

Continue to Live with Joy

Caring for Pets While Living with Dementia
by Dan Bulgarelli, PAC Speaker

When I look back on my life and think about the things that have brought me joy, the list is long and varied. Championships won by my favorite teams, getting the new toy I really wanted – whether that was a game as a kid or a car as an adult – seeing snowcapped mountains for the first time, and so many other wonderful things. All of those experiences I mentioned were wonderful, yet in many ways they were fleeting. My teams certainly didn't win championships every year, the toy/car became outdated and boring within a few months, and the pictures of those snowcapped mountains are beautiful, but nothing is quite the same as being there, is it? The one type of joy I can focus on that isn't fleeting is the relationships I have with my family, my friends, and my dogs.

I am lucky enough to have a wife who is also my best friend and a nine-month old (9 months already!?) son, who has changed my definition of love. I know they both love me, but when I walk in the door after being gone for 5 minutes, 5 hours, or 5 days my dogs are the first ones to greet me. They don't ask a whole lot from me; a daily walk, food promptly in their bowls, and to be petted as often as possible. In return, I get unconditional love and never ending joy.

Why do I bring this up in a monthly dementia journal? There are a few reasons. Teepa created Positive Approach to Care in order to help us realize that people living with dementia can, and should, continue to live life well and have a life filled with joy. I am in the fortunate position that I still have family and friends nearby, my dogs by my side, and a job and hobbies that keep me challenged and fulfilled. However, many people living with dementia no longer have those things. Spouses may have passed on, families may have moved away, friends may have left due to the stigma associated with dementia, retirement was chosen or forced due to declining skills, and all of the things that have made us who we are start to go away one by one. A person living with dementia can feel like they are losing who they are and the moments of joy are becoming fewer and farther between.

Having a dog or a cat (I'm sure there are other animals as well, those are just my favorites) can help a person living with dementia on so many levels. While not all animals are as food driven as mine, many like to be kept on a schedule for feeding, which creates structure for the person taking care of her or him. Being outside in the fresh air is beneficial for dogs as well as people, so going for a walk once or twice a day will be great for everyone. Animals aren't all that particular when it comes to what's on the television or what you are reading, so when you get comfy in your chair to watch the game or read a book, you'll have a free hand available to pet your furry friend while they snuggle in with you.

When the dementia progresses to a point where the day-to-day tasks are more challenging, having a care partner who has been trained with the Positive Approach means that he or she can work with you to complete the tasks. Hand-under-Hand can be used to help scoop food in the bowls, go for leisurely strolls on the grounds, or even push a wheelchair while you hold the leash. The important thing is that the care partner is doing these things *with* you instead of *for* you. There is a big difference between walking or feeding your best friend and watching someone else do it.

The important pieces of life that can be lost with a diagnosis of dementia are varied and vast: loss of connection or bond with family, fear of being judged by friends, unable to continue a career, and even losing a sense of purpose. The list of loss with a pet is much less varied and vast. I may now need a care partner to assist in the routine and the skill, but whether I am lost in 5 minutes ago, 5 hours ago, 5 days ago, or 50 years ago, my dogs will still be the first ones to greet me and show me how much they love me every time. Having a true connection with our pets and animals is a big key for many living with dementia to living a fuller life with more moments of pleasure and feelings of being valued.