Is Pet Therapy Beneficial for Lupus?

by ANNA SCANLON

Pet Therapy: The Therapeutic Benefits of Owning a Pet

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) reports that pet ownership has many benefits, both psychological and physical.

For example, those who own pets and engage in pet therapy report having lower blood pressure and cholesterol than those who do not have them. They can also increase fitness by forcing you to take your little guy out for a walk or have an indoor play session, and they can significantly help combat feelings of anxiety and depression.

Pets can even increase your self-esteem, self-worth and can help you make friends, as they can start conversations or lead you to events centered around the specific animal.

Personally, I have only ever owned a dog that was all mine and totally my responsibility.

When I was nine, I begged my mother for a hamster. I named her Claire and she bit people and didn't like to be held. By the time I was 11, I had grown tired of her, but I was still somewhat attached to her — at least enough that I wasn't ready to give her away.

Still, the attachment I have had to my family dog and now my own personal dog totally surpasses any feelings I had for my hamster. Don't get me wrong, hamsters do make lovely pets for certain types of people, but my dogs have been the pets I have loved and cherished above all. Goodie, the dog I grew up with, passed away 10 years ago now and I still miss him and recall him fondly.

Pet Therapy for Lupus

Now I have Eugene, a 7-year-old stubborn as ever shih tzu who has gotten me through the worst of my lupus. I got Eugene when my symptoms were just starting to take a turn for the worse and I was being loaded with more medication.

At that time, I had just gone through a break-up, and although I had friends in town, many a night were spent with just Euge and me cuddled up together as I put ice packs on every possible part of my body.

Although some people may doubt it or find it a bit weird, having Eugene and engaging in pet therapy has honestly helped me through some of my toughest lupus moments.

Over the summer of 2010, I was bedridden for almost a month. Having Eugene, however, gave me the impetus to get up every now and then and keep me from getting blood clots and get some sunshine on my skin.

I lived with a roommate at the time, but since he worked full-time and was obviously not employed as my caretaker, I spent a lot of time alone in bed, ordering groceries and toiletries to the apartment and sleeping as

much as humanly possible. And despite my feeling absolutely terrible, Eugene still needed to be fed, taken out for bathroom breaks and have his basic hygiene maintained.

Though it was exhausting to keep up with, it gave me something else to focus on, even for a few moments, while I was in total lupus hell.

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Pet Therapy for Lupus

The thing with animals is that I feel as though they can sense when you are not feeling well.

When I am sick, upset or crying, Eugene is always the first one at my feet. And although he is fiercely independent, the way a lot of shih tzus are, the moment he notices I am not myself, he will come up and curl beside me until he feels like he can leave me alone in good conscience.

Throughout my life, and increasingly whilst having lupus, I have struggled with clinical depression. When I get sicker it seems to get a lot worse, and sometimes I find myself struggling with racing or very dark thoughts.

Although depressed people are usually not very selfish as a rule, the disease can make you focus on yourself and your body extensively. In addition to depression, I often experience anxiety, particularly if I am not feeling well.

Having a pet, especially one as spirited as Eugene, gives me something else to focus on if I'm having a down day. And although Euge can be a handful to deal with sometimes, I am a tad grateful for something else to focus my mind on.

I'm especially grateful for the giant fluffy little guy who comes and cuddles me when I don't feel well and lets me know just how special he thinks I am when I am having a really down day. Eugene also has the biggest personality I've ever seen from a dog and he keeps me laughing and in high spirits.

Is Pet Ownership Right for Me?

Taking care of animal when you have lupus, though, is a big thing to consider. You need to be sure your animal can be well taken care of, despite your disability.

Although I think it is extremely beneficial to own an animal, it is alive and has needs and desires that you need to be able to fulfill, despite your lupus. I knew I wanted a dog, no question, but I had a few stipulations I needed to fulfill before I got him.

Because I suffer from extreme fatigue and sometimes have bad arthritis, I knew it wouldn't be fair to get a dog that actually physically needed to be walked or exercised outside every day. While dogs can help you get outdoors even when you're not feeling well, many small breeds can get their exercise requirements just by playing around the house.

This is partially why I chose a shih tzu, because he doesn't really need all that much extra exercise. I was also able to train him to go to the bathroom inside on puppy training mats (which some people really dislike, but for me it was necessary to meet his needs while I wasn't feeling well). But getting an animal means a commitment to meeting his needs for his entire life, so it is absolutely necessary you know you can do it before you take the plunge.

If your lupus makes it impossible to fully jump into pet ownership, you can always volunteer at local pet shelters on your good lupus days. As a volunteer, you'll likely get your pet therapy by feeding and walking dogs and cats, as well as spend some quality time petting them and loving them. You may even be able to help them find their new home.

The very act of petting an animal can reduce your stress and take your blood pressure down, making you feel even better in the long run. If you’re more of a horse person, consider investing in some horseback riding lessons or take a day out for yourself and a friend to ride on a trail.

I honestly believe that pets are therapeutic and one of the best thing to ever happen to humans; when you have lupus, that amazingness increases tenfold. I am so grateful to have Eugene and that I get to spend quality time with him every day.