

Animal Assisted Therapy and Dementia

by Pam Osbourne,
Animal Assisted Therapy Specialist, Author –
“Connections: Animal Assisted Therapy for
Alzheimer’s Disease and Related Dementias”

When my mom was first diagnosed with dementia, my dog Rufus and I had been an animal assisted therapy team for six years. During that time Rufus and I worked in hospitals, schools, libraries, etc. assisting a variety of people who were struggling with various problems ranging from cancer, to kids with reading deficiencies, and autism. But we had never worked with the dementia community. So when my mom was diagnosed, it didn’t occur to me that Rufus and I might be able to make a difference in her life, too. And as it turned out, it made an astounding difference.

My heart was breaking while I watched Mom’s disease progress. I admit, I wanted my mom back! But, the more I learned, the more I realized that I needed to adjust to the *new normal* in our lives. I wanted her to be as functional as possible, so I focused positively on everything she *could* do. When I noticed that Mom had a hard time with strength building exercises prescribed by a physical therapist, it dawned on me that Rufus and I might be able to help by applying our goal directed therapy experience directly to her.



With a focus on functionality, I was on a mission. Starting my mom with the simple transition from standing to sitting, then sitting to standing, it was apparent that the introduction of a therapy dog offers a wealth of therapeutic possibilities, ranging from physical to cognitive to emotional. With this positive connection, Mom’s motivation was much higher when Rufus worked with her. For this particular exercise, I positioned Rufus facing Mom, sitting. When she stood, he stood. When she sat, he sat.



This simple movement embodies so much more than physicality. By the addition of a verbal command, a cognitive component is involved. Mom would tell Rufus to “stand” or “sit” as she did the same. Sometimes we would change it up, and she would count the repetitions out loud as Rufus followed along. It gave her some control in a world where she currently had very little. The icing on the cake was Mom’s interaction with Rufus at the end of the session. She would give him a treat and a pat with the praise, “Great job, Rufus.”

During our visits, I began to see differences in the other residents in the memory care community at [Villa St. Benedict](#) in Lisle, IL. Residents who were seemingly non-verbal were suddenly responding to Rufus and me. Some wanted to move, get up, and take him for a walk. Others simply wanted to have him on the sofa next to them for some petting, which almost always stimulated conversation.

Although Mom passed away two years ago, Rufus and I continue to visit Villa St. Benedict on a regular basis, engaging the residents in a variety of therapeutic activities that encourage their functional well-being.

Animal Assisted therapy has been shown to benefit people with dementia by helping them maintain functional fitness and encouraging abilities in three broad areas:

- **Cognitive, Psychological, Emotional**

Lowers stress, decreases depression, reduces agitation, increases focus and attention to a task.

***Example:** The dice game. Residents throw the oversized dice, count the dots, read the number on the skill card, read the skill, and direct the dog to perform the skill. Primarily a cognitive activity, it also promotes motor skills, hand-eye coordination, and verbal skills.*

- **Physical and Motor**

Can improve fine motor skills, hand-eye coordination, gait skills, range of motion, strength, and decrease in pain, possibly even cause a decrease in medications.

***Example:** Placing a treat on a paw is primarily a stretching and balancing activity, It also promotes cooperation and initiates conversation. The dog is told “down,” the resident reaches down to place a treat on the dog’s paw, then tells the dog to “wait,” until he/she gives the “okay” for the dog to take the treat from the paw.*

- **Social Skills and Activities of Daily Living**

Promotes interaction and communication about feelings or experiences.

***Example:** Residents may remember that they once had a dog and begin talking about their pet. Brushing the dog can encourage their own grooming activities. The simple act of holding out food to a dog on a fork can encourage eating to those residents who may not be interested or may have forgotten that they also need to eat. The resident spears the food with the fork (a cooked vegetable like carrots works great) and the dog takes the food from the fork.*

These examples are only a few of the therapeutic activities with which a therapy dog can assist. Animal Assisted Therapy can be administered by either working with a small group or with an individual. Whether focusing on a specific skill, or having a calming effect by just being close to a person, the benefits of the therapy dog are immeasurable.



Introducing a therapy dog to the dementia community is one way of making positive connections. It is a way to engage the mind and body by focusing on capabilities in order to maintain functionality in all aspects of life.

If you are interested in working with your dog and the dementia community, a good place to start would be registering your dog with a therapy group in your area. National groups such as [Alliance of Therapy Dogs](#), [Therapy Dogs International](#), [Bright and Beautiful Therapy Dogs](#), [Love on a Leash](#), and [Pet Partners](#) can direct you to their local organizations. Some local organizations such as [Rainbow Animal Assisted Therapy](#) in the Chicago area register dogs as well.

The book, [Connections: Animal Assisted Therapy for Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias](#) is filled with simple, easy to apply activities for the Dementia community.

Pam Osbourne received a B.A. and teaching credentials before beginning a long career of over 30 years of writing and editing in the publishing business.

She edited and published "Animal Assisted Therapy Activities to Motivate and Inspire" in 2009, and her latest book, "Connections: Animal Assisted Therapy for Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias," was published in 2017. 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 ten years of experience which includes 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.