

PET THERAPY BENEFITS FOR PEOPLE

...Truly Man's Best Friend

By Lesley Bess, RN, Center Director, Active Day of the Grand Strand

The positive benefits of animal-assisted therapy and visiting dogs has long been established in national research projects. The unconditional love and therapeutic gain animals bring to humans can be witnessed firsthand at a medical adult day program in Myrtle Beach. Handlers volunteer their time weekly to bring in these incredible dogs for personal interaction with the seniors and those who are disabled at Active Day of the Grand Strand.

Sigi Mayo, the owner and handler of Abby, a two-year-old German Shepherd, said that she realized very quickly that Abby was very intelligent, eager to learn and ready to give love and affection when she came to her as a foster dog in May 2009 from the Noble Shepherd Rescue mission. Abby was trained as a working service dog under Richard Kaplan. "Abby and I are grateful for allowing us to visit this center to help her achieve her goal," said Mayo.

Bode is a pure bred Golden Retriever, who is also a certified working service dog trained by Kaplan. Owner and handler of Bode, Jeanne Maxon said, "He's friendly and has a natural instinct for gentleness when interacting with both the seniors and the young. He loves the attention they shower on him. He accepts dog biscuits, hugs, pats and kisses from the people, retrieves the ball when they throw it and performs obedience tasks for which he receives applause."

Pet therapy included in a therapeutic program for the elderly and disabled provides a multitude of social, physical and emotional benefits. The visits foster socialization, increase alertness and encourage physical movement. The animals have an evident affect on mood and have been shown to decrease stress level. The dogs decrease agitation in some Alzheimer's patients, who are visibly calm and cheerful when interacting with the dogs. In an article published in the American Heart Association Journal in 2001, it was readily acknowledged that stress levels can be reduced by interaction with animals, which in turn is believed to lower blood pressure and heart rate. Even the Center for Disease Control (CDC) website offers a section on the health benefits of pets noting that pets can lower your blood pressure, cholesterol levels, triglyceride levels and feelings of loneliness by increasing ones opportunity for exercise and outdoor activities, as well as socialization. Those with mental or physical impairments, as well as mental health issues like depression or anxiety disorder, that are mostly withdrawn-naturally want to reach out to the animal on introduction.

Visiting dogs like Bode and Abby offer unconditional affection and therapeutic touch to all individuals, accepting the people as they are...no matter their age or disability. It is this acceptance that is one of the most important benefits of the visiting dogs. Most of us experienced the joy of having pets when we were children. However, as we age, our circumstances and ability to care for pets may change. The interaction of a visiting dog or animal rekindles that affection and triggers happy memories from our childhoods with our own family pets. For more information on scheduling a visit with Abby or Bode, please call Jeanne Maxon at 1-910-575-6476.

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