

For Seniors: Pets Are Just Plain Healthy

By Ed Kane, PhD

Just like sunshine and vitamins, pets are just plain healthy for seniors. They are that spark plug to getting out among friends, keeping fit, and just making a senior's day better. For a few Seattle area seniors, not only do their pets provide companionship and a prescription for better health, but they also serve other area seniors in the Delta Society's Pet Partners Program®.

Love and Exercise

Florence Kellog's social and loving dog Nicky, an 8 year-old Siberian Husky-Norwegian Elkhound mix, approaches people easily. "It's just a natural situation to take her (on Pet Partner visits). I get the pleasure of it too, because when I get the response from people it's really heartwarming," states Kellog. Among health benefits for Kellog, are walks twice a day to a park close by. Both she and Nicky enjoy the regular exercise and companionship. "One of the benefits that we get from them is that we have a responsibility to these animals," she says. "When you get older, you try to stay very active, but older people have a tendency to just sit. Because you have the responsibility for the animal, you don't have that tendency."

A Very Special Cat



Moochie, an 8 year-old cat, favorably mooched his way into Donna Williamson's house and heart. The health benefits Moochie provides her are many. "I really feel that it's kind of a spiritual thing, that closeness, that bonding that you get," Williamson says. She, a nurse since 1964, recently went to part-time, which gave her an opportunity to participate in Delta's Pet Partners Program. "I previously had dogs, which I took to nursing homes, but I never knew a cat could do this," Williamson stated with surprise. "I took him for all the stuff he had to go through, which was quite a bit for a CAT!! He did wonderfully. The person that gave him his passing marks, she was amazed that she was handing a cat that high of a mark! What's impressive about Moochie is that he seems to know when people are sick. He tends to be very close to them. At a health facility, he knows he's going to a special job. At home he's as wild as a March hare."

"With him, I am a much more patient person," Williamson notes. "Things don't bother me. He just soothes. You can just feel yourself kind of relaxing. He surely helps my heart rate and blood pressure. My mother was ill one time. I had to fly back to the Midwest. When I was there I was very busy, just running on adrenaline. When I came home I just wanted to go to bed. A few minutes later, Moochie came in and, instead of playing, he just slept for 9 hours with me. It isn't what he would normally do."

He is especially beneficial to the patients she sees. One family had called specifically for a cat for a terminal patient. When Williamson got there, the daughter came out of the room crying. She thanked her for coming, but said that her father was now in a coma, and not responding. Compelled to help, Williamson took Moochie into the room anyway. She put Moochie on the bed and rubbed him real hard by the man's face. He was just lying there with his arms under the sheets. As he felt Moochie, the man awoke from the coma, took his arms out from under the sheets and began petting him. The man's wife and daughter were elated at the result. "The nurse sat there with her mouth wide open. Every time I see that nurse, she relates what a miracle that was."

A Big Guy with a Big Heart

Bruce Sillers' standard poodle, Buddy, is a "big guy" at 65 pounds. He seems to have an affinity for older people. When Buddy visits Sillers' mother, a small and relatively frail woman, he's very gentle with her. She fusses over him, and talks to him. Buddy coaxes her for attention, enticing pets by very gently putting his big paw on her knee. "With children he's rambunctious and playful, but when he's with older people, like my mother, he slows down, moves very slowly and gently. He doesn't bark or whine or make noise or anything like that." "Buddy's been ill recently," stated Sillers. "She cares and asks about him as much as she does about her grandchildren. I think anything that pulls her outside of herself is very positive, gives her something else to focus on. The other interesting thing is that she talks about Buddy to her senior friends at the senior center as she would about a grandchild." "Buddy provides additional exercise for me," Sillers mentions. "He makes me a playful person on a regular basis. Buddy encourages me to get down on the floor, playing and rolling, something an older person is not supposed to do."

A Collie Who Knows What to Do

Melinda Codling's Border Collie Cheyenne and her horse have been extremely beneficial as healing therapy. Her significant other was tragically killed in a mountain climbing accident. "Cheyenne would give me the reason to go out and play, throw a ball, run around and to go out on long walks," remarks Codling.

As a Pet Partner, it's the same type of thing. "For the seniors, she knows what's appropriate behavior as far as being low-key, sitting, etc. I'm letting her use her own judgment as far as how outgoing or reserved she is with people. It didn't take but 2 or 3 visits until she had it figured out. There were certain patients that she could run up to and put her paws in their laps, and they would throw the ball for her, and her energy level would be very raised. There were others that she would tend to be very quiet around. She tends to just want to lie on the floor (next to them). If they would want to pet her she would put her paw on their laps."

Codling recently visited a sweet older woman, confined to her bed. She put Cheyenne in a chair next to the bed, so the woman could pet her. Cheyenne very quietly and slowly worked her way on the woman's bed, until she was stretched out full length next to her. She just lay next to this woman for several minutes. The woman indicated that she was not going to be around too much

longer. "Cheyenne kind of picked up on that and was there to offer her comfort," noted Codling. "She seems to be connecting to people on a much deeper level than what I can comprehend and I just trust her and let her do her work."

Pets like Nicky, Moochie, Buddy and Cheyenne demonstrate their varied health benefits to seniors. Among these benefits are:

- Seniors with dogs go to the doctor less. Dogs are preventative and therapeutic against everyday stress.
- For people aged 65-78, dogs are a major factor of conversations with passersby. Companion animals readily elicit friendly responses.
- Pet owners have lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels.
- Pet owners have fewer minor health problems, lower medical costs, better psychological well being, and higher one-year survival rates following coronary heart disease.
- Pets promote social interaction, decrease the feeling of loneliness and isolation, and increase morale and optimism.
- Pets encourage playfulness, exercise, and promote laughter.
- Pets satisfy the need for touch and to be touched, and give nonjudgmental warmth and affection.

For more information about these and other benefits, please refer to the [Health Benefits of Animals: Seniors abstracts and articles](#).

Though pets are wonderful companions for seniors, they should not be seen as a panacea to relieve the loneliness created by the lack of human companionship. Human support should still remain a priority for the elderly.

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