

My new best friend: pets and older people

by Marion Shoard

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One day, June Thompson, who runs the WI country market in Dorking, Surrey, met a grey-and-white dog named Shadow. A friend asked her if she would take the border collie for walks as her elderly owner had become too arthritic to do this himself. June expected the arrangement to last for a fortnight; in fact, it was to last for four-and-a-half years, until Shadow's owner died. Asked to adopt Shadow, June did not hesitate: 'The decision was an easy one. I knew what a lovely, quiet, loving dog she was'.

June believes that Shadow has brought her two important benefits: company and exercise. The two are inextricably linked. 'I am out of the house walking with Shadow for two or three hours every day. I used to go for walks because I couldn't stand in the house all the time. Now it's much more fun, because I speak to so many people who would have passed me by before. Today, coming through the market, a little girl wanted to stroke her.'

Certainly most of us would testify that being greeted by a pet when we return home, stroking it by the fireside, watching it play, taking it for a walk and getting into conversation with other pet owners are all things that can much enrich our lives.

Choosing a Pet

Anybody taking on a pet has to consider the cost of feeding it, labelling it, insuring it and paying vets' bills, but some of the responsibilities and challenges of pet keeping become more burdensome as we grow older, not least, hoovering carpets strewn with moulted hair and providing exercise. Also, when you are older, the likely lifespan of the creature becomes a more significant consideration. It can be heartbreaking to think that your beloved pet will be put to sleep because you have to go into hospital or a care home which does not accept pets and no one can be found to look after it. So, if possible, involve your family or friends when you select a pet, on the understanding that if you are unable to care for it, they will take it on.

Older people often do not want a very young animal which they will need to house-train and which may well outlive them. A reputable rescue centre is one place to acquire an older animal, such as those run by Cats Protection, the Dogs Trust, the Blue Cross, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Such centres will know the sort of environment to which the animal is accustomed and try to match temperament and lifestyles; they ought to be able to narrow down your choice so that you can choose between three or four possibilities. If the pet turns out to be unsuitable, a reputable centre will take it back and you can try again.

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Cats' relative independence also makes them a very attractive proposition for elderly people. They do not need to be exercised, and older cats are often more than happy to curl up on a lap and so provide comfort and psychological support.

Small caged animals such as birds, gerbils and hamsters do not of course have to be taken out for a walk, and are easily transported to somebody else if you are going on holiday. If your eyesight is poor, you still know where the animal is, although grooming may be difficult, as can retrieving a bird let out of its cage. Fish can be extremely restful and interesting to watch, and although tortoises cannot now be bought new, they are easy to look after and they respond to their owners.

Nonetheless, many people insist on a dog. Small dogs can be easier for older people to manage, but they can be very bouncy and easily tripped over. Also, small dogs tend to live longer than larger ones: terriers, for example, can live to 18 or even 20. Though large dogs may have a more manageable lifespan, it is not a good idea to have a dog that could pull you over or which you could not lift when it is unwell. Also, large dogs eat a great deal: will you be able to carry home tins of dog food?

Are there particular breeds which suit older people? Frail people should avoid dogs bred for working which need a great deal of physical and mental exercise, such as German shepherds, springer spaniels and border collies. Setters can be extremely affectionate, but they are often difficult to train, highly-strung and need a huge amount of exercise. However, every dog and every situation should be judged on its own merits. June Thompson, in her 70s, is not particularly fit, but Shadow uses up a lot of energy galloping after her ball.

Cavalier King Charles spaniels can make good pets for older people, although they may be prone to particular medical problems. Dachshunds, corgis and terriers can also make good pets, although terriers are bred for ridding, so they are quite active, and may be yappy. Shetland sheepdogs make good companions but need a lot of grooming and quite a lot of exercise. Some of the very tiny exotic breeds can also need a lot of grooming, but are of course very light to pick up. Whippets are very gentle, sweet-natured and quiet, and of course have short coats; greyhounds need surprisingly little exercise (although they can be heavy to lift). Although Labrador retrievers are large and highly demanding until about the age of six, an older Labrador can be gentle and extremely companionable. Mongrels, if they combine the good traits of the breeds from which they are derived, can make very good pets.

Support

Two big problems if you have a pet and are getting on is what to do with the pet if you have to move somewhere which does not accept pets, whether suddenly into hospital, or long-term into a care home. The second is vets' fees.

Although there is no NHS for pets we are extremely fortunate in having nationwide organisations which help people of modest means should their pets become injured or ill. The Blue Cross and the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals or the PDSA provide medical treatment for pets free at their own hospitals and they also reimburse the fees charged by private veterinary practices. To qualify for help from such organisations you need to demonstrate that your income is low. The most straightforward way of doing this is to show that you receive a means-tested benefit, such as council tax benefit, housing

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benefit or the guarantee element of pension credit. However, if you are of modest means and do not receive such a benefit, it is still worth approaching these organisations. Ring up the national office of each and talk through whether it has a clinic near you or, if not, what other help it could provide. The third organisation you could try is the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The RSPCA provides similar help to the Blue Cross and the PDSA at RSPCA hospitals and private veterinary practices except that it does not cover the whole cost of treatment and the amount of financial help varies between the local branches which provide it.

There are also differences between these three organisations in the costs they are prepared to cover in addition to those for medical treatment. The Blue Cross, which is particularly keen to keep down the numbers of stray animals, will pay for neutering; some RSPCA branches will help with the costs of neutering or microchipping; the PDSA will subsidise but not pay the whole cost of neutering, flea treatments, microchipping, deworming and vaccination.

The Cinnamon Trust is a little-known charity which offers different support from the mainstream pets organisations: it seeks to help elderly people look after their pets should they become ill or incapacitated. Volunteers scattered across the country provide practical help when some aspect of pet care poses a problem, from the management of a cat's litter trays or the cleaning out of a budgie's cage to walking a dog or fostering a pet whose owner has to go into hospital. Help is free, non-means-tested and short-term or long-term. The Trust also offers two other invaluable services. It publishes a directory of care homes which accept pets. Also, it offers a scheme whereby elderly (or younger, terminally-ill) owners can ensure that the Trust takes over responsibility for their pet should it outlive them. In this eventuality, the Trust finds a foster home for the pet, while itself caring for very infirm pets at 'home-from-home' sanctuaries with settees and attractive gardens.

If you are in hospital, you may want to see if Pets as Therapy (PAT) is operating in your area. This scheme has 4,500 dogs and 90 cats which, with their volunteer owners, visit people in hospitals, hospices, schools and care homes. Only dogs which pass tests covering health, temperament and behaviour can enter the scheme.

Care Homes and Sheltered Housing

Whether a retirement housing scheme or a care home accepts residents' pets can be of enormous importance. It can be heartbreaking to move into new surroundings bereft of the company of your pet, because the scheme operates a 'no-pets' policy, as many do. The challenge of settling in to a care home or a retirement flat is compounded by grieving over loss.

If a housing scheme or care home looks otherwise attractive but pets are barred, it is worth challenging the rule, particularly if live-in staff keep pets themselves. At the same time, offer suggestions on how your pet could be managed, thus countering possible practical objections. These suggestions could cover:

- How much freedom should the pet have? In which parts of the scheme or home, including the grounds, should it be allowed to roam freely and from which banned or taken in only on a lead?
- Who is going to buy and pay for food?

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- How are vets to be summoned?
- How often will walks take place? When? Who will take charge? What happens in bad weather?
- Who will be responsible for breakages?
- What happens if the resident is ill or has to go into hospital?
- What will happen to the pet if the resident dies?
- What will happen if the pet fails to settle in?

Pets can be especially rewarding for people with dementia, since they are affectionate and do not discriminate against sufferers (as human beings often do). Pets can bolster a sufferer's self-esteem, both through interaction but also by providing the opportunity to give care. Frena Gray-Davidson, the author of *The Alzheimer's Sourcebook for Caregivers*, recommends that carers who are looking after somebody with dementia should seriously consider obtaining a pet, such as an adult cat.

Contact details

Battersea Dogs and Cats Home

4 Battersea Park Road
London SW8 4AA

Tel: 020 7622 3626

www.dogshome.org

Cats Protection

National Cat Centre
Chelwood Gate
Haywards Heath
RH17 7TT

Tel: 08702 099 099

www.cats.org.uk

Cinnamon Trust

10 Market Square
Hayle
TR27 4HE

Tel: 01736 757900

www.cinnamon.org.uk

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Dogs Trust

17 Wakley Street
London
EC1V 7RQ

Tel: 020 8737 0006

www.dogstrust.org.uk

People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA)

Whitechapel Way
Priorslee
Telford
TF2 9PQ

Tel: 01952 290999

www.pdsa.org.uk

Pets as Therapy (PAT)

3a Grange Farm Cottages
Wycombe Road
Saunderton
Princes Risborough
HP27 9NS

Tel: 01844 345 445

www.petsastherapy.org

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)

Wilberforce Way
Southwater
Horsham
RH13 9RS

Tel: 0300 1234 555

www.rspca.org.uk