

Sebastian was rescued from TEARS and is now a PAT therapy cat

Andie Chandler with her feline-canine therapy duo Sebastian and Rumba



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# THE LOVE

Does your cat have what it takes to be a therapy cat?

If you've had a particularly long day, you'll know just how relaxing it is when your cat comes for a cuddle. Gently stroking her soft fur, hearing that happy purr or feeling the roughness of her tongue helps the tension melt away. Your tense shoulder muscles relax. Your heart rate slows and very soon, you're feeling stress-free.

Animals can have a profound effect on humans. Scientific research reveals that just touching an animal helps to lower blood

pressure. When we interact with animals, the level of cortisol, a hormone associated with stress, drops and the feel-good hormone, serotonin, increases. Endorphins, other feel-good chemicals in the body, may also be released and can help to suppress pain. Research shows that pets are good for physical and mental health.

Cats who are very in tune with their owners often instinctively know that something isn't right. Cat lovers tell how their cats seem to

know when they aren't feeling well, or have stayed close by them through a difficult convalescence. Others tell of the strength they have drawn from felines after the loss of a loved one.

### Cats in therapy

There are two main approaches to animal therapy. The first, known as Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT), is a formal approach to therapy, with a definite outcome. This would



include play therapy with animals for children or equine assisted therapy for the physically disabled. Animal Assisted Activities (AAA) are visits to hospitals, homes and schools to improve the quality of life for sick or orphaned children or the elderly or disabled.

### Special qualities in cats

For a cat to be registered as a therapy cat, she needs the right temperament. A good therapy cat needs to be well socialised with people of all shapes and sizes, with a patient, gentle and confident nature. Stroking and handling is very much part of the therapy service so the cat needs to enjoy meeting new people and thrive on human contact. The cat should enjoy curling up in a human lap or jumping up on a bed or chair to be stroked. While any cat with the correct temperament can be used as a therapy cat, retired show cats often make great candidates as they are used to the people and frequent handling.

Various organisations have different registration processes, but in general a cat will be tested in different situations to see how she reacts. Some organisations also request that the cat be comfortable walking on a lead or harness.

Your cat may have the right qualities for the purrfect therapy cat, but are you right for the job? Therapy pet volunteers need

“For an animal to become a therapy pet, he or she must be calm and gentle.”

What started as an activity largely for dogs now incorporates pets of all types, with cats at the top of the list. Cats have been particularly successful in care facilities for the elderly, especially patients with Alzheimer's disease.

Just as our own cats help us to feel less stressed at the end of the day, cats visiting care facilities have many positive effects on the people they visit. Pets are often not allowed in old-age facilities and for people who have had the companionship of an animal throughout their lives, this can be a heartbreaking rule. Organisations that bring pets for visits at these centres can help fill the void and give residents a chance to love and cuddle an animal.

to be empathetic and compassionate and able to communicate with people of all ages and walks of life. When you sign up as a volunteer, you will also need to let them know how often you can make your visits. A weekly visit is ideal, but you can also choose to visit fortnightly or monthly. An hour is usually enough time for the pet and the person you are visiting.

Your cat will need to be in good health and you will need to present her veterinary certificate to show that all vaccinations are up to date and that a deworming programme is in place. Visit the Pets As Therapy website for more information: [www.pat.org.za](http://www.pat.org.za) 

### Meet Sebastian

Andie Chandler always liked the idea of getting her TEARS rescue cat Sebastian involved in pet therapy. She grew up with cats and learned early on just how comforting a cat can be. Andie decided to sign up her rescue dog Rumba and Sebastian for volunteer work with Pets As Therapy (PAT). They make the perfect feline-canine team and are warming hearts at an old-age facility in Cape Town.

#### TELL US MORE ABOUT SEBASTIAN.

Sebastian is the most special cat, rather like a living teddy bear. He will jump on your lap at the first opportunity and then stay in almost any position you place him, totally uncomplaining. He just loves human affection. We had to stop having him sleep on our bed at night, as he used to push his way between us, getting as close to our heads as possible. In the small hours I would wake up having my hair 'groomed' by him, as he tugged and pulled at my messy tresses trying to smooth them down with his tongue!

#### WHAT QUALITIES DO CATS HAVE THAT MAKE THEM GOOD THERAPY PETS?

For an animal to become a therapy pet, he or she must be calm and gentle, unperturbed by sudden noises or movements and happy to be stroked fairly vigorously and held tightly by people who are desperate for some animal love. Patience is most definitely a necessary virtue, in both human and pet. I quickly learned that a dog and a cat make very different therapy pets. When I am alone, I can visit with only one of the animals, as we have to give them our undivided attention, but my husband and I can do a 'team visit' with both animals.

#### HOW DO PEOPLE REACT WHEN SEBBY COMES TO VISIT?

We can spend time with up to five people in their rooms on any one visit - any more than that is too much for him, so we try to see different people each time to give everyone a chance. If we could go every day there would be no complaints, the residents just love to have their chance at a personal visit from the PAT cat.