



June
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Newsletter

Helping Seniors Stay in Their Own Homes

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What's the Best Pet for a Senior Loved One with Dementia?

Companionship in the form of a four-legged friend can be a real lifeline for people who are aging, especially when dementia is present. Throughout history, animals' primary function has been utilitarian. They helped plow fields or transport passengers. Today domesticated animals have a strong connection for humans. Pets bring friendship to seniors and their family caregivers at a time when a little extra love is sorely needed. With so many older adults affected by Alzheimer's disease and related dementia — 5.7 million people, in fact, according to the latest data from the Alzheimer's Association — the numbers of family caregivers and those with dementia who could benefit from pets is growing and will continue to rise. Family caregivers can improve not only the quality of life for their senior with dementia but also their own caregiving experience when a home becomes pet-friendly!

Benefits of Pets

Both the person with dementia and their family caregivers know all too well the effect the disease progression has on their mood. Having a loving pet may put a positive spin on a person's mood. Research has shown that pets in the home can reduce our stress levels physically through oxytocin and endorphin changes. Reducing stress can parlay into lower blood pressure and heart rate too. Naturally, this is true as long as the pet behaves well and their care isn't in itself a stressor. Some older adults suffer from depression and now more family caregivers do as well. Not surprisingly, pets have been shown to help reduce the presence of depression. Receiving unconditional love and acceptance as well as a daily social interaction can help the symptoms of depression.

Pet Companionship Beneficial

Dementia can be socially isolating when withdrawing from social situations and favorite community activities becomes more frequent. Pets can reduce loneliness, one will give and get unconditional love and companionship. Purposefulness comes when a pet requires someone to care for them each day. It could be a reason for your senior to get up in the morning and face each new day. A dog or cat needs to be fed and watered, walked outside, and provided a playmate with whom they can interact. Giving someone a reason for being can not be overrated when it may seem to them as though there is no other reason to go on. Pets don't judge. They don't care when a question is asked ten times an hour. They don't become frustrated when a person with dementia doesn't act as they once did. On the other hand, pets do encourage our senior loved ones to be active physically and to engage mentally. Their presence can lead to reminiscing about pets from the past or pals from childhood. Pets love hugs and laps and getting kisses from affectionate seniors. Pets have been known to turn seniors' frowns upside down! One study found that having a pet present can lead to increased meal consumption in a person with dementia with a waning appetite. Improved mood can lead to a better appetite.

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Which Type of Pets Are Best?

What type of pet is best for a senior with dementia? Having just any pet may not be the answer family caregivers seek. A pet that is more trouble than benefit, is aggressive, or requires a lot of care such as grooming or medical attention will not be a welcome addition. It will be important to consider any pet's behavior and personality before you add him to the household. Will the pet jump up or bark incessantly at every squeak or outside noise? Will a small dog be underfoot causing a tripping hazard? Will the attention-seeking pet exacerbate anxiety in a person with dementia or is the pet capable of lowering anxiety in the house? The pet can be a dog, cat, fish, or bird. Any type of pet might be enjoyed, not just the four-legged kind. Actually, consider how much care your senior with dementia can handle and how much you will have to do when selecting a pet. Conversations with a Pet Expert : Senior Care Corner Radio Show includes many tips from an expert to help you determine what type of pet will suit your family.

Specially Trained Dogs

Dogs in particular can be trained as companion pets and certified as service dogs for people with dementia. Many trained pets are used to provide comfort to people with dementia basically primarily as companions. Service dogs can be specifically trained to retrieve items, remind seniors to take their medications, warn them as alarms are sounding in the home, remind them to eat, wake them at certain times of day, or guide them home when walking. Carrying a service dog ID and registration card will be helpful. Many family caregivers ask how to get one of these dogs for their senior loved one. The answers vary by situation, as it depends on where you live and how much time you have to invest in the process. There is no one national organization that certifies service pets for people with dementia in the US. It seems it is most likely an individual site or training center will best be able to provide training and a credential for your pet.

Learning More

There are some groups that you can check into to learn more about pets as companions or trained service pets. Here are a few to start:

- Pets for the Elderly (charity that financially helps seniors get pets for companionship, doesn't train dogs)
- Assistance Dogs International (don't train dogs but collaboration of members who do, locator service)
- Power Paws (breeds and trains dogs, located in Arizona) are a few to check out.

You can train your own pet by bringing them to a trainer or site near you for training and certification. Search for a professional group that trains dogs in your area to help train your pet or one where you can select a pet that is already trained. You will likely have to be involved in some training yourself to acclimate the pet to your family's living environment. There are therapy dogs that are trained to visit facilities in order to provide pet companionship and love. They are trained in obedience, not to startle others or get startled by groups, and to not jump on elders. These pets usually visit at regular intervals and can brighten a senior's day but don't live with them or live in the facility. There is also a program in the UK that trains special dogs called dementia dogs. The dogs are trained to interact with people with dementia. They can distract them when getting agitated, remind them to take their pills and generally help keep the person with dementia calm and occupied.

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