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Animal Assisted Therapy and Ambers

by Pam Osbourne,
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The Living GEMS® cognitive model focuses on the abilities of an individual as brain changes are experienced. The therapy dog can help bring out that individual's best self while using a variety of techniques.

This month, focusing on the Amber GEMS state, connections made with Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) can yield a number of therapeutic benefits. Addressing some of the characteristics of Ambers with a therapy dog may have a calming effect. As with any person living with dementia, the AAT team should approach with calmness and caution. The visit should always start with a calm greeting and an introduction to both the human and the dog.

In an Amber's case, the gentle repetitive motion of brushing a dog could be beneficial. To facilitate this calming activity, ask if the participant would like to brush the dog. Put the brush in his/her hand, and gently guide the brush strokes until the participant is doing it on their own. It may take several tries to initiate the movement. Or, it may necessitate constant guidance.

Perhaps an Amber is resistant to getting dressed. First, the dog can help refocus and turn the activity into a positive experience. The dog can be directed to bring an article of clothing to the participant, and time can be spent talking about getting dressed. This simple act by the dog could encourage an Amber to begin getting dressed. Another way to redirect would be to have the person put articles of clothing on the dog which can also serve as motivation to focus on the act of dressing oneself.

Sometimes eating is stressful for an Amber. However, the person may feel comfortable feeding the dog some food. Putting it on a fork may be the motivation to pick up a utensil. Whole meals can be eaten one bite at a time, when feeding the dog, then picking up one's own utensil and taking a bite.

Studies have shown that the mere presence of the dog generally creates an increase in serotonin, our "feel good" hormone, and lowers our levels of cortisol, our "fight or flight" hormone. For Ambers, the dog may make all the difference in at least one part of the day.

Pam Osbourne's latest book, ***Connections: Animal Assisted Therapy for Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias*** was published in 2017. She also edited and published ***Animal Assisted Therapy Activities to Motivate and Inspire*** in 2009. Her extensive experience as an Animal Assisted Therapy handler, coupled with her simple and complete descriptions of directed activities, provide an exceptional resource to anyone interested in learning new, innovative techniques for this therapeutic approach.

Pam and her therapy dog, Rufus, have over eleven years of experience in schools, hospitals, libraries, and senior/memory care communities. When Pam and Rufus aren't delighting residents at Villa St. Benedict or listening to kids read to Rufus at the library, she can often be found at the gym where she can deadlift more than her body weight. Long marathon runs have given her plenty of time to strategize treatment options and ways to make the connections that are so critical to successful Animal Assisted Therapy interventions.