

Unconditional love

By Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal and Dian Pasquinal Kaur

For people with prolonged illnesses and disabilities, the unconditional love offered by their pets is a stable force that helps them to cope, write Dian Pasquinal Kaur and Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal



PETS make wonderful companions. In a survey taken by the American Animal Hospital Association in 2004, it was reported that 57 per cent of pet owners actually preferred the company of their pet to that of another human if they were stranded on an island!

For most pet owners, their pets are regarded as trusted members of the family. Not only do these four-legged or two-winged, or gilled companions provide wonderful companionship, they also provide therapeutic effects and benefits.

Pets make us feel safe, accepted and happy. Their devotion and unconditional love go a long way towards boosting our mental and physical health.

During times of crisis, major stress or prolonged illness, pets are usually an anchor that help us cope. For older people, a pet not only offers companionship and affection, it also provides security and protection. Three pet owners share their story.

That thing called love

Housewife Rohana Nadzir fell in love with her cat, Tommy, on her way to the shops more than six years ago. Her ears caught the sounds of pitiful meowing coming somewhere from inside a drain.

Peering in, she spotted a tiny kitten, soaked to the bones and hungry, and her heart melted at the sight. She made the decision to give the animal a home almost instantly and today, he, and another new feline, Timmy, who was found wandering around in her backyard about six months ago, are much loved companions in the house.

The 56-year-old mother of six, who has always loved cats since she was a child, has gone through a lot over the last few years.

From frequent fainting spells to suffering a mild stroke which left the left side of her body paralysed, she was eventually told by the doctor that she had three blockages in her arteries and had to undergo a heart bypass. It was the only choice.

Despite the fact that the doctor had warned them that the chances of survival would only be one per cent, the family, after a long discussion, decided that she should undergo the operation.

“Even though I was still in denial, I decided I needed to pull myself together for the sake of the children,” says Rohana, recalling the memories of two years ago. The 10-hour bypass surgery was a success. Thanks to her family’s support, Rohana continues to lead a fairly normal life.

Today, she never misses her monthly check-ups and observes a good diet.

“Things are okay now. A heart bypass can prolong a person’s life span but it’s not a cure. I am undergoing rehabilitation and physiotherapy these days. One must always have faith and pray for good health to continue. It’s important to remain strong,” says Rohana.

Her cats, she says, are a source of comfort for her. When she’s feeling particularly unwell, they offer her their devotion and company.

“They’d sit on my belly when I’m lying down on the sofa, especially when I’m watching TV. Just stroking their silky fur makes me feel at peace and calm. They are very lovable cats and follow me everywhere. When I hold them, I know that their love is unconditional.”

A trusted companion

For someone who has had a life-changing experience, Irene Yap marches through life with a different perspective these days.

The 56-year-old was diagnosed with first stage cancer some five years ago and underwent a lumpectomy.

“I attended a cancer-awareness talk five years ago and was taught to do self-examination. I felt a lump on my breast and felt uneasy. This occurred a few months after a clear mammogram, my very first one,” she recalls.

Irene is blessed with a very supportive family who helped her overcome surgery and 15 sessions of radiotherapy.

“I was naturally upset and the ‘why me?’ constantly played on my lips. ‘I’ve never had a single surgery in my life. I remember just before being wheeled into the operation theatre, I gave my wedding ring to my husband and gave my last words to my children. They had more faith than me and I am very thankful for that.”

While Irene is incredibly grateful for the support rendered by her family members, the National Cancer Society volunteer found solace in her pet dog, Jazz.

“Jazz came into my life in November 2009, during my recovery period. She’s the second dog I have had and her presence is very therapeutic as she is always there to chase away my blues. By just looking at her face, I am comforted,” she says.

Having a pet is not something Irene has been particularly fond of because it’s a major responsibility but her children changed her perception.

“My son wanted a dog so badly and I made a pact with him that if he scored 4As for his UPSR, I’ll yield to his demands. I never expected him to score straight As,” she smiles. Her son proved her wrong and demanded for his reward.

A visit to the SPCA brought along the first pet in her life — Cody, a mixed-breed female dog who went on to live a good 16 years with them until it was put to sleep in April 2009 due to loss of hearing and sight.

After Cody passed on, Irene decided not to have a dog anymore because the heartache of losing a pet was too much for her to bear. Her cancer diagnosis too took place towards the last few years of Cody’s life, and she could only handle so much distress.

She found Jazz through an email from a friend who thought she might be interested to adopt a pup from a watchdog that had just given birth to a litter at her workplace.

“I talked about it with my son and he encouraged me to take in a pup and that’s how Jazz became a part of my household. With my husband and son at work and my daughter in Japan, Jazz became my trusted companion,” she says proudly.

For the next five years after her lumpectomy, Irene was on tamoxifen to prevent the cancer from returning and keep her oestrogen levels at bay. She came off the medication early this year and her worry about a relapse has escalated a few folds.

“Every cancer survivor worries about relapse. The meds were my security blanket and now that I’m off it, it’s a little nerve-racking. I would often look at Jazz and ask her if I would ever get it again. She’ll just look at me and I’m somewhat reassured.”

Having conversations with Jazz has helped Irene find answers on her own. Unlike one’s loved ones, pets cannot offer advice. “I don’t want to worry my family by raising this matter time and again. So I talk to Jazz. Some people may think it’s silly but I think it has helped me tremendously and this has given me hope, that everything will be all right,” she says with a positive note.

Jazz is a very timid dog and is fearful of thunder and strangers but all she has to do is seek comfort by plonking herself down at Irene’s feet. The symbiotic relationship between the two is blossoming and overflowing with mutual love and reassurance.

“I’ve changed a lot since my diagnosis. I was too busy to take care of myself before but now I’m more at peace. I’ve learnt to take it easy and I don’t complain as much anymore. When Cody used to mess up the house sometimes, I would get cross but I don’t anymore. I have greater things to celebrate, like life, than to fuss about a slight mess,” she declares with disarming candour.

While Irene keeps herself busy spreading the message of early detection and life after cancer, she's also very passionate about being a responsible pet owner.

"I believe in providing them with the best food, something I have been chided for because Jazz is a mixed breed. It's also important to care for them like you would your own child and spay them to prevent the birth of puppies you wouldn't know what to do with."

A gentle guardian

At any time one were to walk pass the home of Cecelia Ayadurai and get too close to her gate, a black, medium-sized dog would charge out of the house, sniffing out potential threats against the one it guards dearly.

Neighbours, however, know that it is harmless.

"She's very possessive, this Royal Highness of mine," says 64-year-old Cecelia in the comfort of her lovely home in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, stroking her pet, Pepto.

The 12-year-old mongrel endowed with Doberman features looks up adoringly as Cecelia strokes its gentle face.

Protective when she needs to be, Pepto now settles pensively at the foot of Cecelia's wheelchair.

Cecelia has had a soft spot for dogs for as long as she can remember.

"When I was younger I told my dad I wanted a tiger but he told me I'll have to make do with a dog. Let's just say they have always put up with my demands to have a dog," says Cecelia, a part-time social worker attached to Mobiliti, an organisation that she helped to establish in 2001. It offers transport services, mainly for wheelchair-bound folks in the Klang Valley.

Although Cecelia admits that the heartache of losing her pets never eases, she carries the memories in her heart and moves on. She shows me a picture of an earlier pet before Pepto came along.

"Coco loved taking photos. The minute anyone whipped out a camera and pointed at her, she curled back and posed for the lens. She was a good muse for any cameraman!"

After Coco's demise, her neighbour gave her a two-month-old puppy that he found abandoned in a jungle when out trekking with his two dogs.

"She trailed my neighbour all the way. He, of course, didn't have the heart to leave her there. When he held up the pup to show it to me, I was won over by her eyes. And I became her slave ever since!"

A couple of months after Pepto entered her life, Cecelia underwent a procedure to have her right leg amputated due to diabetes.

"Of course it was a hard time for me but I didn't dwell on it. I've had the pleasure of travelling the world and living life on my own terms, I have no regrets. It was easy for Pepto to adjust to me being on a wheelchair because she was just a pup then," says Cecelia.

Her home is dotted with exquisite finds from her travels, a reminder of her escapades.

Pepto has been a good companion, she states vehemently. “She’s an excellent watch dog and I love being in her company. I break bread with her, share my bed and also talk to her like I would to any other person. It’s not difficult to look after her.”

Cecelia’s helper comes in thrice a week to clean and cook. At other times Cecelia is alone with her trusted companion.

“Many people can’t believe the extent of my independence,” says Cecelia, a fan of crime novels and suspense-filled shows such as *Criminals Minds*.

“Being alone is not a problem for me. My mother was a socialite with a gracious streak and she was a very strong woman. I inherited that trait from her. But I can never be without a dog.”

Being a chronic diabetic with low blood sugar level, there have been times when Cecelia required immediate medical attention but luckily, her sister is a phone call away.

“Seeing me in those moments, Pepto gets really upset because she knows something is wrong. She settles down when my sister arrives because she knows that help is here.”

Having a pet, especially a dog is very therapeutic. For that reason, Cecelia thinks that homes for old folk should get dogs to keep the occupants company.

“They would learn to bond with the dogs, form a relationship with them and they will be comforted to know that — in return — they will be loved unconditionally. Dogs are selfless like that and I’ve seen it all my life.”