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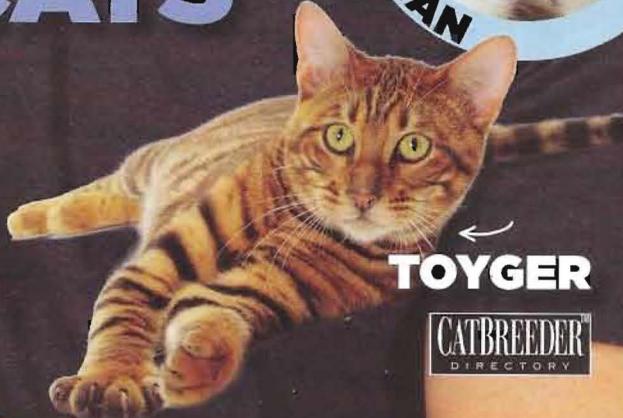
**CATS COMFORT
VETERANS WITH
PTSD**

**+
CATS WHO
WORKED AS
CIA SPIES**

Love Men
**WHO LOVE
CATS**

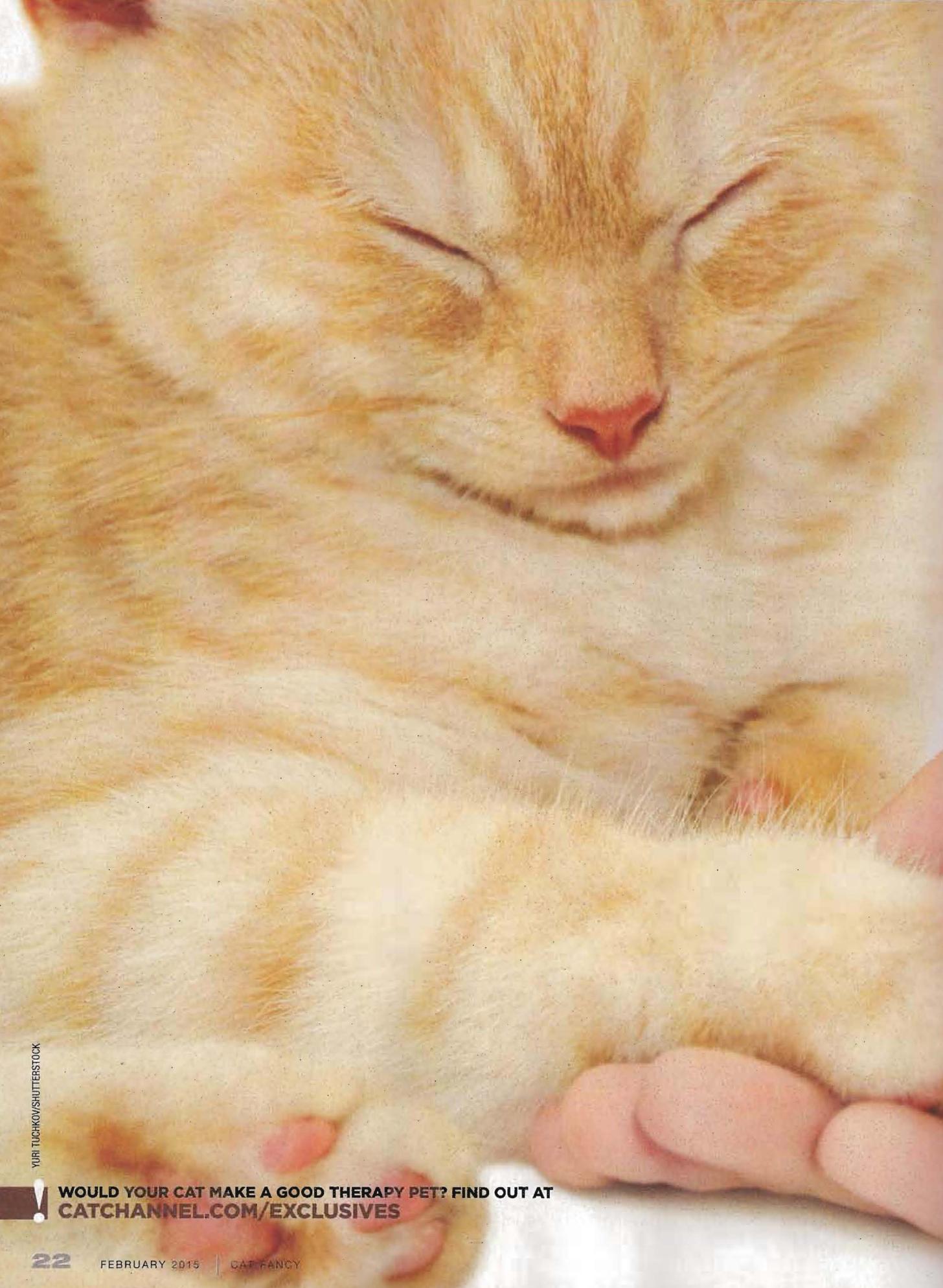


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**! WOULD YOUR CAT MAKE A GOOD THERAPY PET? FIND OUT AT
CATCHANNEL.COM/EXCLUSIVES**

Feline

Comfort

EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT
CATS CAN HELP PEOPLE COPE WITH
POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER.

WHEN MIKE GRINDELL, NOW 67, ADOPTED A CAT FROM Maine's Coastal Humane Society some nine years ago, people thought it was insanity. A Vietnam veteran, Grindell has post-traumatic stress disorder, and on the flip of a dime, his best friends become his worst enemies. People were afraid this anger would certainly be directed at the cat.

He named the big, black cat Spike and, from the moment they met, they became best buddies, giving Grindell a purpose in life and a daily routine. Every morning at 4 a.m., he gets up, maneuvers his wheelchair to the kitchen and gives Spike breakfast. Then, he and Spike go back to bed to nap for a few more hours.

At 55, Grindell had his second stroke, leaving him unable to walk or use his right hand. Spike knows this and never tries to get into Grindell's lap. He knows that his human friend needs his space, as well as his unconditional loving companionship. He provides both.

Pets and PTSD

Grindell is one of the 30 percent of Vietnam veterans diagnosed with PTSD. From 11 to 20 percent of veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars (Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom), and as many as 10 percent of Gulf War Desert Storm veterans are affected by PTSD, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs website. It's not just veterans; any person who has gone through a trauma can be affected, especially those subjected to rape or domestic violence.

While depression, anxiety and isolation are



Mike Grindell and Spike have become best buddies.

COURTESY OF B.J. BANGS

symptoms of PTSD, there can also be flashbacks, nightmares, fear, guilt, shame, always being on edge and alert for danger, and difficulty concentrating or sleeping. Suicide, family abuse, unemployment, broken relationships, addiction and depression can ensue. But can pets, including cats, help people with PTSD? Grindell believes his Spike is a centering force in his life and, no matter what, is there for him.

George Decker, public affairs and communications specialist at the VA's Medical Center's National Center for PTSD in White River Junction, Vermont, points out, "Part of the problem is that there is insufficient research to show that pets are effective therapy for PTSD. Pets can be helpful in many ways, and many people say that pets help with PTSD symptoms. What we don't yet know is if animal therapy can make PTSD go away."

Cheryl A. Krause-Parello, associate professor and director, C-P.A.W.W. (Canines Providing Assistance to Wounded Warriors) at the University of Colorado, Denver, is trying to change this. She points out that, while there are numerous studies correlating the benefits of pets to people with PTSD, there is insufficient funding to sponsor well-designed clinically controlled trials needed to provide the hard-core medical scientific evidence to prove it.

Why Cats?

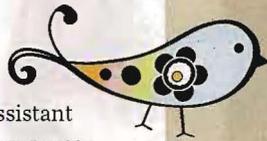
Admittedly, most research has centered on dogs. Nora Mund, a Marine who was injured while serving in



Nora Mund, USMC veteran, research assistant; Lulu and her handler, Gillian 'Jill' Wilschke, LMFT; and Cheryl A. Krause-Parello, associate professor and director, C-P.A.W.W.



COURTESY OF C-P.A.W.W.



Afghanistan and who has been working as a research assistant at C-P.A.W.W. since April, explains why. Dogs have a keen sense of smell. They can be trained much more quickly. But she says there's no reason why other pets, including cats, would not be great companions, because the 'unconditional love' factor is huge when it comes to anxiety, depression and loneliness.

When you are tuned into the pet, the focus is on the pet, not your fears. Companion animals help people stay "in the present" and realize that if the pet is calm, the flashback probably is not real. Pets can even be trained to wake people from nightmares.

For more than 20 years, there have been indicators proving that mirror neurons in our brains fire back, or mirror, what we are experiencing and watching at that moment. So if you smile when looking at a cute kitty face, that smile can ignite a sense of happiness extending through the whole body. There's also a series of chemical and physical changes that occur with positive pet interactions, including the release of a number of feel-good hormones, including serotonin, prolactin and oxytocin.

Animal therapy takes on different levels from the specifically trained psychiatric dog to service, therapy and companion pets, all of which, Mund says, can help those with PTSD symptoms.

Animal trainer Clarissa Black founded Pets for Vets in California about five years ago after making therapy visits with her dog to a VA Hospital. She saw how the veterans' faces lit up. "I thought if this could happen once a week in the walls of the VA, why not 24-7 inside the home," she says.

Pets for Vets, now in 19 states and the District of Columbia, is all about matching the veteran with the right pet, whether it be a cat, dog, bird or something more exotic.

Someone might think they want a certain breed because they are cute or cuddly, only to find that the animal doesn't fit his or her lifestyle at all. Trained volunteers profile what is the best pet personality for the vet, and then work with shelters to find the right fit. "It's matchmaking at its best," Black says.

Pamela Barlow, animal behavior counselor with the ASPCA's Animal Assisted Therapy program, works with Pet Partners (formerly known as the Delta Society), in New York City. Cats are great therapy pets and companion animals, especially in the Big Apple because many apartments only allow cats. "Cats are mobile, portable and more bomb proof," Barlow says. "They are used to noise, sirens, honking horns, people, hot-dog carts ... You can put the cat in a carrier and off you go on a bus, the subway or a taxi. That's not so easy with a big Labrador Retriever."

Cats create a sense of escape, emotionally and physically, with a therapeutic and relaxing effect. The bond develops, not only from touch, but from gazing into their eyes, or experiencing their calming presence in the room. They can help sick people become "pleasanter," and come out of their shells, Barlow says.

While animal-assisted therapy has been around for some 40 years, there have been a lot of major changes in the last 20 years. "It used to be sort of *laissez faire*," Barlow says. "Now, it's about finding the right animal for the right person in the right circumstances. If a person is looking forward to the pet visiting all week,



COURTESY OF ASPCA

Pamela Barlow, animal behavior counselor with the ASPCA's Animal Assisted Therapy program, works with Pet Partners (formerly known as the Delta Society) in New York City.

and the animal rejects them, it is devastating. If the animal walks right up to them, and says hello and the person feels 'wow,' that's the kind of therapy we want."

That "wow" is what keeps Grindell committed to his Spike, and why they have become the best of friends. 🐾

BJ Bangs is an award-winning journalist/blogger/freelance writer and photographer, who absolutely loves cats. Residing in rural New England with her five felines, she blogs at www.bjbangs.net (Paws for Reflection) and contributes to a number of regional and national publications. As a longtime friend, she knew how much Grindell loved being with BJ's Smokey-Blue and that a cat would be an ideal companion. It was she who took him to the shelter and let him pick out the cat who was right for him, one who would become his best buddy.