Pet Therapy in Nursing Homes

Pets make us happy. They provide unconditional love and comfort. For the elderly with dementia, depression declines after they interact with a therapy animal.

As well as being wonderful companions, pets also provide significant health benefits to their owners.

Research indicates that pet owners are healthier, less stressed, and happier. Sadly, it is not feasible for all residents in care facilities to own one. In this case, the best alternative is to organise a pet dog to visit residents regularly.

Pet Therapy: For Pet Lovers Only!

Be aware that visiting pets are not for everyone. Participant group should be composed of residents who love pets and/or have previously owned pets. There are many people who are allergic to pet fur, fear animals or have a particular dislike for certain animals and would be uncomfortable with such an activity.

A resident's family dog should be suitable, provided it has a good temperament.

Related: Pet Therapy with a Dog

Note: Residents going through late stage dementia may be better suited with simulated/robotic pets. Simulated pets can move their heads and make noises. Unfortunately, they are rather expensive to purchase however once you have one there is no ongoing expense.

Pet Therapy for the Elderly

For seniors, pets may actually help them live a happier, healthier life. Contact with pets on a regular basis has been shown to improve cognitive functioning, balance emotional concerns and increase feelings of enthusiasm and interest.

Pets also provide other intangibles.
"Dogs - and other pets - live very much in the here and now. They don’t worry about tomorrow. And tomorrow can be very scary for an older person. By having an animal with that sense of now, it tends to rub off on people," - Dr Jay P. Granat, a New Jersey psychotherapist.
Pet Therapy in Nursing Homes

The role of pets is particularly significant for those who live in a nursing home or in some form of assisted care. Numerous studies show pets provide one of the few interventions capable of permanently lifting the atmosphere of nursing homes.

Research undertaken in nursing homes shows pets may actually delay the aging process. This is achieved through increased physical exercise and socialisation and increased mental functioning attained through talking to pets and having the responsibility of caring for them.

Pets also boost the activity levels of the elderly, and dogs especially help people keep an active routine providing a reason to get up in the morning.

What is Pet Therapy?

Pet Therapy is a broad term that includes animal-assisted therapy. It is now a growing field in Nursing Homes, Hospitals and Special Schools to help people recover and/or cope with health issues.

The Benefits of Pet Therapy for Seniors

- Combat Loneliness
- Reduce feelings of hopelessness
- Instil a sense of purpose
• Boost activity levels
• Reduce stress and alleviate depression
• Provide a reason to stay independent as long as possible
• Positive interactions with pets translates into positive human interactions

Related: [10+ Benefits of Pet Therapy](#)

### 3 ways to introduce Pet Therapy into Nursing Homes

Even though most facilities do not allow residents to live with their own pets, most of them will embrace Pet Therapy by:

• Allowing relatives to bring pets for visits
• Having a live-in pet (or pets) to share among residents
• Hiring ‘Pet Therapists’ from professional companies

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**My experience with live-in pets at a nursing home**

The last facility I worked at had two small dogs and this worked wonderfully. The dogs were a source of immense pleasure to residents.

When the idea of housing our own pets first came up, we consulted with Management and Residents. Following this, our manager purchased two puppies - Miniature Schnauzers - and Activity staff took over from there.

• The Activity Coordinator called a meeting to establish ‘duties’ for every shift and designate staff to take care of the dogs (at least two staff members per shift). Nevertheless, it was a foregone conclusion (often emphasised at Staff Meetings) that the pets were the responsibility of all activity staff members.
• Our pets were ‘inside’ pets and although they were toilet trained, in winter, staff took them outdoors for toilet breaks to avoid accidents.
• We sought volunteers to take the dogs to visit the Veterinarian, Hair salon and Puppy school/training when needed. We had more volunteers than we needed among relatives of our residents!

• Our pets were taken to the local park for a walk with volunteers once a week (usually on the weekends). Otherwise, our backyard/garden was large and secure enough for them to run around in.

• A playpen was donated to keep the dogs enclosed when necessary.

• We had a Veterinarian Assistant teach us how to administer a tablet or capsule to a dog.

• One long-standing staff member volunteered to take care of pet-worming and flea treatments as required.

• Our dogs were trained to obey commands such as: ‘sit’, ‘heel’, ‘fetch’, ‘down’, ‘roll over’, and ‘shake’.

• We had both dogs neutered before entering the facility.

• Every new staff member would be given a copy of the ‘Pet Care Plan’ to get acquainted with.

Common (but minor!) problems with live-in pets

Of course, there were setbacks along the way, and we took them in our stride. Our Coordinator was a very wise and diplomatic person who dealt with every problem tactfully.

• Some Activity staff resented cleaning up the odd ‘mess’ and cleaning staff refused to do so in principle. We had a meeting on the subject and came to a consensus: Activity staff would pick up stools and wipe away urine and then notify Cleaning Staff so they could disinfect the area.

• Some staff members would lean too much on others to do their pet care duties which caused discontent.

• Some residents monopolised the dogs and altercations ensued.

• Some visitors disapproved of dogs and voiced their annoyance.

• We had problems with the dogs barking at newcomers and had to buy ultrasonic bark control devices for them because keeping them out of the Reception area proved too difficult.

• We had problems with residents feeding them inappropriate food. Everyone thought the dogs ‘were starving’ at all times!
Pet Therapy Activities to get started with

We ran four activities with our pets, and we integrated them into our Activity Program. They were:

- **Throw & Fetch** - with a Frisbee or rubber ball; it took place in our backyard twice a week and if volunteers were available we would go to the local park.
- **Tug of War** - a soft toy or a towel is given to the dog to hold at one end while a resident holds on the other side.
- **Bathing** - This activity was very popular; we bathed the dogs fortnightly in a baby bath tub and seated residents close by. Residents enjoyed ‘helping’ out.
- **Grooming** - Our Pets loved to be groomed and anytime they saw a resident with the brush they would rush to them.

Related: [Pet Therapy: Washing a dog](#)

Creating a roster to effectively care for pets

Apart from feeding, there was not much to be done during the day except keeping a general look out for the pets. This included watching out for any signs of illness, observing whether they had fleas and getting them out of trouble. The two shifts at my facility shared the following duties from Sunday to Sunday.

**Roster for 9am to 3pm shift - Denise and Rommie**

9:30 am - Pets fed dry food and water bowl refreshed.

Soiled areas to be wiped clean by Activity staff.

Pets are to be kept out of meals area.

In an emergency staff will call:
Roster for shift 3pm to 9pm shift - Jack and Bella

6:00 pm – Pets fed wet food and water bowl refreshed.

8:30 pm – Staff make sure the dogs are in their beds before leaving.

Pets are to be kept out of meals area.

Soiled areas to be wiped clean by Activity staff.

In an emergency staff will call:

- Veterinarian for advice or
- Volunteers for assistance
- Phone numbers listed in ‘Pet Care Plan’

Final Thoughts...

This was my experience with small dogs in a nursing home setting; I hope it will give you some ideas.

At the same facility, we had a chicken coop with 7 chickens. We took residents in wheelchairs to get the eggs every morning; much to their delight.

Related: Living Eggs Chick Hatching Program
I also worked in a Hostel where a couple of residents had **budgerigars in cages** in their rooms. The residents would bring the birds once a week to the recreation area for others to enjoy. Conversations were generally very animated, with suggestions, much laughter, reminiscing, and lots anecdotes and stories about pets.

**Cats** are also wonderful pets despite being very independent animals. If you are considering cats it is a good idea to get them just after weaning so they can learn to interact with people and become a ‘lap’ cats instead of indifferent cats.

Whatever your plans, you have to start with the blessing of Management and follow the rules and regulations at your facility.

**I wish you the best of luck!**

Below is an example of a ‘Pet Care Plan’ for small dogs.

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**We'd love to hear your feedback.**  
What has been your experience with pets in nursing homes?
Pet Care Plan (Sample)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name: Brandy</th>
<th>Breed: Miniature Schnauzer</th>
<th>Date of Birth: March 2013</th>
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<tr>
<td>Vaccine Record Book: Complete</td>
<td>Council Registration: Up to date</td>
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<tr>
<td>Veterinarian visit: Once a year – September/2015 (or when needed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medication: Nil</td>
<td>Worming &amp; Flea Treatment: Designated person</td>
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</tbody>
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Interventions:

1. **Brandy** will be bathed fortnightly (dog shampoo only) by staff or volunteers. If a resident wishes to help he/she should be allowed to do so. eg: pouring shampoo, towel drying.
2. **Staff** will ensure that **Brandy** will have meals and fresh water at the same time daily as per “Roster Duties”.
3. When parties and celebrations are taking place, staff will keep **Brandy** in his playpen so that he doesn’t accompany guests to the carpark.
4. **Accidentally soiled areas** will be cleaned by activity staff who in turn will ask cleaning staff to disinfect the area.
5. **Staff** will ensure that **Brandy** is never allowed in the dining room at meal times.
6. **Brandy** will be kept away from the reception area at all times to avoid him barking at newcomers.

Signed: ____________________________  Date: _____________
**Pet Care Plan**

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Signed: ____________________________  Date: _____________