



Generations: Benefits of pet therapy for the elderly

Hunterdon County Democrat By Hunterdon County Democrat

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By Janet Kuebler

The sight of a friendly dog visitor can make people smile. Most people love to pet a dog or visit with a cute little puppy. Not only are they a joy to see...their visits actually have some great benefits on the elderly.

Research has shown how beneficial pet therapy can be to the elderly, especially those who are living in nursing homes or assisted living facilities or have come to a facility for short-term rehab. Sometimes that means leaving their dog at home with family or even in a kennel to be boarded during their rehab stay. They may or may not get to see their pet during their stay.

Pet owners often become sad and may even demonstrate some degree of depression over missing their pet. If dogs come to visit, it can help raise their spirits and give them a chance to tell stories about their dogs. This can increase socialization. It can help them forget (if even for a moment) any pain that they are experiencing, any sadness that they have, how much they miss their home. It can help improve overall mood which can lead to increased motivation and participation in therapy resulting in increased ability to achieve rehab goals and prepare to return home. And returning home is the goal of rehab.

Regular visits with pets, usually dogs, can have positive physical, emotional, and mental benefits. Physical benefits include lowering blood pressure, lowering heart rate and reducing overall stress. Emotional benefits are reducing anxiety and depression plus decreasing loneliness through increasing social interaction with the pets and their human companions.

Consistent interaction with a pet has been shown to cause an increased release of serotonin and dopamine in the brain which has a calming and soothing effect on the body. This can be helpful for patients with Alzheimer's dementia, as regular pet visits may help to decrease unwanted behaviors and calm their agitation. Also there are mental benefits that are a result of increased mental stimulation, whether it's talking to the pet directly, asking questions to the dog's owner or talking with other residents about the dog. All of these things help to keep the brain active.

Pet therapy dogs will always visit with their certified trainer/owners and can be available for clients wherever they may live. For more information regarding this article, contact Janet Kuebler, Owner, Certified Senior Advisor & Certified Dementia Practitioner, Right at Home of Somerset, Hunterdon and Mercer Counties, 908-281-7961. Right at Home offices directly employ all caregiving staff. Each caregiver is thoroughly screened, trained, bonded and insured prior to entering a client's home.

Janet and her dog Aimie, a senior mixed breed rescue who recently became certified a Therapy Dog, are also available for service.

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