



How Having a Pet Can Help With OA

by ALI ESFAHANI

Having a Pet Can Help OA Sufferers in Many Ways

Most people with arthritis, including myself, have heard it all when it comes to potential modalities to help deal with the effects of their condition. These include various pain medications, meditation, exercise, support groups, distraction, herbal remedies, fad diets and even surgery. However, I bet you have never heard the most powerful remedy for arthritis sufferers: having a pet!

Having a pet as an OA remedy? I myself would be skeptical of the idea that a pet could help me cope with the effects of arthritis if my wife and I hadn't adopted a cat a couple months back. I wasn't convinced of this phenomenon when we got him on a whim from a local cat shelter.

I also wasn't convinced of this possible phenomenon *at all* when I was cleaning his litter, refilling his food, and exterminating any possible fleas in our apartment. However, I have learned to appreciate the effects an affectionate and loyal pet can have on one's temperament and my tolerance of chronic pain.

By no means is our furry friend a cure to all of life's trials, he has definitely become a positive and loved member of our family.

How Can a Furry Friend Help?

So how exactly can pets help a person deal with arthritis? They help alleviate the negative feelings caused by chronic pain, provide unconditional support, and are a perpetual distraction from the condition.

As mentioned in one of my previous posts, chronic pain and the emotional burden created by chronic pain can mix into a nasty cycle. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, studies show that people with severe depression feel more intense pain.

Many studies are finding that erosive osteoarthritis symptoms such as inflammation may be a link between depression and other illnesses. The link between inflammation and depression may be due to higher than normal levels of inflammatory proteins, called cytokines, people with depression have in their body.

So how does this relate to pets?

Pets can help alleviate the extent and symptoms of depression or anxiety. According to studies, pets decrease feelings of depression, loneliness and isolation.

Another way pets help is by providing unconditional support on a daily basis. Chronic pain sufferers deal with negative thoughts and sensations throughout the day with constant reminders of what they are incapable of doing, but support can help them get through the constant obstacles.

Support can come in a variety of forms; it could be someone who helps with tasks you are physically unable to do, someone you talk to about your struggles, or in this case, a pet that is willing to cozy up to you and listen to your problems.

Having a Pet Provides Support and Distraction

In this day and age the people we often count on the most for support are often too busy to give us helping hand. Fortunately your pet is always there to hear your frustrations or show you love even when you're feeling worthless.

Although I'd like to think I am winning the battle between arthritis of my spine and myself, I still have my bad days and it affects my psyche. But coming home to love and support of both my wife and cat helps me on the tougher days.

Lastly, pets are one of the best distractions a person can have from their chronic pain. Although the sensation of chronic pain is not productive to the needs of our body, it does a very effective job of preventing the pain sufferer from being able to focus on anything else and accomplishing normal daily activities.

It is simply difficult to concentrate on the external environment when a person's internal sensations are screaming at them constantly.

Socializing can be one of the most difficult activities to engage in when suffering from the chronic pain caused by arthritis. Coincidentally, it could be one of the most beneficial activities a person with chronic pain could partake in.

The benefits of socialization have been well documented; people who socialize experience lower stress, cope with adverse events better, and are generally healthier. On the other hand, a lack of socialization can lead to depression, anxiety and low self-esteem.

Socializing can also help a person in pain take their mind off the negative feelings, distract themselves in a productive manner, and force themselves to escape the negative emotions associated with chronic pain. Even though I wrote about these positive effects of human socialization in a previous article, the same idea applies to your pets!

I don't have a complex scientific explanation explaining how pets are powerful pain-relievers, nor do I ever foresee healthcare companies advertising cats and dogs as the remedy for osteoarthritis. On top of that, an animal in one's life will never dull the uncomfortable sensations one experiences due to arthritis.

However, what they can do is to alleviate the burden and negative feelings associated with the condition. They accomplish this by alleviating the negative feelings caused by chronic pain, providing unconditional support, and by being an exceptional distraction. It may seem hard to believe, but I am a witness to these effects a pet can over one's psyche and ability to cope with arthritis.