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Pets can do wonders for older adopters

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They're best buddies who watch out for each other. You might even say they've saved each other's lives.

Sarah Lilly, who just turned 90, and her 12-year-old Lhasa apso-poodle mix, Katy, have been inseparable for nearly two years.

They wake up by 7 each morning, eat breakfast, take a walk and spend much of the day lavishly doting on the other. When in their favorite recliner, for example, Lilly strokes Katy's soft, tan, loosely curled fur, and the cuddly 12-pound dog expresses her appreciation with wet kisses.

"She's such a blessing," said Lilly, adding that before Katy came into her life she had become a homebody after being scared by several falls.

Now, she takes Katy for at least two walks a day and to visit a neighbor caring for his ailing mother.

Wherever they go, Katy is mindful of giving Lilly plenty of room and stays on the other side of her cane.

"She's so smart; she follows me everywhere but manages to stay out of my way," Lilly said.

Experts say pets can play a significant role at every stage of human development, and perhaps no more so than for older adults.

“I’ve actually ‘prescribed’ pets for some patients because the benefits can be so remarkable,” said Dr. Marian Schuda, a geriatrician and medical director of OhioHealth’s John J. Gerlach Center for Senior Health.

Pets can help reduce stress, lower blood pressure and regulate heart rate during stressful situations, she said. They also can increase the social interaction and physical activity of seniors who live alone or in group facilities, which increasingly have become welcoming of pets as the research into their benefits grow.

Some senior centers allow residents to own pets; others bring them in for therapy. And a few have adopted “resident” dogs or cats so patients can enjoy the physical and psychological effects, which can be just as powerful.

“It’s my theory that pets and babies have a way of bringing seniors out of themselves and their problems,” said Dr. Donald Mack, a geriatrician at the Ohio State University’s Wexner Medical Center.

Studies have shown that animal companionship can reduce depression and loneliness, as well as generate feelings of greater self-esteem and overall emotional well-being.

“What better than to have the unconditional love of a dog,” said Deb Finelli, assistant director of the Franklin County Dog Shelter.

Pets also benefit from the arrangement, particularly when older people adopt older pets in need of a forever home. “It’s a new lease on life for them, too,” Finelli said.

About 40 percent of the shelter’s adoptions are for senior dogs, which can be taken home at a discount rate of \$73 compared to \$123 for younger animals. The cost includes a dog license, shots, spaying or neutering and a microchip.

Senior animals often are trained, calmer and require less physical activity than younger animals — making them ideal for many older adults, said Rachel Finney, executive director of the Capital Area Humane Society.

But not every animal is right for everyone, Finney said. And anyone consider adopting a pet should carefully consider what they want in a pet and what they would do if they could no longer care for that animal.

“We really believe pets are family, and you should have a plan for everybody in the household, which may mean including who gets them should something happen to you in your will,” she said.

People should consider their lifestyle, if they have a disability and how that might affect their ability to care for an animal, experts say.

They also should also consider the age, energy level, size and temperament of the pet they want to adopt and what it will take to care for that animal, including cost. Those with physical challenges, for example, might want to look at a cat instead of a dog. Cats tend to need less care.

At the same time, seniors aren’t limited to just cats and dogs, said Dr. Greg Wise, a family doctor in Groveport and chief medical director at Medigold, Mount Carmel Health System’s Medicare Advantage plan.

He has had patients with birds, goats and even domesticated rats. Ferrets, guinea pigs, mice, rabbits and reptiles also are popular. But there are often special considerations that come with these more unconventional pets, he said.

“I had a patient with a goat that was as much as a lap puppy as a dog, but zoning became an issue when he relocated,” Wise said.

Lilly hadn’t owned a dog since her three boys left the house more than six decades ago.

And she probably wouldn’t have even considered adopting another if her oldest son, Dr. Larry Lilly, a breast-cancer surgeon at OhioHealth, hadn’t learned about Katy from a coworker.

The woman had inherited the dog after her father had died, and while she loved Katy, she felt guilty leaving her alone while she worked long hours.

Now, Lilly can’t imagine life without Katy.

“I like to joke that the two of us are getting old and cranky together,” she said with a chuckle.

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