

Adopting a Rescue Dog During Our Golden Years

Dogs have traditionally been regarded as “man’s best friend.” However, dogs may also be a senior’s best friends keeping our minds alert and keeping us youthful and energetic and well exercised even as we grow older. There is undisputed scientific evidence that companion animals such as dogs and cats improve our health and increase our longevity. There are many reasons we are increasingly finding Assisted Animal Therapy Dogs and cats in hospitals, assisted living centers and retirement homes as well as such potentially stress-inducing environments as medical facilities and the offices of physicians, dentists and attorneys.

Pet ownership has been shown to have a statistically significant effect on the physical health of older people. Pet owners tend to be more physically active than non-pet owners. Seniors who have pets pay fewer visits to the doctor and experience shorter stays in the hospital than non-pet owners.

A study published in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society of May, 1999 demonstrated that independently living seniors that have pets tend to have better physical health as well as emotional and mental wellbeing than those who do not. They are more active, cope better with stress and have overall better health. A 1997 indicated that elderly pet owners had significantly lower blood pressure than their peers without pets. Lower heart rate, and even lower cholesterol levels are accompanied by a decrease in depression, anger and loneliness.

Many seniors, who live in assisted living centers or other facilities which don’t allow them to keep pets, feel bereft and deeply miss the presence of an animal companion. Those who receive visits from Animal Assisted Therapy pets are highly responsive to them and react favorably to the unconditional love and affection these animals provide. Therapy dogs lift one’s spirits and improve not only a patient’s mental and emotional outlook but also their physical health. In many cases, there is actually a lower mortality rate among seniors who live in assisted living centers or nursing homes along with animal companions.

There are many reasons for the benefits pets bring. Simply the act of petting an animal companion has a soothing, relaxing and calming effect upon us. In addition, interacting with a living, sentient being keeps us from being isolated and lonely. As many of us grow old, we lose loved ones and tend to withdraw or isolate from others. They can act as a support system for older people that don’t have any friends or family or close friends nearby. Pets offer their friendship, loyalty and companionship. They are unconditionally loving, forgiving and nonjudgmental – they don’t care about our social or professional status or our appearance. They live in the moment, and their spontaneity and playfulness can bring us joy, laughter and physical contact. Pets require caregiving and nurturing, and interaction. as well as – exercise, walking, petting grooming, feeding and so on. These activities help improve our cardiovascular health and help keep our joints flexible and limber.

Loving and caring for a pet can help fight depression and loneliness, as the bond we have with our pet helps us maintain a purpose in life and even gives us a reason for getting up in the morning. They can help combat depression and offer us a reason to stick to our regular schedules resulting in our own healthy eating, exercising and sleeping routines. For people aged 65-78, dogs are a major factor in increasing social action and interaction among their peers. People love to talk about their pets and are more willing to “meet” and talk with strangers than they ordinarily would be. Pets also satisfy the need for touch – both to touch and to be touched

Our pets can also act as a support system for those of us who don't have friends or family nearby. Pets can serve as a buffer against social isolation and depression. They help us maintain perspective and keep our minds off of our problems. Further, they help us to remain more emotionally stable during a crisis.

In our highly technologically oriented and increasingly impersonal world, we often feel lonely, isolated and detached. Our pets are a link with the world of nature from which we draw strength and refreshment. Our animals are genuinely who they appear to be – they are not duplicitous or deceitful. They, in turn, afford us the opportunity to let down our guard and to be who we truly are without concern of another's judgment or criticism.

Pets can help people of any age to live more fully and joyously. For those of us in our golden years, pets offer us far more than health benefits and companionship/ They are our best friends and beloved family members.

BIO: Diane Pomerance, Ph.D. is the author of seven books including the Animal Companions Series and her most recent book, OUR RESCUE DOG FAMILY ALBUM. She and her husband have saved and adopted over forty rescue dogs in recent decades. They currently live in Texas with their twenty-one “canine kids.”