

Health benefits of animal therapy for older adults

By Jodi Schneider McNamee
Correspondent

Animals not only offer companionship and unconditional love, they can also have the ability to improve health and general well-being, especially in the older adult population.

The most serious problem for older adults is not so much disease — it's loneliness. Therapy animals and their handlers can make a resident in a care home come alive, bringing joy and laughter with every visit.

Dr. Michael McCulloch, a Portland psychiatrist, and Dr. Samuel Corson, of Ohio State University, are experts on why pets excel as therapeutic agents. According to McCulloch, "Touch is one of our primary needs when we're born and one of our last needs to go."

In long-term facilities, residents are often lacking the feeling that they are needed. Pets allow them, even if for a short time, to be nurturers once again.

Elderly people, especially those living in residential care facilities, are at a higher risk for developing depression.

One form of therapy that has been a success is animal-assisted therapy, or pet therapy. The goal of pet therapy is to improve the resident's social, emotional, or cognitive functioning. Animals used in therapy include domesticated pets and farm animals.

Marlene Baldock raises alpacas at Desert Song Ranch off Cloverdale Road in Sisters, including two three-month-old crias (baby alpaca) named Misty and Cheyenne.

Baldock had been waiting for a chance to bring an alpaca (in a spacious new trailer) to a facility that would allow her animals to be used as a therapeutic tool to break daily routine, sooth lonely hearts and bring out laughter among the residents.

It's a pay-it-forward gesture for Baldock.

Baldock remembers spending a good deal of time in hospitals with their son Brian, who since passed away at age 27, because of a chronic blood disease.

"My husband Jerry and I spent most of our time in and out of hospitals from Portland to Washington, D.C. We learned firsthand what a joy it was to have therapy animals

come and visit the patients in the hospitals; once a week a therapy pet would show up and cheer up all of us," Baldock said.

"I have had many people over to visit my alpacas, and I have observed the interaction between them. People are instilled with a sense of wonderment and affection when they see the alpacas. I have noticed a sense of calmness that happens to a person when they look into the deep peaceful eyes of an alpaca."

Baldock finally got the chance she was looking for and was able to use two of her adult alpacas, Juliet and Daphne, and three-month-old Misty, as visiting therapy animals in an assisted-living facility in Bend.

Bethany Kuschel, full-time activity director for High Desert Assisted Living, knows precisely how pet therapy benefits the residents.

"I am so thankful for therapy animals and their human handlers. We notice a total change in energy when animals are around. The therapy pets are especially helpful for people with memory loss, and they bring such comfort to our residents. Sometimes as



PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER MCNAMEE

Seniors benefit greatly from interaction with animals

seniors age, they become more withdrawn and solitary, losing the desire to develop new relationships. With animals around, it increases the quality of social interactions among the residents," Kuschel said.

"Marlene Baldock's alpaca was a big highlight for all the residents. Most of them had never seen an alpaca up close and they enjoyed touching and petting them! It was an amazing experience."

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