

Pawsitive Connection

FEATURE

LATEST NEWS

© June 15, 2021



By Julie Jacob

Julie Jacob is a communications professional and writer who focuses on healthcare and technology issues.

In a purr-fect pairing, pets bring love and companionship to older adults

When her Arlington Heights retirement community locked down due to the pandemic, 83-year-old Virginia Maas dearly missed visits with her family and chatting over meals with other residents. During those long months when she was isolated in her apartment, however, she cherished her bond with her dog, Beau, more than ever.

The small Havanese had become part of her life three years after her husband died in 2009. Now Beau snuggles with Maas on the sofa, trots down the hall to greet her, and barks to let her know when her meals are delivered.

"He really is company," Maas says.

Chicagoan Vera Starnes, 66, also found comfort from her pet during the pandemic. Starnes acquired her striped tabby cat, Honey, as a kitten last February. When the pandemic hit in the spring, training and playing with the energetic kitten kept her mind off the grim news and social isolation.

"She helped me a lot. She needed a lot of focus because she was just a kitten. It was just me and her," Starnes says. "Honey helped me through it by showing me her needs and giving me laughter with her mischievous behavior." There's a multigenerational appeal, too. Starnes' mother, in her 80s, also delights in playing with Honey.

Some 55% of adults age 50 to 80 have a pet, according to the University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging. Older pet owners, like Maas and Starnes, say their pets reduce their stress, increase their physical activity, help them connect with other people, and give them a sense of purpose.

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Vera Starnes and her cat, Honey. Photo by Jim Vondruska

A sense of purpose is exactly what Andie Kramer appreciates about having pets. Kramer and her husband, Al Harris, share their home in Chicago's River West neighborhood with a happy pack of three cats and three dogs, including their most recent addition, a rescue beagle named Eddie. Caring for her furry brood has kept Kramer, who is in her 60s, grounded during the pandemic.

"I wake up, make sure everyone is present, accounted for, and that they've got their food and meds," Kramer says.

A paws prescription

With so many benefits, pets could be the best medicine for some.

"There is a healing power to pets," says Steve Dale, a certified animal behavior therapist and host of [Steve Dale's Pet World](#) on WGN Radio.

"I hope it is commonplace someday for a doctor to prescribe a dog."

Dale adds that numerous older adults have called into his show to tell him that fostering, adopting, or purchasing a pet has made a major difference in their life.

And a pet doesn't have to be a dog or cat to provide benefits. If someone is unable to care for a larger animal, even a guinea pig scurrying in a cage or a betta fish gliding around a tank can be soothing, Dale notes.

Research supports the benefits of having a pet. For example, a study published in 2020 in *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* found that pet ownership correlated with better cognitive health for older adults, and senior dog owners had better physical health than older adults without dogs.



Andie Kramer and Al Harris with their pets. Photo by Jim Vondruska

enri Lorca, who asked for his last name to be changed, lives alone in an apartment in Chicago with his two cats, Princess and Tommy. At 72, he appreciates their company and warmth. "Tending to the cats and having a pet to touch is good," he says.

"There is a healing power to pets."

Tracy Kissamis, a social worker at [Lake Forest Place](#), a senior living community, often sees this healing power of pets.

Pets give residents a routine, sense of purpose, and exercise. More importantly, [the relationship] decreases loneliness and gives them companionship and stress relief," Kissamis says.

Seniors for seniors

Not only do pets benefit older adults, but older animals benefit too. A home with a senior adult can be a match made in heaven for older pets, who are often overlooked by potential adopters.

Senior pets are house-trained, calmer than youngsters, and thrive in a quieter environment, notes Gabriella Keresi-Uresti, executive director of the [Heartland Animal Shelter](#) in Northbrook.

"It is an amazing mutually beneficial relationship," Keresi-Uresti says.

To encourage older adults to adopt senior pets, Heartland's Seniors for Seniors program waives adoption fees for adults age 65 and older who choose a dog or cat who is at least 8 years old.

Even older adults who are unable to take care of a pet on their own can reap the benefits of interaction with animals. Pre-pandemic, therapy dogs visited weekly at Lake Forest Place's skilled nursing and memory care facilities, and residents also regularly visited Equestrian Connection in Lake Forest to pet therapy horses.

"I notice smiles, tears, but happy tears. People talk about the dogs they had," says Mary Eichenfeld, activities director for Balmoral Care Center at Lake Forest Place.

"They are especially comforting to me now."

Joy Schochet, 83, lives in Chicago's East Lakeview neighborhood with her husband, Jonathan, who has memory loss. She says their menagerie of six cats and two chinchillas has helped both of them. Two of the cats, Snippet and Bells, cuddle with Jonathan at night. The animals also have provided companionship for Schochet as her husband's ability to interact has faded.

"They are especially comforting to me now," she says. "The cats keep me grounded. They have certain needs. It's steadying in my life — it's predictable."

Planning ahead

As joyful as having a pet can be, older adults may need to come to terms with some challenging prospects: They may not be able to care for their pet in five or 10 years, or their pet may even outlive them.



Jerry and Fay Ligon with their dog, Bella. Courtesy of Presbyterian Homes. photo by Mike Kelly

Fay and Jerry Ligon were thinking of the future when they settled on a sweet Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Bella, after their lab, Mona, died 11 years ago. When they were younger, they loved to ski and be active, and they had owned a series of big dogs who matched their lifestyle. Yet, in their 70s they moved into a retirement community in Lake Forest and decided a smaller dog would be a better fit. While Bella can easily keep up with her greyhound pals in the dog park, she's a snuggler at heart and needs less exercise than a bigger pet.

Meanwhile, Kramer and her husband have made backup plans for their brood, arranging for a friend in the country to take in their animals if needed. And Schochet has given instructions to her children to contact cat rescue organizations to rehome her cats if necessary.

PAWS Chicago has a program for donors called Guardian Angels that will find a home for pets if the donor is unable to care for their pet, says Wayne Gailis, a 79-year-old longtime PAWS Chicago volunteer who lives in the Lincoln Park neighborhood with two dogs and two cats. "Anyone who lives alone should make plans," Gailis says.

Despite the muddy paws and cat hair on the furniture, older adults who share their lives with companion animals say they couldn't imagine their life without their furry friends. They know that love can come at any age. It isn't always sealed with a kiss but rather with a purr, a bark, or a wag of a tail.

Check Pet Policies at Senior Communities

Many independent living and assisted living communities are pet friendly. [Petfriendlyseniorliving.com](https://petfriendlyseniorliving.com) provides a list of independent living and assisted living communities that allow pets.

Keep in mind, however, that each senior living community may define "pet friendly" differently. It's important to do your

Pet Resources for Older Adults

- **AARP** members can get a 10% discount on Petplan pet insurance.
 - **The Anti-Cruelty Society** has a free behavioral hotline and low-income clinic. Its Friends Who Care program helps older adults who have a referral from a local social service agency with services such as free monthly deliveries of dog food, cat food, and cat litter.
 - **Heartland Animal Shelter's** Seniors for Seniors program waives adoption fees for people 65 and over who adopt an animal at least 8 years old.
 - **PAWS Chicago** offers a reduced adoption fee of \$50 for people 60 and older. The shelter has a mobile pet food pantry for adopters who are facing financial challenges. It also runs the Lurie Family Spay/Neuter Clinic, which provides free and low-cost services.
- **PupStars Pet Care** offers a 10% discount on its services for senior clients.

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