



Duke, Max & Lucy

THEY'RE GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH

By Tiffany R. Jansen



Max, posing on a couch, at King Street Rehab

Peggy Van Tassell doesn't need an alarm clock. Every morning at 7, she's gently nudged awake by Isis, her yellow Labrador Retriever - named for the Egyptian goddess. "We get up and we start moving," Mrs. Van Tassell says. That includes two long walks a day at the local dog park.

Research suggests that people with dogs are more physically active and less likely to be obese. That exercise becomes even more important as we age. A study published last fall had followed about 1,600 participants, ages

70-89, for just over two-and-a-half years; those adhering to a regular walking program were found to be less likely to suffer from conditions that limit or strip mobility and, if they did, more likely to recover.

Kathy Ball, a veterinarian at Guiding Eyes for the Blind in Yorktown Heights agrees that dogs are good for your health. "Instead of sitting in the house, you have to get up, take the dog out, maybe interact with other people who approach you because you have an animal," she adds.

In fact, research shows that dogs are a great conversation starter. That social connection could help you live longer and stave off mental and physical decline. Social interaction has also been linked to lower blood pressure.

But you don't have to be a dog owner to reap these benefits. Simply being around an animal can facilitate a connection. "We can touch them, we can love them, we have relationships with them," says Pia Salk, a clinical psychologist

and animal advocate in Irvington. "Sometimes, the most healing, unconditional, loving relationships we've had in our lives have been with anything from a chicken to a dog to a pig to a cat."

Max, the Red Poodle who spends his days at King Street Rehab in Rye Brook, helps people feel at home during their stay, says Facility Coordinator Lindsey Wilner. He greets families coming in to the center and attends recreational activities, along with their bird Ziggy.

Just petting an animal can do wonders for your health. For starters, it releases serotonin, a natural, mood stabilizing chemical in the brain. You'll also get a boost of oxytocin, known as the "love hormone," which produces an antidepressant-like effect. According to one Japanese study, making eye contact with your pet gets the oxytocin flowing too.

Having a pet may also reduce stress. Petting has been linked to lower blood pressure, reduced heart rate, and lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Add to that the feeling of safety that animals, especially dogs, bring into the home. "A lot of people sleep better if they have an animal in the house," says Ball.

For Mrs. Van Tassell, nothing beats the companionship Isis provides. "I live all alone," says the Goldens Bridge resident, who's been adopting retired Guiding Eyes' dogs since her husband passed away. "Often, when I'm sitting reading, she [Isis] will come up and just sort of lean into the side of me, just to let me know she's there," Mrs. Van Tassell says.

"They [dogs] are very sensitive creatures - so much more intuitive than we are because they use their senses at a much higher capacity," says Jeanne Clune, behavior and enrichment coordinator at the SPCA of Westchester.

"It gives you a whole other dimension to life," Mrs. Van Tassell, who turned 91 in February, says of her relationship with Isis. Indeed, caring for a pet is a great source of satisfaction and gratification, especially post-retirement or once the kids have left the house. "It's really given to my life a purpose," Mrs. Van Tassell explains. "I just feel so lucky to have this dog."