



Companion Animals and the Elderly

What is man without beasts? If the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beast also happens to man. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the Earth befalls the sons of Earth.—Chief Sealth, Duwamish Tribe, State Of Washington, Letter to the U.S. President, 1855.

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One important “significant other” that often goes unrecognized in professional circles is the companion animal with whom many elders share their daily lives. Yet, more than a century ago, Florence Nightingale wrote that pets were excellent companions for patients confined by long-term illness(1). Why, then, should pets not make fine companions for elders in any state of health?

Today, the human-animal bond has become an exciting subject for interdisciplinary study and has gained popular interest. These studies indicate that pet ownership or access to pets can yield measurable benefits for human health and happiness. The relative newness of this research is reflected by the fact that six books contain most of the significant articles or bibliographies on the relationship between people and animals(2a-f).

The effect of pets in helping to

counteract some common difficulties of age are too promising to be overlooked. Nurses can do much to recommend pet ownership or provide access to pets to patients and facilities that could benefit. In fact, nurses can make or break programs in long-term care settings that introduce animals as residents or visitors(3).

Katcher and Friedmann have pointed out that a pet animal might be expected to influence health beneficially because it becomes a companion to decrease loneliness, to care for, to keep one active, to touch and fondle, to watch and play with, to make one feel safe, and to stimulate exercise(4).

Combating Loneliness

The most common reason people give for owning a pet is companionship, a desire for physical proximity, friendly interaction, and a sense of esteem from another living thing(5). Loss of companionship is widely acknowledged as one of the social problems of the aged. Elders who are retired, widowed, separated from their families, or living in cities often have special need for a close companion. Pet dogs, cats,

and birds can serve this function(4).

Mugford and M’Comisky studied the effect of birds as companions for functionally impaired old-age pensioners living alone in an urban area of Great Britain(6). One group was given a parakeet; another received a begonia; and there was a small control group. Half the subjects in each group had a television set. After five months, those who received the birds showed significantly more positive changes in their attitudes toward themselves and others than did the plant owners or the control group. The presence or absence of a television proved to be irrelevant.

The researchers found that the pensioners formed a surprisingly intimate attachment to their pets, which had become a main topic of conversation (even displacing medical ailments) and served as a “social lubricant” with visitors. All the pet recipients named their birds and insisted on making their own arrangements for the birds’ care, something they were still doing when revisited 18 months later. Although the study involved only 30 subjects, it provides some of the

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first quantitative evidence that pet ownership can have a beneficial psychosocial effect on elders. Perhaps the most valuable attribute of a pet is its ability to give unquestioning, uncritical, and open affection and approval. It does not matter to the pet if his owner's body has deteriorated or abilities weakened or even if he repeats the same story time and time again. For some elders who live isolated lives, a friendly animal may be their only source of continual, unconditional love without rejection.

MacMillan described her pet dog this way:

He saw me through all my changing scenes. He put up with my every whim, he listened and seemed to understand all my failures and he revelled in my few modest successes. He seemed to know when I was unwell and tended to me by sprawling over my lap or by my side and gently licking my hand.(7)

Sometimes concern is expressed that people who form close bonds with a companion animal may tend to exclude human relationships. Evidence suggests, however, that in comparison to those without pets, pet owners tend to feel better about themselves and desire the company of others(8-9). For elders who've lost family members and friends, loving and caring for an animal can sometimes help in the transition to learning to love others again(4).

A pet often acts as a catalyst to social interaction. In a study of Swedish dog owners, two-thirds credited their pets with providing opportunities for them to talk with people. Well over half said their dogs had "got them friends"(10). Dog owners walking in London's Hyde Park had significantly more interactions with other people when with their dogs than without them. Conversations were longer when the person being spoken to was accompanied by a dog(11).

Studies by Samuel and Elizabeth Corson and colleagues provide anecdotal and clinical evidence that pets can be social ice-breakers in psychiatric and nursing home settings(12-13). The Corsons' in-

terest in the effect of pets on people began during research with a colony of dogs housed one floor below the day room of a psychiatric ward. A patient heard the dogs barking and wanted to visit them. This eventually led the Corsons to investigate "pet-facilitated psychotherapy" with 30 withdrawn patients who had not responded to traditional approaches. They succeeded with 28 patients.

At first patients related exclusively to the animals. However, the dogs gradually became a social link not only for the patients being treated but for other patients on the ward and for staff-patient interaction. The patients showed marked and lasting progress, including substantially more verbalization.

Later, when the Corsons' dog colony was disbanded, the animals were taken to a nursing home. There, similar evidence of increasing patient communication, livelier social interaction, and enhanced self-esteem was observed. The most dramatic change took place in a man who spoke his first words in 26 years, "You brought that dog." He began to speak of "my dog," had a better disposition, and started drawing pictures of dogs. Brickel has suggested that having pets in a nursing home might attract volunteers(14).

Caring and Responsibility

Having a pet can help satisfy the

need to be needed. While pets give affection and act as social aids, they are also a responsibility. Animals genuinely depend on human companions and force them to consider such practical matters as food, shelter, grooming, health care, and safety. Caring for a pet fosters a sense of responsibility and can strengthen self-respect. In the Corsons' psychiatric and nursing home studies patients who took on varying degrees of caretaking duties for the pet dogs also became more independent and began taking much better care of themselves(12-13).

Keeping Active

Pets help fill the empty or unstructured time many elders have available. In a National Institutes of Health study of healthy older men, only the absence of cigarette smoking and a varied, active, intricate daily life were shown to be strong predictors of survival(15). The factor of pet ownership was not considered in the study, but it seems reasonable that pets would add to the interest, variety, and complexity of the daily routine.

Evidence is mounting that stable, synchronized, internal biological rhythms are an important component of health and that these rhythms require a degree of regularity and structure in daily activities(16). Too many older, retired people, however, lack established





obligations to give structure to their day. The regular active attention a pet requires, however, makes it a "time clock" providing order and responsibility for people who might otherwise have no obligation or scheduled activity(4).

Touching and Fondling

"I like her because she cuddles. I like to cuddle," said a dignified 90-year-old woman who was confined to bed and wheelchair by arthritis. She was speaking of her cat(17).

A companion animal is called a pet. Taken as both noun and verb, the word implies that touch is central to the meaning of a dog, cat, or other animal in our lives. Human beings have an important need for tactile stimulation. Brickel surveyed the staff of a hospital ward that had two cat mascots(14). The most commonly observed patient-pet interaction was cats sitting on patients' laps and being hugged, stroked, and talked to. People often pat or caress their pets almost without thinking.

There is good evidence that petting a friendly animal promotes

mutual relaxation and decreases sympathetic nervous system activity. Lynch and colleagues showed that petting a horse or dog markedly lowered the animal's heart rate and blood pressure(18-19). Human beings had a similar response when they greeted their dogs with petting and words. In contrast, blood pressure rose when these people read aloud or talked to other humans. Katcher speculated that talking to an animal may be more relaxing than talking to another person, since animals do not evaluate what we say and may seem empathetic, whether or not they actually are(20).

Watching and Playing

Watching pets such as aquarium fish can also be relaxing (21). Pets provide entertainment and a diversion from daily problems or monotonous routines. McCullough studied 31 medically ill, depressed outpatients who had pets(22). Although most had adequate support systems of friends or family, they still believed their pets' presence was important in coping with ill-

ness and depression. Most said their pets helped them maintain a sense of humor, and many claimed the animal's playfulness boosted their morale. In another study, elderly veterans in a long-term care setting showed more interest and sociability when a puppy was present in comparison to either a wine bottle or a plant (23).

Pets create an excuse to play. Often the only opportunity adults have to join in uninhibited or silly games is with children or animals. Eighty percent of a sample of Swedish dog owners said their pets gave them an outlet for play (10).

Feeling Safe

A pet can bring a feeling of safety. A dog, for example, has a wider hearing range and keener acuity than humans and helps ensure that an elder is not surprised by visitors. Few household dogs have physical and behavioral qualities that would seriously deter an intruder, but owners typically indicate they feel more secure in the company of their dogs, whatever the breed(4, 10, 21).

A pet can also provide emotional security. In an institutional setting, pets can contribute to a humanizing atmosphere, sending a nonverbal message that "This place is OK"(12).

Stimulating Exercise

Pets can provide an incentive to engage in physical activities that promote health. A dog, for example, needs to be walked, thus giving its owner regular exercise. The owner has interesting company and feels safer on the street, finds it easier to chat with others along the way, and enjoys the dog's pleasure in being outdoors (4).

A trip to the store for pet supplies provides activity for someone who might otherwise have little reason to venture out. Even the relatively minor exercise involved in picking up or playing with a small pet can help restore or maintain muscle strength and joint mobility.

Promoting Health and Longevity

There is substantial evidence that social isolation and loneliness are injurious to health. Widowed, divorced, and single persons have more illness and tend to die earlier than those who are married. Similarly, the incidence of illness and death rises the first year or two after the death of a spouse(24). Katcher and Friedmann suggest that pets, by providing companionship, should help to decrease the pathological effects of social isolation (4). As yet, unfortunately, no large scale studies have compared the health and longevity of individuals who do and do not own pets.

A recent study of Friedmann, Katcher, and colleagues provides the first evidence that companion animals influence the course of physical illness(25). The study investigated the effect of social isolation and social support on the survival of 92 patients hospitalized in a coronary care unit for angina or a myocardial infarction. Although the main focus was on the impact of human bonds, the researchers included one item about pet ownership in a large group of questions on social assets.

The severity of the patients' physical illness during hospitalization predicted most strongly which of them were alive one year later. However, pet ownership proved to be the best social predictor of survival, stronger even than human relationships. Of the 39 patients who did not have pets, 11 died during the year. Only 3 of the 53 pet owners died. The result was not a statistical artifact caused by differences in health or social status of the pet owners, their age or sex, or the predominance of dogs, pets which might have promoted more physical activity. Most important, the beneficial effect of pets was not limited to those who had been socially isolated; it was independent of marital status and the extent of social support from human beings(20,25).

Selecting Companion Animals

A companion animal for an elder should be selected with the prospective owner's physical, social, and emotional needs in mind. While dogs provide more exercise and a margin of security, other functions served by pets can be met by a variety of animals (4).

The pet should be of interest and not financially burdensome. The kind of pet owned during childhood also affects the choice (26). Personnel in long-term care settings have suggested that the ideal pet for their elderly, often frail, residents should be nondemanding, gentle, calm, soft, cuddly, and nonthreatening (27).

Dogs and cats are the most popular companion animals in the U.S. Well over half of all U.S. households own one or the other(28).

Dogs appeal to many elders because of their clear and uncritical affection, tactile comfort, perpetual childlike dependence, and burglar-alarm function. A cat, on the other hand, is a more independent creature, and some elders prefer its esthetic qualities and less demanding attitude. Birds require minimal care and expense and are excellent pets at home or in institutions. Fish and small caged animals have also been suggested.

Pets can probably do much to help the aged who relocate into public housing or an institutional residence(29). It's unfortunate, and sometimes tragic, that many old people have to give up their pets in order to live in these settings.

Practical Considerations

It is important not to overlook the fact that having a pet is also a responsibility for an aged person. Food, clean housing, exercise, and health care for the pet all require work. While the financial burden may be minimal, pets nonetheless do cost something. For a pet to positively influence health and morale appears to require adequate financial means as well as emotional attachment to the animal(2e). The long-term care unit in Brickel's 1979 study reported that its two cat mascots required an average of 8.6 minutes of staff time per shift and cost approximately 2.4 cents per day (27). Some cities have programs that enable people over age 65 to obtain pets from animal shelters and receive continuing services



for them at reduced rates.

Some elderly people have allergies that preclude pet ownership. Those who have never had a pet may need assistance in learning how to handle one. At times of emotional loss caring for a pet may be an added burden(30). Some animals may need to be trained to avoid people who have difficulty walking and might trip over them. On occasion, close supervision may be needed to prevent abuse of the animal. Then too, some people simply do not like pets, for whatever reason.

Local and state health department regulations must be respected, and legal liabilities related to possible accidents and injuries need to be considered. The College of Veterinary Medicine at Washington State University has developed helpful guidelines for selecting and placing animals in nursing homes(31).*

When an elderly pet owner living in the community is hospitalized, he may be quite concerned about the care of his pet. Daily contact with the pet is often important, even if only through talking with the pet's caretaker. Hospital admission forms could well include questions such as "Do you have a pet?", and "Who is taking care of the pet?"(32).

The loss of a companion animal can be a tragedy for an elderly person, and the need to grieve should be recognized and supported. The elderly, especially those living alone, may see their own death in the death of their pet. Sensitivity and compassion should be extended to them, and the death of a pet should never be taken lightly.

Much of the recent research into the human-companion-animal bond has focused on people with mental or social disabilities. We need to know more about the function of animal mascots in institutional settings and whether pets can play a role in helping elderly

people to continue living in their own homes.

A companion animal is not a panacea for the difficulties of old age. A pet is only one of many life variables that affect an elderly person's health and happiness. But for some, perhaps many, old people, a friendly pet can enrich their daily lives.

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*Copies of "Guidelines: Animals in Nursing Homes" are available for \$3 from the California Veterinary Medical Association, 1024 Country Club Drive, Moraga, CA 94556.