

Good companions



From pigs to parrots, pets can enrich the lives of people living with MS.

by Shara Rutberg

Kate Perkins had tried everything — from medication to warm wheat bags — to relieve the multiple sclerosis pain wracking the right side of her body. Defeated, exhausted and overwhelmed, she knelt in front of her sofa, head pressed into the blue fabric in a position that sometimes helped and cried until she felt a soft, warm pressure on the top of her head.



Tenley Diaz, a veterinarian

diagnosed with MS in 2012, has two dogs, a cat, three beta fish, two snakes and a salamander.

Belle, her yellow Labrador, had silently crept up alongside her and rested her chin on Perkins' bowed head. Belle breathed deeply. Perkins breathed deeply. She focused on their breaths and the warm, soft weight of the dog's head. She knew then "that it was going to be all right."

"I remember that day vividly," says the 47-year-old mother of two from her home in the U.K. "It was amazing."

Perkins was diagnosed in 2010. She adopted Belle as a 12-week-old puppy from a local shelter in 2014. Perkins was just beginning to process the impact the disease would have on her life. "I was lonely and isolated," she says. "I'd lost my confidence. I lost myself." She credits the Lab, a breed famous for fetching tennis balls, with retrieving her life.

Animal helpers

Cave paintings dating back to the first century show dogs guiding people. Animals have been helping us navigate life, at least since then. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines service animals as "trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities," including "physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual or other mental disability." Emotional support animals also provide therapeutic benefits to people with medically diagnosed disabilities.



Alisha Crawford gets some fresh air with Jynx, a Labradoodle.

People living with MS attest that animals don't need official certifications to enhance their lives.

“Animals enrich our lives in so many ways. It’s hard even to verbalize it,” says Tenley Diaz, 30, a veterinarian diagnosed with MS in 2012. In those measures of wealth, she may be in the 1% with her menagerie: two dogs, a cat, three beta fish, two snakes and an axolotl, a type of salamander. “It’s truly pure joy they bring me,” she says.

What’s the best pet for someone living with MS? “The ideal animal is different for everybody, depending on their physical abilities,” Diaz says.

Fun, love and laughs

Cathy Wilkinson Barash relishes the nightly ritual she shares with her cats Pause, a tiger cat, and Itty Bitty Kitty, a small Maine Coon of 18 pounds. (Maine Coons can get up to 30 pounds.) Barash will get in bed and read to Pause, who snuggles next to her, while Itty Bitty Kitty lays on her lap, completing the kitty cocoon. “Cat purring is healing energy,” says the 71-year-old who was diagnosed with MS in 1984. “They are my little healers. My god, if I didn’t have them, it would be horrible. They’re my family. They’re just not tax-deductible,” she says with a laugh. They provide fun, comic relief and unconditional love — all of which she’s especially treasured while living alone during the pandemic.



One of Cathy Wilkinson Barash’s cats is a Maine Coon named Itty Bitty Kitty.

“Pets give you a purpose,” she says. “They’re the reason you get up in the morning. You need to care for them, and in turn, they give you so much back.”

Margo Williamson, 35, agrees. Her furry family member, Gizmo, a hamster, is only about the size of her hand.

“I love her more than anything,” says Williamson, who was diagnosed in 2016. “She is a sweet, loving, little thing that brings so much joy to my life. I live alone and don’t have any family, just friends, and having someone, even if they’re tiny, that loves you does help. And I know she does.”

Pets help with all the “good chemical feelings,” Williamson says. “They make you happy. Often with MS, you’re in your own body too much, focused on yourself. Focusing on someone else helps greatly. When I’m taking care of her, I’m taking care of me.”

For Stephanie Faris, Phoenix, her cockatiel, is a critical part of the environment she’s created to keep her well since her 2012 diagnosis. “He makes me smile and laugh all day long,” says Faris of the gray bird with a yellow head, rosy cheek circles and mohawk-like crest that extends and lowers with his mood like a feathery exclamation point. Phoenix spends most of the day perched on Faris’ shoulder — accompanying her to work as a special events DJ, where he “dances and sings along.”



Phoenix the cockatiel spends most of the day with its owner, Stephanie Faris.

“He’s my best friend,” she says, and the perfect pet for her, as she’s home most of the time, which gives him the interaction she says birds require. “With him, I never feel lonely.” The opinionated bird even makes sure Faris takes her afternoon rest to help manage her fatigue. “When I lie down, if I don’t stay still, he gives me little pecks to remind me to stay still. He knows the difference now between my MS shakes/tremors or me just restlessly moving and only pecks me when it’s tremors.”

Alisha Crawford’s dogs Kali, a collie-shepherd, and Jynx, a Labradoodle, make sure she gets out of the house every day to walk them to the dog park. “If I didn’t have the pups, I don’t know if I’d leave the house much, and fresh air and movement are so important with MS,” says the 40-year-old, who was diagnosed three years ago. At the dog park, where they can run amuck without her having to worry about keeping up with them, she savors simply “hanging out with them, trying to enjoy the moment and not take time for granted.”

“I feel like they can read me and sense how I’m feeling, which is just fantastic,” she says. They’ll snuggle up when she needs comfort, walk slowly and lean into her, “helping” her up

the stairs when her symptoms slow her down.

Stress relievers

AJ and Paulie, Mary Ellen Smolinski's Maltese dogs, read her as well — though they're just about 11 pounds each, says the 68-year-old, who was diagnosed in 2015. "When I'm down, they sense it and try to stay near me," she says. Fortunately, they both fit in her lap at once.



Mary Ellen Smolinski says that her Maltese dogs, AJ and Paulie, are her stress relievers.

Pets help reduce stress. "And as everyone with MS knows, stress makes symptoms worse," Smolinski says. "My dogs are my little anti-stress balls."

Animals are "mood lifters," agrees Sarah Mathis Henderson, 38, whose mood is constantly lifted by Hamilton, her mini pig — whom she calls Hammy and who weighs close to 200 pounds. "He just cracks me up, watching him wallow in the mud or listening to him smacking his food — even though I can't stand it when my kids do that!" says Henderson, who was diagnosed in 2016. Hammy, who is litter box trained, spends most of his day outside and sleeps on his blanket in a closet in the bedroom Henderson also shares with her husband. While Henderson adores Hammy, she doesn't recommend pigs, in general, for people with MS, due to their size. "It doesn't bother us to have him in the house, but for some people, that's not OK," she says, laughing.

What to consider

The full-grown size of your potential pet is just one crucial factor to consider when thinking about adding an animal to your family, says Diaz. "I have tiny dogs," she says. "Because that's what I can handle comfortably."

Consider the breed, energy levels, and typical breed personalities and training requirements, then research which might best fit your lifestyle and physical environment. Keep in mind that

senior animals may take less energy to care for. Remember that even small animals need care that takes energy. “Think carefully about what will be required physically, emotionally and financially,” Diaz says.



**Sarah Mathis Henderson,
diagnosed with MS in 2016,
can count on her mini pig,
Hamilton, to lift her spirits.**

People with MS must plan for future possibilities, too. “I know it’s hard to think about, but I may not be at the same level of physical ability later on,” Diaz says. “You need to have a plan about who will care for the animals if, after a relapse, you don’t come out with the same abilities.” The pet owners we spoke with emphasized having care plans — help lined up — during times they are unable to care for their animals.

“Get pet insurance,” Perkins says. “There can be quite a financial investment, as well as an emotional one.” However, the return on the investment is beyond calculation, she says. “Belle just makes all of us so happy physically, mentally and emotionally. If she charged for her service, we’d be paying a lot!

“With a chronic condition, you’re so often worried about the future. Belle helps me live life in the present. Looking after her, even just stroking her, helps me release the stress and anxiety of living with MS. She helped me grow my confidence. After my diagnosis, I was scared of doing things. She made me walk, and I found that walking helps manage my pain and mental health.” It also helped her connect with other dog walkers.

MS can be an invisible disease, she says. “Often, people can’t see your symptoms. You have to put on a brave front. You don’t have to do that with a pet.

I never thought I’d come such a long way, but since I’ve had Belle, I’ve even been looking into working again. She’s helped me find myself again — a different version of the old me. Maybe a better version.”

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