

Measures Owners Can Take in the Nursing Care of Elderly Dogs

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Hello everybody. I am Keiko Nakatsuka and a JAHA authorized dog-training instructor. Since 1993 I have spent about 15 years working as an instructor and during that time I have resolved many kinds of behavioral and other dog-related problems by working together with my students, [Slide 1].

Large numbers of dogs that were bought or adopted as puppies in the early years of the current pet boom are now reaching old age. As a result, we are now seeing a gradual increase in the sorts of problems that are characteristic of elderly dogs. I have accumulated practice in this area too.

In much the same way as elderly people, elderly dogs experience a range of medical problems that can be treated, but at the same time they also begin having various other troubles in daily life.

The photo in the slide shows my favorite pet dog Sally. She died at the age of 14 years and 8 months, but I learned a lot of things in the course of caring for her. My advice concerning how to take care of elderly dogs at home is based on my experience with my own family, including Bell and Jico, (now deceased), and my other precious dogs. Today, I am going to attempt to demonstrate some of the devices that can be used to help care for older dogs in daily life. Thank you in advance for your attention.

[Slide 2] First allow me to introduce myself in a bit more detail. I used to be an elementary school teacher. The subject 'Ethology', the scientific study of animal behavior, has a lot in common with human psychology. Since becoming a dog-training instructor and learning about the habits of dogs I have been amassing studies

and practice, together with dog owners. I think that the reason why I have been able to write so many books on the subject is that I have gathered the real voices of dog owners. In this context, I feel that the habit of writing things down is very important.

Keeping a notebook is a natural thing for a veterinary hospital nurse, so I first decided to write down everything asked to me by dog owners in a notebook. Then I realized it might be important to compile the answers to such questions and publish them in book form. So far I have managed to get along quite well using a method that includes survey-taking and asking people about things I have been unable to introduce in my books. In "Seikatsu Hot Morning", I was able to bring to light many of the problems encountered by elderly dogs. I was also the first instructor to hold classes for elderly dogs in Japan.

[Slide 3] As Dr. Wakayama has already explained, recently the environment for keeping dogs has improved due to higher levels of medical service and keeping dogs indoors, with the result that the lives of dogs have been gradually lengthening. The average lifespan of dogs in Japan has increased from 8.6 years in 1990 to 11.9 years today. In a 2006 report, the ratio of dogs over seven years old was 42.7%. In 2007, surprisingly, this ratio increased by over 10% to 55.3%.

The trend for large dogs has changed in this way. As a result, we are now in the midst of a problem with large elderly dogs. Since the defining characteristic of these animals is that they are large, the burden they place on their owners who care for them is correspondingly large. A similar problem with small elderly dogs is expected to come up in the future. Dachshunds, in particular, tend to develop problems with their legs and waist.

The dog-training school I have been running was also born out of the needs of the [pet boom] era. I established this school because I noticed that many people have trouble training large dogs. The dogs that were puppies at [the start of the pet boom] became elderly dogs in 2006, and are now in their final years. Upon seeing more senior members attending my elderly dog-training classes, other members with older dogs began to gather one by one.

At what age do we regard a dog as being elderly? I have a table comparing dogs and humans. Incidentally, how old is your dear pet dog? In my case, my eldest dog is now 14 and the youngest is five years old. Since elderly dog-training classes are a way of preparing the animals for getting old, the classes are centered on dogs aged between seven and ten years old. When large dogs reach the age of 15, they usually find it difficult even to get into a car, and their physical condition tends to alternate between good and bad days in a wave-like fashion. This makes it almost impossible for them to participate regularly in the classes.

Next, I will talk a bit more about why I started holding elderly dog-training classes. An important reason was because I began receiving many inquiries regarding elderly dogs from owners of pets that had graduated from my earlier classes.

In the case of a physical anomaly, it is often possible to resolve the trouble by consulting with a vet and having the animal treated. I realized it was important for owners to have a specific place where they could ask about and obtain answers for the problems encountered in elderly dogs. Essentially, this was to be a forum where owners could consult on how to deal with their favorite pet when the pet's habits and personality began to change as they aged, just as people do. So first of all I held a reunion that I called the "Roken Kyoshitsu" (Old Dog Classroom).

When the dogs and owners got together there was such a lot of fuss. These old dogs, that until then had been living a relaxed life at home, became so excited when they met up with their old pals that they even

started wetting themselves, one after another. Their owners were all veteran owners, so I'm sure they had already prepared their dogs for class by having them go to the toilet beforehand.

Since these same dogs had never wet themselves in the classes when they were young, the owners were disappointed that "aging leads to things like this." But at the same time they also understood first hand that every dog becomes like that if they live long enough.

The dogs confidently climbed onto the obstacle balance beam they had previously been so good at walking on before and enjoyed playing various games. They also enjoyed the stretching exercises. At the time, the practice of giving stretches and massages to elderly dogs wasn't very well known. But based on some information I obtained from overseas, I produced a program for the day in consultation with hospital veterinarians and veterinary nurses.

The dogs looked like they were feeling good. Moreover, the stretching and massage fully appealed to the owners' wish to touch their favorite pet dogs. Incidentally, my own Jiita joined the Old Dog Classroom when he was three years old. As he started so young, you could say he had an extremely long old age.

From these reunion classes, more and more owners gave voice to the opinion that we should start routine preparations for when our dogs get old. They could see old age looming up on their pets, and this marked the beginning of regular classes for elderly dogs. In starting up the Old Dog Classroom, I asked dog owners and vets for their opinions. After this, I established rules for the Old Dog Classroom. These rules are:

- Move slowly. Within the extent possible, get the dogs to act with the idea of expanding their threshold level just a little.
- Consider how to make the dogs feel good and have fun. This is a class for relaxing, and there should be absolutely no competition between the dogs.
- Be conscious of having a pleasant time with your own dog. Regard aging as a form of evolution and enjoy making new discoveries.

- Make the Old Dog Classroom a forum for information sharing with other owners.

Within these information exchange opportunities, the important thing is to not only encourage the sharing of knowledge but also the sharing of each other's feelings. After we had been holding the Old Dog Classroom for a while, we discovered that this sharing of feelings about old dogs was in fact the most important thing. I mentioned about Jiita earlier. This laid-back class appealed to him so much. In other classes, he would often get bored half way through but in this class he couldn't wait to join the other dogs. He really liked the relaxed atmosphere surrounding his seniors, an atmosphere in which he was not pushed very much. After witnessing this, I thought it was necessary to incorporate a similar kind of lure into everyday lessons too.

Therefore, as well as elderly dogs, nervous and easily frightened dogs also achieved very good results by joining this class. For me personally, this became an excellent opportunity to caution myself against turning dog-training classes into occasions for merely imposing learning or for passing tests.

At this point, I will introduce some examples of the sort of lessons we give in the Old Dog Classroom. Firstly, we give agility lessons as a preparation for growing old. Agility lessons can involve something like an obstacle race. For puppies, these lessons are used to give the dogs experience with various kinds of movement and various tools. For young adult dogs, they are used for practicing precise movements in order to avoid accidents when running at speed, jumping or tripping over. Elderly dogs need a reasonable amount of exercise. This exercise should be conducted at a slow pace with a focus on maintaining balance.

"Easy agility", which can be practiced at home as well as in class, helps to maintain physical function in elderly dogs while giving them the joy of being able to do things. In this way, we have the elderly dogs experience agility with the aim of improving their self-confidence. They gain the enjoyment by remembering what they

did in their young days.

Also, when their legs become weak older dogs tend to develop conditions such as hernias, etc. The agility exercises can be a useful preparation for rehabilitation if this does happen.

Recently, dog rehabilitation centers have been established and veterinary hospitals have begun popping up where vets and trainers perform psychotherapy-type treatments. When elderly dogs suddenly try to perform rehabilitation movements they can perform these movements without stress if they have experienced similar movements in the past. Now, I will show a video that has some actual instances of this.

- In the 'step-over' movement, it is very important for the dog to trip over. Pulling back the legs as in an "oops-a-daisy" fashion is also very meaningful. In this video, we use golf bars, but it is safer to use light, thin lengths of wood, if you have these at home.
- In the slalom, vets advise that it is better for the dog to move in a naturally forward-looking position because the load on the dog's body is less. Then, when the animal masters the technique, it does not pay too much attention to its owner.
- When encouraging a dog to climb over an obstacle, use something which is an appropriate height for the dog's agility so that the animal does not have to jump to get down, and will not be injured if it does jump down. In this video, after the dog sits, it is carried down.
- Crawling under a chain is something a dog can do pleasantly and with little load. We did this while tightly securing the chair by hand so that the dog would not get caught in or not tumble into the chair. You can try the same sort of thing at home with whatever materials are available. But pay attention so that the dog does not strain itself too much. Owners should do this while smiling and talking to the dog so that both animal and owner enjoy the experience.

Next, owners of elderly dogs often experience some nuisance relating to their pet's "food fixations". When the pet was young, its feeding habits were controlled by training. But when the dog becomes elderly, there may be behavior changes that owners often find

difficult to tolerate. For example, an elderly dog may begin to break things, intrude into an unexpected place, or produce ear-splitting barks in demands for food, etc.

Conversely, elderly dogs sometimes experience a period in which they will not or cannot eat. As owners, we want our dogs to eat, but if they are unwell and we try to force them to eat, the dog is put into a difficult position. So let me talk a little bit more now about these “food fixations”.

My favorite pet dog Sally began displaying an excessive urge to eat when she was around 12 years old. She became obsessive and her weight began to increase. She eventually gained more than five kilos, grew very fat, and totally lost the slim look of her youth.

Let me show you one picture of my memories of Sally. One day, I left her at home as usual. Then, when I came home from work... It was so terrible that I aimed my camera at her. I was dispirited to see that her personality had completely changed. I heard my husband say, “This is not the same Sally we knew before.”

The countermeasures we took against her obsession with food were as follows.

1. Don't let your dog get into bad habits. Manage [the pet's] food by not leaving it lying around outside of meal times, etc., change meal times and the number of meals served each day. (This is important from the standpoint of environment management when the dog is young). Also, re-examine the environment with an intention to start afresh.
2. Increase the volume of meals by soaking dog food in cold or warm water, or by adding vegetables.
3. Find creative ways of slowing the pace at which the dog eats.

As for changing our own thinking, owners need to recognize the importance of not just regulating how their dogs eat (by managing their meals), but also of saying “no” firmly when the dog is disobedient, being creative about feeding, and persuading reluctant dogs to eat, even if only at a slow pace.

Now, let me explain how to do all this in concrete terms. Firstly, you can scatter food. If a small dish is used, the meal becomes easier to eat this way. The dog can finish the entire meal very quickly.

Through changes such as switching from food bowls to ‘treasure sheets’ it may be possible to satisfy a dog’s hunting instinct, which is to eat slowly in the course of hunting for food. Dogs get pleasure from the expectation that there may be some more food somewhere. Even after they have eaten everything in sight they continue searching. Next, there is a device to ensure that dogs eat their food slowly while tasting it by, for example, putting several large food balls into a large food container to prevent the dog from eating too quickly. Pay attention to use balls that are large enough that they can’t be swallowed accidentally. You can buy special toys to use in the treasure hunting game, and I recommend you to use them. If you play the treasure hunting game using the whole house, it will look something like this. Almost all elderly dogs end up not being able to eat very well. One day they are suddenly no longer interested in eating. It will seem incredible that they were previously barking out their demand for food. So we should try to make eating as pleasant as possible for them. It is also important to adopt an attitude of, at least to a certain extent, accepting any barking for food when it occurs.

If older dogs demand food, grant them their wish to a small extent such as by giving them one small piece of food at a time, and then cease this after ten pieces. This should stop the anguished barking for food. I have heard that a similar method is also used in dealing with elderly people.

Finally, if owners are in distress they can obtain some peace of mind by sharing their experiences with other owners who have had similar situations. We have set up a teatime meeting where owners can talk about the ways in which they care for and live with their elderly dogs. Here they can find somebody to listen to their problems when they are feeling anxious. From time to time, owners bring along easy meals or snacks, which helps them with their own health management.

Everybody acknowledges that caring for an elderly dog is a path that every owner will have to follow eventually. By sharing stories they can apply other people's experience to their own dogs.

We also hold product experience meetings. Commercially available goods can be expensive and may end up being wasted if bought before they can be tried out. I have proposed that veterinary hospitals establish rental systems for such products.

Even if you don't take part in dog-training classes, please try to put into practice some of what you've heard here today. Another good idea is to ask the training school that your dog attended in the past to create an opportunity for elderly dog classes. I would also be very happy if veterinary hospitals could provide 'experience corners' in their waiting rooms.

Dog-owning acquaintances who meet up on walks often seem to have dogs of the same age, but I would recommend that you also talk to other owners with dogs of different ages to your own pets. Tell them your experiences and listen to theirs.

It is becoming easier to prepare for your own dog growing old by seeing how other elderly dogs are faring around you today. If you have prior knowledge, you will feel less anxious about the changes and if you can anticipate how your dog will get old in advance, it will not be such a shock.

So one thing you can begin doing right now is to exchange information with the dog-owner acquaintances you meet on walks. Please do so by all means

"Don't be angry at a puppy, as you yourself came along that path.

Don't laugh at an old dog, as you yourself are going along that path.

The path we have taken and the path we will take we will travel together.

Today's path is the one we are traversing now.

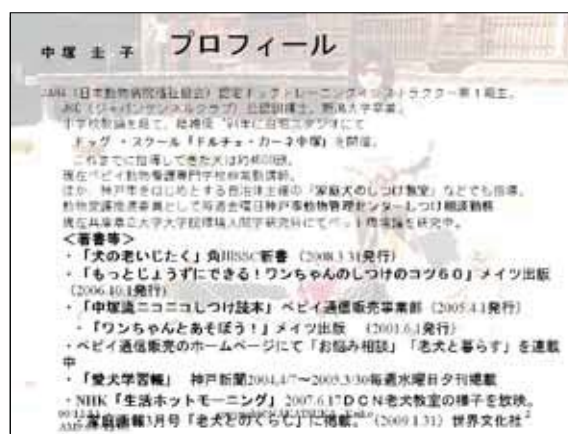
It is a path we can only take once."

The original version of this poem referred to a child instead of a puppy and an old person instead of an old dog. It is a poem my husband always murmurs when he sees his mother. Every day is a day for making memories of living together. Everyday is an occasion for bearing witness of having lived in this world.

My wish is that all dogs and all dog owners will walk pleasantly and treasure their final steps together, even if this requires great effort. Thank you all so much for listening.



【Slide 1】



【Slide 2】



【スライド3】

