

Pet Therapy for Elders

by **NANCY WEBRE** of Evergreen In-Home Care Services

In Western cultures, dog is known as man's best friend. And, research supports that taking your dog for a walk is not only good for your dog but good for human health as well. Having a dog around improves people's physical, emotional, cognitive and social wellness.



The benefits of pet therapy for seniors has been documented for decades. According to WebMD.com, it takes just 15 to 30 minutes with a pet to reduce anxiety and stress levels which impact the body's overall wear-and-tear. In that period of time, the body endures physical changes that impact mood. The levels of the stress hormone cortisol are reduced, and more of the "happy" chemical serotonin is produced. Increasing research supports that pets can help to reduce stress, alleviate boredom and provide companionship.

For example, studies show that when animals are with residents with Alzheimer's disease or arteriosclerosis, they smile and laugh more. They are also less hostile toward their caregivers and tend to be more socially communicative. It is no surprise that pets offer positive benefits such as: lower blood pressure, stress release, ease of depression, pain relief, combating loneliness, morale boost, en-

couraging activity and offering social stimulation.

Since 1990, the Delta Society, an organization devoted to promoting animal assisted therapy, has trained over 3,000 volunteer-human teams to participate in its Pet Partners program. Therapy roles can range from actively participating in physical rehabilitation to just spreading a little love among patients. Pet therapy uses the unconditional love of the animal for a human being. Pets are increasingly being used in facilities for the elderly, such as foster homes, assisted living, skilled nursing, hospice care and rehabilitation facilities to provide a source of positive interaction for recovering patients.

Before dogs are used for pet therapy, they should be trained with Pet Partners. Possible scenarios are enacted out with the trainer to expose the dog to different situations. Appropriate responses are taught to the dog which will prevent the animal from panicking when it faces a real situation. Unfavorable responses from animals can upset patients. Dogs used for pet therapy all need to comply with health checks to be certified disease free, as the elderly have weak immune systems and there is the possibility of disease transmission.

Dogs utilized in pet therapy must possess basic obedience skills which will help it to handle stressful situations. It must be able to walk calmly and behave coolly in the face of strangers or under stressful situations. Dog socialization involves meeting different people to accept different types of handling/petting. The dog also needs to be accustomed to people using walkers, wheelchairs or

those who are bedridden. Pet Partner therapy dogs must be registered and are volunteered by their owners. They are registered by Pet Partners, formerly the Delta Society, and have been trained and tested prior to patient visits. These dogs must wear vests and a name badge to prove their certification during visits.

After completing proper training and passing his evaluation, Oliver, Evergreen In-Home Care Service's therapy dog, began working privately with Evergreen clients. Oliver is also registered with Pet Partners with whom he is a volunteer. For further information regarding Evergreen's services, contact Evergreen In-Home Care Services at 541-389-0006.



Registered Pet Partner Companion & Evergreen employee, Ollie.



EVERGREEN
In-Home Care Services

Care for loved ones.
Comfort for all.

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