Pets for Alzheimer’s Patients Provide Huge Benefits

by ANGELA FINLAY

Ease the Strain Using Pets for Alzheimer's Therapy

It’s no secret that pets can bring an enormous sense of comfort, relief and camaraderie to anyone, but an animal companion can be particularly rewarding for those struggling with Alzheimer’s disease.

Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) isn’t as new as you might imagine — it’s been around in some form for centuries — but it is growing in popularity for a variety of conditions. From relieving chronic pain to improving longevity, doctors and patients are getting to know first-hand how powerful animal companionship can be in a clinical setting.

For Alzheimer’s patients, animal interaction can drastically improve quality of life in a number of ways.

Physical, Psychological and Social Benefits

Pets generally make people happy, but they can also make lives better in a number of specific ways.

Some of the main burdens of Alzheimer’s and dementia — like agitation, confusion, appetite loss and isolation — can be tamed with the help of an animal friend. Both science and experience help to explain why so many patients enjoy so many benefits.

Animals Are Easy to Tolerate

When memory fades, a sea of strange faces can cause a person to become agitated and frustrated, especially when they’re being asked all sorts of questions about their memories and relationships.

Experts suspect that so many Alzheimer’s patients take to a new pet relatively easily because there’s no worry or pressure to interact in a certain way. Initially, interaction may be limited to the animal, but soon after, patients may start to open up to the people around them more easily, as well.

A Peaceful Companion Can Calm Your Nerves

A number of well-controlled studies have shown how simply being around friendly, loving animals can reduce blood pressure, slow down heart rate, and improve well-being.

One 2002 study found that after a resident dog was placed in an Alzheimer’s care facility for four weeks, behavioral problems measurably decreased during the daylight hours. Moreover, some studies have found that eating habits also improve in the presence of the resident animals.

Pets Make It Easier to Engage Socially

As Alzheimer's progresses, language and understanding suffers, and it gets harder and harder to connect in conversation. Eventually, many patients begin to withdraw from social situations entirely, and that only increases the burden of isolation and loneliness.

Fortunately, a pet is a fantastic icebreaker, and a very good way to bridge the gap between two people who might feel too shy or constricted by their condition to interact naturally.

Dogs Encourage Activity

Not every patient can work a lot of exercise into their day, but for those who have decent mobility and can handle short walks, a dog can be their ticket to better fitness, not to mention all the emotional benefits that come with regular exercise. Even minimal exertion — throwing a ball or brushing a furry friend — can maintain the muscles, and provide a gentle, even meditative, form of activity.

Ordinary Pets vs. Trained Therapy Animals

Interacting with any friendly animal can bring positive results, but studies suggest that specially trained animals can make the biggest difference for those in cognitive decline. Properly trained therapy animals have a few advantages over ordinary pets, especially in a long-term care facility:

The Right Temperament Makes All the Difference

Pets, like people, can have all sorts of personalities. Some are active and friendly, but very active animals can be too demanding. Some dogs and cats respond better to certain tones and movements, and are skittish at other times.

Therapy animals are selected for their good temperaments, and are trained to be tolerant, engaging, and calm around all sorts of strangers. In a way, they are a safer place to begin, especially if an Alzheimer's patient isn't used to pets.

Handlers Can Pick and Choose the Right Animal for the Job

In many cases, the trainers and handlers of therapy pets have several different animal helpers, each with their own strengths. Since so many Alzheimer's patients have a hard time in group settings, an animal that does best one-on-one can be a better choice for certain people.

On the other hand, a pet that can connect with a bigger group can help to bring people closer to each other, helping with socialization and cooperation.

Professional Control Guarantees a Healthier and Safe Environment

Animals are great, but they can also carry infections and disease. Moreover, they can behave unpredictably in new surroundings, and that may spell trouble.

On the other hand, trained therapy animals are regularly groomed, properly vaccinated and periodically tested for illness, comfortable around hospital equipment, and have enough restraint to pass by food smells without getting distracted.

Pets Who Can Perform Will Delight

Sometimes just sitting next to a docile pet is enough to reap the rewards, but pets that can perform tricks provide some very welcome entertainment for those who can't enjoy the activities they once did. Many therapy dogs are trained to perform a trick after receiving a treat, and that transaction between patient and pet can really strengthen the bonding experience.

Dogs are most often used as therapy pets, but cats, rabbits, and even chickens can be trained for the role. In some cases, an aquarium is enough to provide pleasant distraction and a good deal of emotional relief.

If you’re not sure where to begin, contact a local Alzheimer’s organization to get some tips on where to find therapy animal, or how to choose an appropriate, low-maintenance pet for your loved one.