

Dogs Help Cancer Patients

By Comfort for Critters

Anyone battling cancer deserves not just every treatment option available, but every comfort option too. We're now learning that sometimes that "comfort option" comes with a wet nose and questionable breath. Just last month, a study conducted by researchers at Mount Sinai Beth Israel became the first of its kind to document the benefits of animal-assisted therapy for adult cancer patients. Over 40 patients were involved in this study, reported in the Journal of Community and Supportive Oncology. I've read many such reports, after spending years as a research analyst. I can tell you this report, this finding, is the real deal.

I can also attest to its reliability because I've seen it played out in my own home, many moons ago. Just as I entered my teen years, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. This was back in the 70's, before pink ribbons and walkathons. Treatment was one-size-fits-all, limited and ruthless. As she went through radiation, then chemotherapy, our kitties were of great comfort to her. They were actually "my" pets, but clung to her while she was battled cancer. As they lay in bed for hours with her, she insisted they could sense an especially bad day as they snuggled closer. I know she was right.

This newly released report highlights what I saw all those years ago. It's also strong evidence that pet therapy can be one of those "outside the box" ways we care for cancer patients, where all the side effects are good ones. In the study, patients interacted with therapy dogs after chemotherapy and radiation treatments. These patients all had generally good prognoses, but they knew that the necessary treatment would make them feel much worse, before they would feel better.

Interestingly, the emotional well-being of the patients improved dramatically over the course of the visits, even as the patients experienced declines in their physical and functional well-being. So even as they got "sicker", they felt better. Some patients even indicated that they would have ended treatments prematurely, if not for the presence of the dogs. Bottom line, by visiting with a certified therapy dog, their emotional well-being and quality of life significantly improved. And it's not hyperbole to say that's huge.

This concept can be applied in so many directions, that it's hard to know where to start. Having cats live in nursing homes, allowing trained dogs to visit hospital patients, and using animals to comfort people in times of crisis are all great ideas. Thankfully they are all being done. My hope is that shelter pets can be used more and more in these situations and that this study opens the floodgates for funding of these programs...from pilot to full implementation across the US. These warriors deserve all the support available. Let's not overlook the support that pads into the room on four paws and wags its tail.

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