Anger can be a wonderful motivator," said my friend as I entered the tiny cramped room. My friend Betty (pseudonym) is usually optimistic and cheerful, so I knew there was a problem. Tucked away in the corner was the wheelchair she had grudgingly accepted for use a few weeks earlier, and her walker was back at her chair. A respiratory infection had weakened my 82-year-old friend, who already was challenged with the residual effects of a stroke. Everyone had encouraged her to rest by setting aside her walker and using a wheelchair, and for the first time, she had agreed.

This story began 6 years ago. Back then, Betty was an independent widow who lived with her three dogs and was actively involved in obedience training and traveling to compete with her dogs. Tragedy struck when she experienced a stroke, which left her struggling to speak and with a loss of any feeling on her right side. Everything in her world was about to change.

Two of her dogs were placed in permanent new homes, and only her elderly Shetland Sheepdog, Fagan (pseudonym), was kept nearby by a friend. Knowing Betty, I did not wait long before taking my daughter’s scruffy little rescue dog for a visit.

"Memphis," a certified therapy dog through Therapy Dogs International®, who helped 82-year-old Betty get back on her feet after a stroke.
Memphis (pseudonym) was a certified therapy dog through Therapy Dogs International®, so I clipped on his special identification tag and walked straight through the hospital to the intensive care unit. When I announced I had brought a visitor and placed Memphis on her bed, Betty was ecstatic. After some petting, he soon settled at her feet and laid down for a nap. I didn’t know then how their lives would come together in the future.

Betty was forced to relearn everything, and there were many difficult months ahead. Speech, occupational, and physical therapy were intensive and left her exhausted by the end of each day. Eventually, she was transferred to a skilled nursing facility for rehabilitation. Despite her best effort to be optimistic and work hard in therapy, sadness gradually crept into Betty’s eyes. I felt certain there was something missing from her treatment, and it wouldn’t come from a provider’s order. “When are they going to start including Fagan in your therapy?,” I asked. In Betty’s face, I could read her surprise and tentative hope. This was the turning point in her rehabilitation.

Soon Fagan was the highlight of the therapy room. A faithful friend dropped off Fagan at the nursing home several mornings per week. Therapy now began to include brushing Fagan and walking with him while using a walker. After Fagan became involved, Betty’s progress outpaced all expectations.

It was not long until Betty moved to an assisted living facility, and Fagan moved in with her. It can be difficult to make a transition like this, but Fagan helped pave the way. He quickly became the most popular resident, and that made his owner a close second. Staff members would even bring their children to visit Betty and Fagan on their days off.

Three years ago, Fagan succumbed to Cushing’s disease, and while everyone mourned his loss, their most pressing concern was for Betty. Fagan had been her constant companion. Disheartened and no longer taking her daily walks, Betty’s positive outlook was gone. Without a reason to take daily walks and socialize with others, Betty’s physical health was declining each day. Fortunately, Memphis—the same little dog that had visited years before when Betty was in intensive care—came to the rescue. My daughter asked if Betty could “board” him while we were on vacation for a week, and the temporary arrangement became permanent. Once again, Betty was taking daily walks and had a steady stream of visitors. A performer who will do anything for a treat, Memphis puts on many “shows,” and Betty even taught him the new trick of “saying” hello.

What might not seem obvious was the change that occurred for Betty. Following the initial stroke, the neurosurgeon predicted she would be in a wheelchair at best and that long-term survival hopes were slim. Considering her other preexisting health conditions, Betty’s life expectancy appeared grim. Betty tells me the neurosurgeon never fails to shake his head when he sees her now. “I don’t understand how you are doing so well,” she told me he says. I suppose he just does not know about human-animal bonding. Betty has been pushing herself all these years to care for her dogs. At least four times per day, rain or shine, snow or scorching heat, she walks her dog. Every step is a struggle, as she must constantly focus on holding the walker with a right hand that cannot feel it and a right foot that must be consciously commanded to take each step.

Now we are back to where this story started, when Betty had consented to using the wheelchair following a respiratory infection. At first, the staff had agreed to take Memphis out four times per day since Betty couldn’t manage his walks with the wheelchair. But after a week, Memphis was waiting for his walk long beyond the agreed-on times due to busy staff obligations. This made Betty concerned about her little companion. Dedication, love, and concern for Memphis drove my friend to struggle out of her wheelchair and resume performing all of Memphis’s care, without help. Betty chuckled as she told me how she had used her anger as motivation, but I believe the real motivation was Memphis.

Research in the field of human-animal interaction has found that most people consider their pet dogs to be members of the family (Cohen, 2002). Their presence is associated with lower blood pressure (Anderson, Reid, & Jennings, 1992), increased social interactions (McNicholas & Collis, 2000), and fewer feelings of loneliness for dog owners.
Endnotes

(Katcher, 1985). Dog owners are more likely to take walks (Brown & Rhodes, 2006), and having a dog to walk has been shown to increase commitment to walking in an exercise program (Johnson & Meadows, 2010). Not every person likes dogs, but for some people, interaction with dogs affects their health in a positive way.

I don’t know what would have happened to Betty if she had not been allowed to include Fagan in her initial therapy or found a residential facility that accepted dogs. I do know that my friend’s life is full of happiness, and most of this seems to be related to her current companion—a scruffy little dog who doesn’t ask for much more than an occasional tummy rub or treat!

REFERENCES

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