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Pet Separation

By Steve Duno

For generations, pets have been a part of the fabric of our lives, keeping us company and providing us with steadfast, loyal devotion. Most of us have felt their unconditional love, and the sheer joy that comes from having a best friend who accepts us for who we are, faults and all, in an uncomplicated, mutually satisfying intimacy. Pets just make people feel happy.

Enjoyed by over half the households in the country, pet ownership is especially common amongst seniors, who, often living on their own, find the company of a good cat, dog, bird, or other pet to be of great comfort. The bond they develop with their pets can be deep-seated; indeed, the elderly's closest confidants often walk on four legs rather than two.

The Trauma of Pet Separation

When the decision is made to move an elderly loved one to an assisted living facility, the fate of that strong pet/owner bond can become a major issue for the senior. *"What on earth will happen to my friend?"* is sometimes their biggest concern, often even above and beyond their own welfare. And some seniors, though relieved by the surrender of caring for a pet, can become remorseful over it; ironically this can mirror the mindset of their own families, who too may feel guilty over the senior's move to the assisted-living environment.

The deteriorating health of our elderly, besides being the major motivator for a move to an assisted- living facility, can also adversely affect their pets. No longer able to go for regular walks, seniors aren't able to properly exercise their dogs, or attend to basic pet needs such as feeding, cleaning up, and taking the pet in for a veterinary checkup. Those without the ability to drive or use transit can no longer get to the store for pet food and other supplies. And if the pet is a large, healthy dog, the senior might even get hurt trying to manage or control it. Though smaller pets such as cats or birds pose less of a problem, the ability to care for them properly is still diminished, often to the detriment of the pet. Clearly, when fading health becomes an issue, the pet/owner bond suffers.

The Benefits of Pet Ownership

Despite the elderly pet lover's diminishing capacity to care for his or her pet, studies show the health benefits of regular contact with an animal to be significant, especially for the aged. Contact with a dog, cat, or other pet has been clinically shown to lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels, and to reduce the incidence of depression as related to failing health and fading autonomy. Pets help reduce boredom and feelings of hopelessness, and instill in the owner a sense of purpose born from being accountable for the welfare of an animal. Fewer doctor visits are reported, and aerobic activity levels tend to rise. In addition, caring for the pet becomes an "events calendar" of sorts for the senior, who without the pet would have precious little to do during the day. The pet provides a sense of obligation and duty, acts as a social catalyst, and gives the elderly owner someone to talk to and confide in. For all pet owners, but especially those in failing health, a pet can literally add years of health and happiness.

Degrees of Pet Separation

The good news is that most seniors today need not be denied the company of a pet, even when relocated into an assisted-care facility. First, as per federal housing laws, publicly-run facilities cannot prohibit pet ownership by residents, *provided they are able to care for the pet.* This would allow the pet-owner relationship to continue as long as the pet is adequately trained and socialized, and does not pose a threat to other patients. Though private facilities need not abide by these same federal laws, many still do allow pet ownership on varying levels. Staff and family providing elder care support can assist the patient when needed, with feeding, walking, and other pet-related duties. Patients with a good degree of autonomy are often fully able to care for a pet, especially when the living arrangement closely mirrors a normal home environment.

"Many homes allow pets on the premises," says Michelle Cobey, spokesperson for the Delta Society, a Bellevue, Washington volunteer organization that helps incorporate pets into the lives of the ill, elderly, or disabled. "But sometimes it can be difficult to manage without help from the staff, or from volunteer case workers." Cobey's organization specializes in sending volunteers and their well-mannered pets into managed-care facilities, and in helping the elderly care for any resident pets on hand.

Resident pets don't always work out well though, especially when the senior in question has a dog evidencing territorial behavior. If the resident does not properly socialize the dog with other patients, the animal can become overly-protective and guarded. This is especially common with the dog of an elderly owner, as it can sense its master's failing health, and often compensates with increasing protectiveness.

"It usually works out better to have one resident-shared pet at the facility than to have many individually cared-for pets, especially dogs," says Ron Baker, administrator at the North Creek Health and Rehabilitation Center in Bothell, Washington. "That way you avoid territorial issues that can lead to injury or trauma." Baker adds that pet care volunteers are always welcome at his facility, to bring in pets or help with ones at the center.

Alternatives

If the senior cannot adequately care for a resident pet, family members can bring the animal into the facility for regular visits, rules permitting. Or, volunteer organizations such as the Delta Society, Pets On Wheels, Therapy Dogs International, or dozens of others can be called upon to send their legions of volunteers to facilities all across the nation, bringing with them friendly dogs or cats to delight both residents and staff. Trained to help seniors, children, hospital patients, and the cognitively impaired to enjoy interaction with gentle, loving pets, these volunteer visits are often the highlight of a pet-loving resident's entire week.

In some cases, when the family or senior is unwilling or unable to care for a pet, it may have to be surrendered to a shelter for placement with another family. This pet separation can be devastating or liberating to the pet lover, depending upon the outcome. With a well-funded "no-kill" shelter in charge of placement, though, most healthy adult dogs have a good chance at finding a new home, especially if the pet is well-behaved and sweet. National organizations like the SPCA and the Humane Society, as well as countless quality regional shelters can all help with the difficult task of finding the appropriate home for a good pet whose owner can no longer care for it.

"Often it's a last-minute decision made not by the elderly resident, but by the family," says Judith Piper, director of Old Dog Haven in Arlington, Washington, dedicated to finding homes for older dogs often surrendered up by the elderly. "Often I find the physical and mental condition of these dogs mirrors the condition of the elderly owner, who might be suffering from reduced cognitive capacity. A dog's poor hygiene and worsening physical and behavioral state is often a clue to the owner's inability to care for it. Families can get a good feel for their loved one's state of mind by noticing any health or behavior problems

in their pets." Piper adds that, if a family or resident plans to surrender a pet up for adoption, it is essential to provide the shelter with pertinent veterinary records, especially if the pet is old.

If the pet is being cared for in a managed care facility by a resident, certain practices can be taken to make caring for the pet easier. With a cat for instance, the litter box needn't be located on the floor, where it might be difficult for the senior to access. Better to locate it at waist height on a counter, where the resident can easily attend to it. For walking a dog, residents can use a halter-type collar instead of a traditional neck collar, to prevent pulling on leash. The halter collar fits on the pet's face like the bridle of a horse, and makes leash control nearly effortless. The same goes for a bird cage; place it at the appropriate height and location so the resident can access it easily. All food, litter, and pet supplies should be easily accessible and light enough not to cause strain. Buying smaller bags of food and litter can prevent muscle strains and back injuries. And for medical concerns, consider having a mobile veterinary service visit the facility, instead of requiring the senior or a family member to make a trip.

With proper family help, institutional elder care support, and volunteer assistance, our elderly loved ones need not deny themselves the elixir of the pet/owner bond. It can continue on, helping to motivate and inspire them for years to come, providing the love and good cheer they so deserve.

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