Aging and the Human-Animal Bond: Multiple Benefits in Nurturing These Relationships

What is healthy aging? Is it having a plan, remaining realistic, or just being grateful for the benefits of good health? Aging is inevitable though some of us accept it more graciously than others. Planning for our later years requires some insight into our wishes, expectations, and is frequently more involved than how well we have saved for retirement.

We may forget or take for granted quality-of-life details. Many of us who are animal lovers cannot conceive of the notion that at some point we may not be able to physically, cognitively, or financially maintain the ability to be responsible for a pet. We will always expect to have a pet in our life regardless of our living environment and not worry about the ability to provide adequate care.

Historically animals have been an integral part of society—both past and present—whether they met agricultural needs, provided companionship, or assisted with functioning. For some, maintaining a connection with an animal is vital in ensuring a sense of self-worth or purpose. Acknowledging and respecting one’s history with animals may aid in validating a connection with an animal is vital in ensuring a sense of self.

As we age, our ability to live independently may change. When living in a communal environment individual relationships with a domesticated animal may be lost due to facility policy, the physical or cognitive limitations of the individual, or financial and environmental restrictions. Creating alternative ways for maintaining contact with animals may not only enhance one’s lifestyle but may also provide health benefits.

For all of us, relationships change as we age, including those with our animals. In addition to companionship and unconditional love, our pets may meet the changing needs in our lives in a wide variety of ways, including:

- providing assistance
- helping maintain a sense of purpose and responsibility
- increasing our mobility or exercise opportunities
- serving as a status symbol that sets us apart from others
- increasing socialization—as the pet may serve as a conduit to interactions with others
- helping normalize our environment
- having a calming effect and reducing anxiety

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- decreasing our focus on an illness or stressful situation
- serving as a buffer with family conflict and relationships

It’s an impressive list of supportive benefits. Sadly, however, it is not uncommon for seniors to be separated from their pets due to their inability to provide proper care, financial restrictions, or safety concerns. Some older adults may not seek help for their own care and remain isolated from others out of fear that they may be separated from their pet; their love and concern for their companion supersedes their own needs.

Many seniors are fortunate to have family, friends, neighbors, or the financial resources for paid assistance to possibly help out with the care of their pets but others may not. While society generally appears to value the relationship we have with our pets, it may also be perceived as dispensable as one ages and one’s needs and abilities change. In order to continue benefiting from the bond we have with animals incorporating them into our long-term care plan is vital.

**Including Pets in Long-Term Care Plans**

In my role as a geriatric care manager (GCM) I consider pets to be a part of the family system that need to be considered in the decision-making process of planning for current and future needs. Pets are important not only as companions but also for their therapeutic benefits to the older adult. For example, housing options may limit the older adult’s choices if a pet is involved. It is our role to advocate for that relationship but also help with solutions and resources for ongoing care.

It is also important to help seniors acknowledge the reality that at some point difficult choices may need to be made regarding the care and appropriateness of maintaining pet ownership. Many of these decisions will be dictated by the health status and financial resources of the senior. That said, it is important always to keep in mind that relationships and our interactions with others is an important aspect of our quality of life. Socialization and the stimulation it provides may come from our family, friends, neighbors—but, as importantly, it may also come from our animals. Whether we are animal lovers or not we all need to be sensitive to this relationship and its impact on the aging process and the source of significant happiness and purpose for many.

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Laurie Ray explains: “I established Compassionate Options for Progressive Eldercare (COPE) in 2004, as the only nonprofit geriatric care management organization in the region. It grew from the idea that everyone should have access to a GCM and the resources needed to live safely as they age, regardless of their environment and financial limitations. As a GCM, my role is to advocate, educate, and coordinate the resources necessary as we age. The ultimate goal is to promote independence, safety, and quality of life. For more information, visit us at www.copeeldercare.com, or call 919-481-0410.”