



The Healing Power of Puppies

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By Nancy Gordon As any person with chronic pain knows, the search for relief is often as unending and discouraging as the pain itself. This article may provide an insight into a unique and pleasurable pain management resource that I stumbled upon several years ago involving a rare breed of dog. In fact, our story carries such a heartwarming and innovative use of dogs that Animal Planet asked to feature it in a half hour show entitled "That's My Baby/Toaster". The episode films the story of how this amazing dog changed my life path, and enabled me to make lemonade out of life's lemons. Following a car accident in 1992, I became challenged by the chronic pain of Fibromyalgia (FMS) and Chronic Fatigue Immune System Disorder (CFIDS). Prior to this accident, I worked as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in private practice for 11 years in Oregon. Despite a myriad of efforts for six years after my accident, my condition worsened to the point of having to give up my attempts to manage my practice while living with chronic pain and sleep deprivation. In the past, I had been a high achiever, always able to set a goal, often succeeding beyond it. The experience of FMS/CFIDS was one of the first times in my life that I had to admit that I no longer could set a goal (return to my previous level of functioning to work) and accomplish it. With my health worsening, it still took me a process of two years of rearranging my work schedule and lifestyle in the most creative and desperate ways before I could finally admit I could no longer work and that I had to go on medical disability. I finally surrendered! It was one of the hardest decisions of my life. But one never knows what is around the corner in the grander scheme of things... Within nine months after closing my business and moving to a sunny location near family, my life took an unexpected turn in a direction I never would have imagined. In 1999, I was introduced to a rare breed dog, the Mexican Hairless (breed name Xoloitzcuinti or Xolo), the name derived from the Aztec Indian god, Xolotl, and itzcuintli, the Aztec word for dog, which combined means the dog has spiritual, god-like powers. Although they have the temperature of a normal dog, they are literally HOT DOGS! In fact, throughout their history, it is well documented that they were relied upon as bed warmers and pain relievers for people with "arthritis". Since their existence, Xolos have been dogs with a unique "soul" purpose to heal, but are currently undiscovered by most people. When I first began learning about this breed, I was using a microwavable hot neck wrap on my neck almost 24/7. At the time of meeting my first toy Mexican Hairless dog, I was experiencing acute muscle/joint pain in my wrists. I placed my hands under this dog's belly for about 15 minutes, and when I took my hands out, my pain was gone! He was so warm, he felt like a toaster! Although these dogs don't cure pain, when you place your body against theirs for 15 minutes or more, they offer a unique ability to help mediate pain. After my first experience with a Xolo relieving my wrist pain, it seemed logical that a toy size dog of this breed would be small enough to sit around my neck and serve as a LIVE heating pad...one that does not have to be microwaved! I was so impressed with all I learned about this breed that I bought one immediately, naming her Toaster because she is quite "Toastie"! She soon became, for me, the best neck wrap and pain reliever anyone could want. Often with a big smile, she sometimes scrambles so fast to get up to my neck that she slips! She seems to provide this healing service as if she were born to do it. Toaster and I soon became inseparable. With her warmth easing my pain, I was able to drive and do more things for myself. She helped alleviate my feeling of isolation, an experience shared by many who live with chronic pain. To be permitted in public places where dogs are normally not allowed required Toaster to become certified as a service dog, and so she graduated in 2002 after two years of training. Most people think of a service dog as a guide dog, who assists the blind, hearing impaired, or wheel chair users. However, these are no longer the definitive ways in which dogs can be of service to those with disabilities and health challenges. The list of abilities and services that dogs can provide in assisting humans has been expanded in many new and even unusual ways. Service dogs are trained to assist those with mobility deficits by helping them balance or stand up. It is becoming more widely known that dogs have even been trained to detect cancer or the onset of seizures. Dogs can be trained to open doors, close doors, retrieve items, including from the refrigerator, and help people get dressed or undressed, among many other things. Assistance dogs provide gives their owners much needed physical help, as well as the hope of an improved quality of life. It is a well-known fact that animals, in general, can lower one's blood pressure, relieve stress, and improve mood. Toaster has helped me in so many more ways than just being a hot neck wrap. Many people with chronic pain suffer from secondary conditions, such as depression. I was not an exception. Xolos are extremely intelligent and sensitive to their owner's needs and moods. One of the things I taught Toaster was to sing with me. When I am having a bad day, we sing together and I am quickly cheered up. She even has her own theme song, "Tostada", sung to the tune of Volari. I believe that animals are angels for us, healing us in more ways than we can imagine. They provide us with compassion and unconditional love. They help us remember universal love and the pure pleasure of play, which can be forgotten by those tired and beaten down from a pain/fatigued filled day. Animals offer those who may be isolated in their pain an easy way to interact with people in

public. Animals enable us to feel connected to life, despite our challenges, and our care of them offers us an important sense of purpose and practice of unconditional love. Those with Fibromyalgia form a large, and unfortunately, growing population of people who are disabled by it, but for whom there is no designated type of service dog. To that end, I bred Toaster in order to place Xolos with others who live with chronic pain. On May 25, 2002, Toaster bravely delivered her first litter of puppies. She had two hairless and two coated. All were placed with individuals with Fibromyalgia except the female hairless, La Rosita (Pink), who shares duties with Toaster and graduated with her own service dog certification in 2005. Our story and Toaster's whelping was documented by Animal Planet for their show "That's My Baby!/Toaster" which continues to air and can also be viewed on our website. Animal Planet has helped to increase public awareness of the possibility of this particular breed to serve as a service dog for those whose chronic pain is relieved by heat. One of the most devastating side effects of FMS/CFIDS for me was the loss of my identity and self-esteem, which I experienced through helping others as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. Toaster led me to the birthing of a creative outlet using photographs of her and her puppies for inspirational and support greeting cards/gifts. Especially for people with illness, disabilities, and their loved ones, these cards help people in difficult situations to express many of the feelings for which they may find it hard to know what to say. In honor of Toaster, I named this mission Animal Angel Healers (AAH) Animals, and their natural ability to bring healing to and alleviation of human suffering, are a profound gift to us. I am immeasurably grateful to Toaster because she has provided me with a renewed sense of purpose and an avenue in which I could be of service to others once again. For more information on Xolos and Animal Angel Healers, please visit our website at <http://www.pawsforcomfort.com> This article is reprinted with the author's permission.

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