Five Benefits of Having a Pet When You Have MS

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Pet Therapy for MS

With contributions from Eric Patterson.

Pets are the best things ever! Dogs are my absolute favorite. I had a boxer, named Pebbles, that I purchased several years ago. We brought Pebbles home at the six weeks old, and she brought so much joy to our household. Having a puppy taught my children responsibility, and that other beings existed in the world besides them! Pets can also serve a great purpose if you have a chronic disease like multiple sclerosis (MS).

Pets as a Form of Therapy

Pet therapy, also referred to as animal-assisted therapy, has been employed for many years by healthcare professionals. Animals, typically dogs, are used to help people recover from serious illness, surgeries, and to help with anxiety and other mental health disorders.

The idea of using animals for therapy has been around since the mid-1800s when it was discovered that small animals assisted in caring for those who were chronically ill or did not respond to other treatments. Humans and animals respond well to touch, and this is the theory behind the success of pet therapy.

How Do I Get Started With Pet Therapy?

The first thing you want to do if you are considering pet therapy is to contact a certified pet therapy organization. They make sure that the animal that will visit you is vetted, vaccinated and healthy. If you reside in a facility, be sure that animals are allowed and the best time to schedule a visit.

Check with the American Kennel Club or your local veterinarian for certified organizations in your community. Once you have found a suitable organization, they will schedule a visit so you can meet the animal and find the perfect one to fit your needs.

Types of Therapy Animals

The most popular types of therapy animals are dogs. The actions of brushing and walking a dog have been shown to help in physical and occupational therapy. They are also used to bring a sense of calm to victims of crime who must testify in court. Some are also trained to perform certain medical tasks in the event of an emergency.

Other types of therapy animals that have become popular are:

- **Cats** - They are not trained as dogs are, but they are used to bring comfort. They are most popular in nursing homes, checking on patients and, of course, the snuggle factor.

- **Horses** - The skills required for caring for horses teaches patience and helps ease anxiety. Great if you struggle emotionally and/or mentally.
- **Guinea pigs and rabbits** - Also known as “Smallies” offer great physical and occupational therapy, and the snuggles are great as well.
- **Reptiles** - Caring for reptiles requires concentration and focus which can aid people who struggle emotionally and mentally. Focusing on other things often helps alleviate the anxiety and anger that accompanies that struggle.
- **Birds** - Because parrots can be taught words and phrases and are empathetic creatures, they are also a good choice for those that suffer mentally and emotionally from disorders like PTSD.

All of these animals would be great choices for anyone, but especially for those of us living with MS. There are great choices depending on your physical limitations and any emotional struggles you may have. It is also noted that pet therapy visits are free of charge.

Can My Dog be a Therapy Pet?

If your dog is naturally calm and easily trained, AKC offers a program that can qualify your dog to be a therapy pet called Canine Good Citizen. AKC recommends socializing your dog and teaching behaviors such as loose leash walking and not jumping on people.

If your dog already has this training, you are a step ahead!

Having your dog trained in this manner will be excellent for you and can open opportunities for you to volunteer your time and your newly trained dog to assist in your community.

The Benefits of Pet Therapy for MSers

- **Distraction –** This first benefit is perhaps the most important. With any chronic medical condition, people put too much emphasis on themselves and their own functioning. When you think about your symptoms too much, you begin to perceive them differently; usually worse. Having a pet will take your mind from yourself and move focus onto the challenges and benefits of the pet. This will be a welcomed change as your symptoms begin to fade into the background. Sometimes the less attention you pay to something, the less influence it has.
- **Sense of purpose –** Having MS brings many feelings of loss, hopelessness, and worthlessness to you. Having a pet brings a sense of purpose as something else needs you You may not be able to perform as well as you used to, but your pet couldn’t survive without you. It feels good to be needed.
- **Routine –** Your pet needs you to provide for it. Food, water, a clean environment, and exercise are just some of the everyday necessities for your pet. People tend to build routines and structure around these tasks. You probably know that additional structure is a fantastic MS buster because a routine requires less of your memory and attention to complete.
- **Health benefits –** Studies show that people with pets have fewer mental health and physical health issues. Pets are linked to lower cholesterol and blood pressure. One possible explanation is the exercise listed above. If you choose a dog, your dog is going to need walks. Walking daily improves so many aspects of your life. Having a friend along makes the journey even more pleasurable.
- **Companionship –** Chronic medical conditions have a way of making you feel alone and isolated. Online support groups are great but lack a tangible quality, and in-person groups may not be there when you need them. Your pet is tangible and available when you want. Seeing another face, feeling the heat from their body, smelling them and hearing their noises remind you that you are not alone.

Peace for All Involved

As you can see, scheduling a visit from a therapy pet or having your own dog trained has a positive effect on everyone involved. You receive the benefit of calmness and serenity, as does the animal providing the treatment. It has been proven that even family members and caregivers have benefited from a pet therapy visit.

If you have found that medications for certain symptoms like pain and anxiety have not worked well for you, give pet therapy a try. You'll have all the benefit without the side effects, except maybe a flood of love and happiness.

I met a dog recently and was literally flooded with love and tranquility. She was a great dane puppy named Hiccups. I wanted to take her home with me right then and there, but she belongs to someone else. As much as I would love to have another dog of my own, my symptoms and my life right now will not allow it. She has made me consider scheduling a pet therapy visit of my own!

Resources

Mayo Clinic (Pet therapy: Man's best friend as healer)

Study.com (What is Pet Therapy?)

WikiHow (How to Get a Therapy Dog)

Wide Open Pets (6 Types of Animals Used for Therapy)

National Service Animal Registry (All About Therapy Animals)

American Kennel Club (Training Your Dog to Be a Therapy Dog)