Pet Therapy for Rheumatoid Arthritis: Who Rescued Who?

by LANA BARHUM

Why Pets Are Great for People With RA

Numerous studies show that animals are a great therapy for people who live with chronic illness or pain. As someone living with RA, you might find that owning a cat or dog can bring about lots of comfort and stability despite the chaos and unpredictability RA brings to your life.

What Are the Benefits of Pet Therapy for Rheumatoid Arthritis?

Having a pet offers great health benefits. And studies show owning and caring for a pet can add years to your life, reduce stress and boost confidence.

Pets help you to be more active, which is beneficial for people with RA who need physical activity to manage their pain and other symptoms. And according to a report from the *Journal of Aging Research*, exercise can improve the overall function of people with RA without any detrimental effects on the joints.

Up to 95% of Americans consider their pets to be part their family, this according to the 2015 Harris Poll. That is because pets are a vital source of emotional support, and according to the Centers for Disease Control, they can help decrease feelings isolation, often experienced by people living with RA.

The Mental and Emotional Health Benefits

According to a 2013 study out of King's College in the United Kingdom, research shows up to 40% of people with RA will experience depression. Another study from Queen's University Belfast in Northern Ireland finds animals provide compassion and contribute to psychological well-being.

The Physical Health Benefits of Pet Companionship

Having a pet can improve your energy levels because something as simple as walking your dog or playing with your cat helps you stay active. While it is low impact activity, it is still activity nonetheless.

Research from The University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia, finds a connection between dog ownership and physical activity. Dog owners engage in walking more than people who do not have dogs, which means dog owners are more physically active.

Reasons to Keep Going

Often, RA pain and fatigue make it difficult to find reasons to get out of bed and get yourself moving, especially in the winter and when you are not feeling your best. But having a pet to take care of will give you purpose and a reason to get up every day, and it’s also a great distraction from your pain.

What Type of Pet Should You Get: Cat vs. Dog

If you are thinking about getting a pet, you will need to figure out which kind will be a good fit for your situation.

Cat

A cat is easy to take care of, because, for the most part, it takes care of itself. And cats can be very loving, which can be very helpful on the days when it feels like RA is winning.

You don't have to take cats for walks, and they don't need to go outside to use the bathroom. Most don't need training to use their litter boxes, as most have learned by the time you have gotten them.

While a cat's independence is attractive, cats shed a lot more than dogs. And that might be a big deal if RA keeps you from constantly cleaning up due to pain or if you have allergies.

Dog

Dogs need feeding, bathing, and walking and all these things can drain your energy and are harder to do when you are in pain. And puppies need training.

Also, dogs need more than attention than cats, even when you are in pain. But if it's something you can handle, it's worth the commitment because dogs bring a lot of joy to their owner's lives.

If you are not sure getting a dog is a good fit for your health, ask your doctor to see if it is a commitment you can make. And keep in mind if your situation changes, you can always get a pet walker or ask a friend or family member for help.

Lessons Learned from Your Pet

Some behaviors that come naturally to cats and dogs can also help people with RA. Here are some great lessons you can learn from your pet that can make life with RA easier.

- **Live in the moment.** Whether your pet is eating their favorite snack, playing with their favorite toy, or cuddling with their favorite human, your cat or dog is living in the present moment. They are not thinking about the past or the future; they are enjoying what is happening and nothing else.
- **Don't be angry.** Humans are the only species that feel resentment. Your pet will never be mad at you because you were too tired to take them for a walk or because you forgot about their favorite snack. Being resentful weighs on your emotions and keeps you from moving forward. And this only brings stress to your life that will worsen RA symptoms.
- **Keep moving.** Cats and dogs like to play, and that involves running, jumping, and chasing. It is a good reminder for all of us to keep moving our bodies. Playing also improves your mind and spirit. And if you have a dog, they give you a great reason to get out and go hiking, running or walking.
- **Stay hydrated and take care of yourself.** Your pets know instinctively they need water. And animals usually stop eating when they are full. It is important to stay hydrated and drink when you're thirsty. Drinking plenty of water is also great for weight management especially because, sometimes, when we feel hungry we are thirsty.

The Takeaway

Having a pet to care for and who offers love and companionship can make living with RA just a little bit easier.

Pets are a great comfort and taking care of someone else makes you feel needed. And pets are more powerful than any medication when it comes to soothing you and distracting you from your pain.

Just make sure you can handle the responsibility and the work it takes being a pet owner.