

Caregiver's Corner Column (March 2013)

Use of Animals in Caregiving

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Right at Home In Home Care & Assistance

The idea of Pet Therapy began in the 1860's when Florence Nightingale recognized that animals provided a level of social and emotional support in the institutional care of the mentally ill. Pet Therapy was used by the American Red Cross in military convalescent care after World War II. Today the practice of Pet therapy is divided into 2 types: Animal Assisted Activities (AAA) and Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT). Animal Assisted Activities (AAA) are basically the casual interactions that involve pets visiting people. Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) are specific activities designed for a particular person or a medical condition and are part of the treatment process.

Everyone who has a relationship with a pet experiences the unconditional love and acceptance that companionship with a pet provides on a daily basis. Research shows that as little as a few minutes a day petting an animal can reduce stress, decrease heart rate, temperature and blood pressure.

The benefits of Animal Assisted Activities are currently being used by many assisted living and skilled care facilities, senior centers, hospice organizations, hospitals and rehabilitation facilities in Grand Rapids. West Michigan Therapy Dogs provides 300 handler-dog therapy teams that partner with over 100 organizations in the Grand Rapids area to provide therapeutic contacts with seniors, the disabled and the young. Although West Michigan Therapy Dogs uses therapy dogs, other animals such as miniature horses, cats and rabbits can be successfully incorporated into pet therapy. Therapy rabbits, cats and small dogs can be placed in a lap to be held and petted. This is an added benefit for someone without sight or ability to communicate verbally.

When the animals arrive for a therapy visit a buzz of excitement starts to spread throughout the facility with patients, residents and staff all waiting their turns to visit with the animals. There are always smiles and laughter, shared memories of childhood and present day pets and often a few tears are shed. Even after the visit is over and the visitors are gone the talk continues about the animals that came. Which animals were their favorites, animal personalities and their behaviors are discussed and everyone's mood is lighter.

Today more than 29% of Americans are family caregivers spending an average of 20 hours or more each week caring for a loved one. Family pets can be utilized to help relieve caregiver stress as well. Often family caregivers feel like they are alone and isolated. Having a happy wagging tail to greet you when you come home or even walk back into the room can lift your spirits and counteract social isolation. Family caregivers often have a difficult time making time

for themselves. Walking a dog gives you a reason to get outside, get some exercise and release physical and emotional tension even for just 10 minutes. Let the family cat or dog serve as a buffer in stressful caregiver situations. Point out their antics as a temporary diversion away from the tension you and your loved one might be feeling. Humor and laughter are always good at reducing stress. Slow the pace and take a few minutes to quietly pet or brush your animal. This simple activity releases serotonin into the blood stream and produces a feel-good feeling almost immediately.

For seniors who live at home, or in an independent living facility, simple acts of caring for an animal such as feeding, brushing and petting a dog can foster an increased sense of self worth. It's a reason to get up and out of bed in the morning and keep the daily routine of pet care going. Canadian researchers did a study of seniors up to the age of 80 years old. The study concluded that dog owners were found to walk about 300 minutes a week, almost twice as many as those without a dog. The companionship and physical activity of caring for a pet can improve one's health, keep one more engaged with the outside world and often reduce pain levels of ailments like arthritis. Animals offer a tremendous amount of unconditional love that helps reduce anxiety and depression. Take a moment to look at your pet with different eyes. Who knew they could increase your exercise, reduce blood pressure, anxiety and depression just by being so cute and lovable?

Caregiver's Corner is provided as a public service of the **Caregiver Resource Network**. The Caregiver Resource Network is a collaboration of West Michigan organizations dedicated to providing for the needs and welfare of family and professional caregivers within the community. Funded by the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan with Older American's Act Title III-E, Family Caregiver Support funds. For more information consult our website at www.CaregiverResource.net or call toll free at 1-888-456-5664.