Hadley

Vision Loss and Caring for Pets

Presented by Ricky Enger

**Ricky Enger:** Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, we discuss vision loss and pet ownership. And our guests are Hadley learning expert, Debbie Worman, and Hadley learner, Sheri Robinson. Welcome to the show, both of you.

**Debbie Worman:** Thank you, Ricky.

**Sheri Robinson:** Thank you.

**Ricky Enger:** I am delighted to have you both, and of course, any day that we can come and talk about our fur babies is a good one. So, I'm really excited about this. I know that a lot of people have questions about, I love pets, I love animals, and I just have some concerns about how I might manage some of that now that I'm not seeing as well as I used to. So I thought it would be cool to come and talk about some of those practical concerns, and then of course, talk about the joy of pet ownership as well. So, as we introduce ourselves, I will say that I have one fur baby at this point. She is a 16-year-old, and you wouldn't know it by the way she acts. And she is a lovely little black cat, and she lives up to her name, which is Diva. She thinks that she is absolutely the most important entity in any room, and she's pretty much right. Debbie, how about we get a couple of words from you, introduce yourself and any pets that you want to talk about.

**Debbie Worman:** Yeah, thank you, Ricky. I'm Debbie Worman and I'm a learning expert here at Hadley. I co-host several of the discussion groups here, and I'm thrilled to be talking about pets today. My little boy is Buick, and yes, he was named after the car. That's how I got him. I was not looking for a pet at the time. He just climbed up under my dad's Buick and rode on the back axle for about six miles. And when I got home, it was meow, meow, meow, there he was, and he's been mine ever since. He came into my life at a really important time. I was diagnosed with cancer, and I think he just plopped in at the right time to be my cuddle buddy. And he's just my life. He's my life.

**Ricky Enger:** Wow. I love that story. Every bit of that story is just fantastic. Sheri, you're up next, and I know you have more than one animal to talk about, so I know this is going to be really difficult, but we will just get from you the number of each type of animal that you have, and then if there's one that you specifically want to talk a little bit about, we can do that.

**Sheri Robinson:** Yes, I have two horses, two dogs and three cats. And I will talk about my oldest guy, that is my quarter horse, Thunder. He is 24 now, and I have had him since he was almost two. He is a very even keeled, even tempered, roughly handsome man, because he doesn't like to be called cute. He likes hugs and kisses on his nose. And I have discovered that since going blind, they are very protective of me. And I can go out there and they'll hover around. Of course, they are looking for treats, but they'll hover around, and I can walk right into their butts, and they don't even flinch, so they know.

**Ricky Enger:** They know, right. It's like we talk about pets and children. Pets tend to be really patient, at least some of them, knowing that this is a cub or a youngster doing this. And I do think they have that same sense about, oh, you can't see me making these googly eyes at you begging for food, but I have a different way of showing you that now.

**Sheri Robinson:** And I can still feel my dog staring at me.

**Ricky Enger:** Yes. That is unmistakable. Right? I know that there are people who want to either get a pet now and they don't have one currently, or maybe vision loss is happening along with some other concerns, and people are thinking, gosh, I have this pet now, but am I going to be able to handle everything that pet ownership throws at you? And so again, I thought it would be a good idea to just share our experiences with how we navigate some of these things and talk about some of those practical things that people think about and maybe don't have a solution to. So, Debbie, I know you have a great list of questions, and why don't we just jump right in?

**Debbie Worman:** Absolutely. I think it's just so important. The three of us know, right, we know that pets, our pets just enhance our life so much, just the wellbeing that they give us from joy to unconditional love. I talk to so many learners during the day, and I think one of the saddest conversations I've had in the last year was from a woman who thought she was going to have to give her cat up because of her vision loss. And I hope today we can talk about, as you said, Ricky, some practical ways that people with vision loss can care for their pets, decide to keep them. Or if they don't have a pet, this is a good time to explore, is a pet right for me.

Sheri, I'm going to just throw some questions at you if you don't mind. What would you advise someone who is new to vision loss who is thinking about getting a pet? I know the answer to this, but I want to hear it in your words, do you think it's a good idea?

**Sheri Robinson:** I definitely do. Having an animal, a pet, is good for your soul. It's good for your emotional being. And there are so many ways to deal with an animal whether you have vision or not. I mean, I've got three different species that I take care of, and if I can do it, anyone can.

**Debbie Worman:** I like that. I like when you said good for this soul. That gives me goosebumps. So, let's talk about how you take care of your pets. I know one situation that this woman I talked to was concerned about, as well as her family, is tripping over her pet. It was a small dog. How do you deal with those kinds of issues, tripping issues with an animal?

**Sheri Robinson:** Well, now my dogs are a little bigger. They're both about 50 pounds, but they have learned very quickly to move. When I'm walking through the room, they move. Now, the cats, I have on occasion lost my balance and stepped on a cat, which is never a good thing. But for the most part, even the cats have learned to move out of my way or at least be where I can feel their tail on my leg, so I know they're there.

**Debbie Worman:** Do either one of you ever put bells or anything on the collars to let you know they're about or is that something you've considered.

**Ricky Enger:** I have done this. Sheri, how about you?

**Sheri Robinson:** I have not done the bells. Now, I used to, and when I had the three dogs, my one dog, I put a little ribbon on her collar. I knew if I grabbed the collar with the ribbon on it, that was Stitch. If I grabbed the collar with no ribbon, that was Flicka. But now that I'm down to two dogs, I've just taken Stitch's collar off. And now I know just instantaneously who is who.

**Debbie Worman:** So as long as you were mentioning dogs, I'm always curious too, people with vision loss and how they walk their dogs? For instance, if you are a cane user, how do you walk your dog while you're using your cane? And what kind of situations that may bring up for people who are worried about maybe if they get a dog, how am I going to walk this dog? Or, am going to have to rely on somebody else to take the dog out? What kind of issues come up with that?

**Sheri Robinson:** That is actually one problem I don't have because I have a fenced in backyard. So, when they need to go out, I just open the door and they go out. If I want to take them to the barn with me, they're very well-behaved. I live on a 15-acre farm, so if I want them to go to the barn with me, I just open the gate and they stay around.

**Ricky Enger:** I know having done this as a guide dog user, there were times when walking the dog was different than walking with the guide dog and having him guide me. So, what I would do was have the leash in one hand and the cane in the other hand, and now I'm in control of where we're going. He's not guiding me, but we're making our way throughout the neighborhood. Now of course, there can be concerns if you're new both to cane use and to having a dog, gosh, that's a lot. And so, one thing I know that some people have done is to initially have someone walking with them, not as a guide, but just to make things a little more relaxing. I’m here should something go wrong. But if you practice walking around the neighborhood with your cane, and also, you've got your companion with you, it's a good time for both of you. And of course, if you're walking with your friend, you have a nice little chat along the way.

**Sheri Robinson:** Also, you can always request an orientation and mobility instructor to come walk with you as well if you don't have a close friend or family member willing to walk with you.

**Debbie Worman:** Both of you, you're in my head. That was so interesting. You hit all three points that I wanted to make sure we covered. Ricky, I think you mentioned practice, right? So, somebody new to vision loss often has those overwhelming, I can't do this feeling right. So, you want to be patient with yourself. Even when you get a pet, be patient with yourself because things don't happen overnight. And remember to ask for assistance. We all have to allow people to assist us to offer them that gift to help us at times. And Sheri, it’s so important to remember to seek orientation and mobility training. That's really important, that will help you with walking that dog.

What about those dogs that get out and you're worried about them? Or even in the house, they're going to chew, maybe you have a puppy or a younger dog, or even sometimes when Buick wants attention, what does he do? He chews on my computer cord. So, what do you do in situations like that? We know pets like to chew on things, how do you know it’s happening if you can't see that, and how do you protect them from things like that?

**Sheri Robinson:** The first thing I would do is provide them with something they can chew. My dogs have some of those nylabones or they have those toys that you can get at just about any store, little tires, tug ropes, give them something they can chew and that will keep them from chewing on things they shouldn't chew. But if you catch one chewing on something they're not supposed to, then you need to correct them, discipline them like you would a child and reinforce, no, that is not something you chew on. And then give them something they can chew on.

**Debbie Worman:** Yeah, turn it around and make it positive, right, Sheri? So, it's not so much about being, no. Buick does that when he feels he wants attention and I lacked giving him the appropriate attention for the morning, and here I am working, and he just wants to play. So sometimes it's just saying, "Hey buddy, let's play." And just redirecting him, like you said, a child, oftentimes just redirecting them. And I can hear him as I'm trying to work. I can hear him under my desk and in the cord, so I keep that ear out for him. So, using my heightened senses that way.

**Ricky Enger:** That was exactly the point I was going to make, Debbie, was that I know people think, well, what if I don't see them chewing on something or getting into something that they shouldn't? I do feel like it's a myth that your other senses become better. If you were to measure them on a scale, the senses don't become better, but you become more attuned, as you said, to listening for things like that. And it's something that happens naturally. You can suddenly notice in the environment, “I think I know what that sound is.” Because sometimes things happen in a different room, and even if you do have a set of perfectly working eyes, you can't see from where you are. You probably notice more already than you think you do.

**Debbie Worman:** I'm getting ready to move in with my mom, so I'm taking Buick with me of course. So that brought to mind, what do people do about vets? And if you don't have transportation, if you no longer drive, and how do you give meds if your pets are sick? And boy, that's a lot of responsibility to have on one's shoulder to take care of that. And is that really something you want to do? And how do you manage all of that process?

**Sheri Robinson:** Well, as far as vet appointments, obviously with my horses, the vets come here, but with the dogs and cats, that's when you have to find somebody willing to haul you to the vet. Now, I have a dog that is on medicine because she has really bad arthritis and I keep her medicine separate from everything else. I have a routine in the morning after I feed her, I will go get her medicine, put it in some peanut butter, because heaven knows she wouldn't eat it otherwise, and then give it to her.

**Ricky Enger:** I have just one cat, and I was fairly recently kind of confronted with this. My son wasn't driving yet, and I thought, oh no, what do I do? You can't call a Lyft to get you to the vet. And my friends live 40 miles away, so what do I do? I don't have any family in the area. When I looked into it, it turns out that Uber now does have something called Uber Pet where they have drivers who have indicated they are willing to take pets. And so, you call knowing that everything's going to be great there.

The other thing I was able to do was find a vet who makes house calls. I think it depends on what area you're in as to what's going to be available for you. But it may be that whether you're calling a standard Uber or Lyft and you're putting in the information that, "I'll be traveling with a pet, cancel and let me get somebody else if you have a problem with this." Or you can find a vet who makes house calls or again, friends and family, a great way to do that. And medicine, that's all kinds of fun. I think that in the same way that we do for humans, where we have a way to measure liquid medication in a syringe and a way to distinguish one medication from another. We have Hadley workshops on all those things, and that applies just as much to pets as humans, I think.

**Debbie Worman:** Again, I'm thinking, if this podcast is reaching people who are new to vision loss, that sense of overwhelm sometimes where you've lost your independence. And I'm one for encouraging self-advocacy, anything that can get you to get that take charge, feeling back again, what am I going to do about this? So even if you think your vet won't make house calls, there's nothing wrong with calling up and saying, "Hey, I don't have a driver today. In the future, here's my situation, I don't drive. Could the vet make a house call?" I know in my small town that would be acceptable. We have several vets and I know them well enough that they would do that. I encourage people to do that, take charge and that self-advocacy attitude to recapture that. Especially we pet mothers can be very protective of our pets, so we can adapt really well, right?

**Sheri Robinson:** Yeah. And like you were saying, it does depend on where you are because where I live in Kentucky, the vet that came out to do my horses would also do my dogs and cats.

**Debbie Worman:** Yeah, yeah. People who are thinking about getting a pet, where would you go to get a pet? To the shelter? And if you went to the shelter and someone at the shelter says, "Oh, this person, they have vision loss. I don't know if we should give them a pet." If you were faced with that, or you were faced with a family member that said, "Dad, we're going to have to get rid of Butch here because you're not going to be able to take care of him.” What advice would you have for people who are maybe giving you a hard time about keeping your pet or wanting a pet, or how would you address those issues?

**Sheri Robinson:** Well, nobody gave me a hard time because there were no ifs, ands or buts about it, I was keeping my animals. Even when I moved over here, my sister tried to get me to sell my horses, and I was like, no. And when I lost my sight, my first question was, okay, what are we going to set up so I can get to the barn to feed my horses? It wasn't, should I sell my horses now? No. It was, okay, we need to think up a way so that I can still do this. And we did. Like with most everything, you have a place for everything and everything in its place. All my dog stuff is in one spot. All my cat stuff is in one spot. All my horse stuff is in one spot. I mean, with me, I have the kind of attitude that if somebody tells me I can't do something, that's exactly what I'm going to do, just to prove them wrong.

**Ricky Enger:** So, it sounds like self-advocacy really serves you well in these situations. If somebody says, "You probably shouldn't," or, "I don't know if this is going to work or not," you are the one who gets to decide.

**Debbie Worman:** Yeah. When you were talking, Sheri, it reminded me of the Hadley workshop, Coming to Grips with Vision Loss. My favorite saying in that workshop is take the T off can't. And that's exactly what you do. You problem solve, how can I do this? How can I make this work for me? The fact that you try and strive to be organized and you stick to that, and you trust your gut, that all helps you be a good pet owner looking out for your pets because you're thinking of all of those things.

I'm wondering for people who may be thinking about getting a pet, we all like those cute little puppies and those cute little kittens. Do you think it's better for people to get an older pet? Or if they want a kitten or a puppy? What would you recommend there?

**Sheri Robinson:** Well, as you know, Ms. Debbie, the pet picks you. But I mean either/or to be honest with you. With puppies, I can tell you the first thing I would do if you want to get a puppy, keep a supply of chews for them and crate train them. Get a kennel that he's going to fit in even when he gets bigger and start right away with kennel training so that when you're out of the house or you are asleep, if you don't want him running around getting into things while you're not there to supervise, you can have him in his kennel and you can start right away with that training and that will benefit you.

My one dog actually eats in her kennel, and she won't eat outside of it. I feed her inside her kennel, and I mean, I'm not shutting the door, but she's happy with that. But if I ever need her to go in her kennel, all I have to do is tell her to and she'll go in her kennel and then I don't have to worry about her.

With kittens, also provide them with scratching posts, maybe a cat tree. If you have room in your house or apartment, get a little cat tree so they can climb on it and scratch on it and play, and have toys for them to play with. And then as with everything else, have a place for those toys to go when she's not playing with them, maybe a little laundry basket or a little box and just put the toys in there and then they're out of the way.

**Debbie Worman:** Absolutely. Yes, Buick has his own little toy box and he'll go and pick something out occasionally. There were some toys that I was going to throw away the other day, but cats, change it up, change the toys up because he loves that one. One mouse I was going to throw away, and he just played with it for a half an hour.

**Sheri Robinson:** I found a little hand whip, I never used whips on my horses. So, I brought it in, and I brought some baling twine from the barn, and I tied the baling twine through the top of the whip, and that's my cat toy. And they love it.

**Debbie Worman:** Well, I'm sure you're hearing the joy of us talking about our pets. It's something we could probably talk about all day because they are our babies. Somebody said, "Is Buick moving in with you and your mom?" And I said, "He's my son. He has to go. So yeah." They become a part of our life and it's so important. But owning a pet is a lot of responsibility. Problem solving you'll have to do because of your vision loss, maybe asking for assistance sometimes, learning how to do things you never thought you would have to do, finding the dog doo in the yard, those kinds of things, all those kinds of fun things. So, we know that owning a pet has lots of joys, but it's also a big responsibility. There's a lot that goes into making a decision. Is there anything that you both can think of that we're not addressing? The bottom line, is it going to be worth the hassle?

**Ricky Enger:** I for sure think that having a pet is worth it. We've talked about in this episode, that feeling of overwhelm, and I'm struggling myself, how am I going to do this for somebody else? Sometimes it takes exactly that. Things that you might not feel capable of doing for yourself, or things that seem just a little too much to do for yourself. Somehow when it is someone else or an animal that you're caring for, you find a way, and that can be such a confidence builder to say, I did this. I solved this problem. I figured it out so that I could take care of my animal. So now these things that I'm struggling with myself, maybe I can problem solve with those things too.

**Sheri Robinson:** It kind of takes your mind off your issues because nobody wants to sit around and just woe is me all day long. Having to go out or even to get up in the morning and feed the dogs and feed the cats, and then go out and feed the horses during the day, it really breaks up the day and gives me something else to think about besides, oh, what am I going to do? It really does give you a sense of purpose and a sense of completion.

**Debbie Worman:** Yeah. I just love that you both mentioned that caring for a pet takes you out of your own issues. It gives you a sense of purpose. You're giving back. It is a wonderful thing to have that sense of purpose. So, wow, I don't know. I think anybody who's listening today who doesn't have a pet may just be rushing out to their pet shelter, don't you think?

**Ricky Enger:** Absolutely. Yes.

**Sheri Robinson:** They just might be. And there's more too than just dogs and cats and horses. You could always start with a turtle, maybe a fish. I just feel one species short.

**Debbie Worman:** Yeah. There's a quote that I love that someone shared with me, "Pets are not our whole life, but they make our life whole."

**Ricky Enger:** Oh, that's perfect.

**Sheri Robinson:** Yeah. If I can add one more thing.

**Debbie Worman:** Oh, sure.

**Sheri Robinson:** If people are unsure if they want to own a pet, you can always call the local shelter and foster.

**Ricky Enger:** Oh, that's a great idea.

**Debbie Worman:** And as we say in our pet care series too, you can do that. You can also volunteer to babysit someone's pet to get an idea if it may be something right for you. So that's another thing you can try.

**Ricky Enger:** This is so much fun. I have had a great time with you both talking about our pets and the challenges and the rewards of having a pet. I think this is such an important topic. Check out the show notes for links to workshops on caring for your pets that we have here at Hadley, as well as our medication series, and a couple of other things that are going to be worthwhile as you're thinking about taking that pet journey. And if I weren't working the rest of the day, I think I might be on the way to the shelter to get another pet.

**Debbie Worman:** Oh, I don't know if Diva would like that, Ricky,

**Ricky Enger:** Probably not.

**Debbie Worman:** Thank you so much, Sheri, for your willingness to do this, and Ricky, what a nice idea to have this as a topic. I'm glad that I could be a part of it.

**Sheri Robinson:** Oh, you're welcome. This was great.

**Ricky Enger:** Thanks everyone and thank you all for listening.

Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email Podcast@Hadley.edu that's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@Hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at 784-2870. Thanks for listening.