

How Furry Toys, Animals, and Dolls Help People With Dementia

Posted by Paula Spencer

The hottest tool for people with Alzheimer's and dementia is a baby harp seal. A *robot* baby harp seal, that is. "Paro" is soft and cute as a stuffed animal, but it also coos when its fur is stroked, wiggles on the lap, bats its eyelashes, and makes little noises. Paro reacts to warmth and sound, and remembers previous interactions.

Six-pound Paro debuted in the U.S. earlier this year. It was designed as a therapeutic robot by Japan's National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology back in the 1990s and has been used with elderly people with dementia (and youngsters with autism) in Japan and other countries for several years.

What's so good about it? Lifelike Paro stimulates the senses and encourages communication. It relaxes the person with dementia, lowering the risk of depression and behaviors like agitation, especially during transitions, which can get tense. (Unlike an actual pet, there's no potential for harm.) Its "friendship" and the fact that it also attracts attention from others bring useful social benefits, too.

The bad news: The robot costs around \$4,700. Some long-term care facilities in the US have them (to residents' delight), but they're pricey for home use. (Paro's U.S. website is still embryonic; check the Japanese site for all the details.)

The good news: Similar benefits can be gained in lower cost ways:

- ***Prolong pet ownership.*** If someone with dementia has a pet, it can grow difficult to properly care for the animal (overfeeding, forgetting to water or change a litterbox, for example). Monitor this and help out as long as possible, because animals provide comfort and companionship for people with Alzheimer's. Perhaps a neighborhood kid could walk a dog and check its food and water bowls, for example.
- ***Bring pets to visit.*** If the senior simply can't manage an old pet, or never had one, try arranging for animals to visit regularly. Pet therapy is also a staple in many assisted living facilities and senior centers. Look into bringing a pet program to a place near you. (The Delta Society offers many resources.)
- ***Consider a baby doll.*** "Doll therapy" is especially for women with advanced disease. They bring back memories of a happy time of life and

provide comfort and companionship. Soft-bodied dolls feel real, but it's best to choose a doll and clothes that are washable.

Hmm, my daughter owns the cutest baby doll that talks ("*I'm sleepy, Mama!*"), giggles, and lifts her arms to be held. I wonder if this "robot baby" would irritate someone with late-stage disease (because she was designed for little girls' play) or would work a little Paro-like magic?

Courtesy: <http://www.caring.com/blogs/caring-currents/how-furry-toys-animals-and-dolls-help-people-with-dementia>