, but not like a second date.

And then I met my current girl, and there was just, like, something clicked. Yeah. And I remember I, like, sat there and I just like, started to, like, cry. And I was like, this is the one. And I just think there was like something. And again, it's not that I don't know if it was like fate or whatever, but I think it was like meant to be in a way that she was like my dog.

Doughlas:

I love that I think we can end it right there. Thank you again, Dr. Litt, for this conversation. And thank you again for bringing these fur babies.

Dana:

Look at them, all snuggled up and tired.

Doughlas:

Yeah, they took a power nap after running around after about 10-15 min.

Dana:

It's hard to be a puppy. X2

Doughlas:

I'm sure it is. To be, to be cute and fluffy. I know all the time. 24 seven. I think it's a hard job. Exactly. But, yeah, as, we're closing out, is there any way students or volunteers can get connected with Cowtown Friends? Is there a website that we can link and kind of plug in?

Dana:

Yeah, we are just, at Cowtownfriends.org from there, you can see our social media, things like that.

You can also like, reach out to me. We can set up like volunteering. You can do, some sort of like a group day, you know, where, like, students can come out, like, faculty and staff can come out and things like that.

Doughlas:

Awesome. Well, thank you again for this conversation. Thank you again for speaking on the impact of animals and pets for mental health awareness.

As a courtesy, we also have a goodie bag for you.

Dana:

Oh thank you. Thank you for having me. Yeah. What's this thing you think you got? Swag? They're like, we're too tired for swag.

Doughlas:

Or maybe chew toys for them. Yeah, well, my name is Doughlas Gutierrez. I'm here with your guest. Dr. Dana Litt, and this is Courtyard Conversations.