

A purr-fect companion: Can robotic cats help isolated dementia patients?

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When Marlys Cordes flipped on the light in her daughter's bedroom, the last thing she expected to hear was a robotic meow. She had no idea how interactive the toy cat responsible, Silver, would be.

Silver is her 53-year-old daughter Christine Hasey's gray, life-like

animatronic cat. Delivered a week and a half ago as a surprise for Hasey, the pet is from the Louis and Anne Green Memory & Wellness Center at Florida Atlantic University.

Silver, who purrs, meows, blinks and rolls over, is one of more than 30 robotic cats the memory and wellness center uses to treat dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Although they've been used for over a year on campus, the cats are now going to homes to see how effective they are as treatment for the increased isolation brought on by the coronavirus pandemic.

Hasey is one of the first to receive a robotic cat at home.

She has dementia caused by Reye's syndrome, and before quarantine began, she attended therapy five days a week at the memory center. There, she did not have her own robotic cat, but she had structure to ground her days and friends to make crafts with. But when the center switched to teletherapy because of the coronavirus pandemic, Hasey had to stay home, drastically magnifying her seclusion.

"Especially since this coronavirus hit, she's not motivated to do much at home," Cordes said of her daughter. A typical day for Hasey involves watching "Golden Girls" episodes, completing word search puzzles, going out for two walks and sleeping.

"Not much else interests her," Cordes added.

But now, after just a week and half with Silver, Hasey is improving. She regularly talks to the toy cat, brushes its fur and jokes about it acting drunk when it rolls over.

Hasey knows Silver isn't alive, but she loves and interacts with her robot pet. And because Silver doesn't eat, poop, shed or pee, it's not a burden

on the rest of her family.

"It makes me feel really encouraged to see her playing with that cat," Cordes said. "I'm happy that she has anything to stimulate her mind and body."

Hasey's cognitive impairment is intermediate. She recognizes her surroundings and the day, month and year. She still argues with her mom sometimes, like any mother-daughter duo. But she often seems lost in thought, and she needs a walker to keep her balance.

To slow the progression of her dementia and keep her mind as sharp as possible, Hasey needs not just pills but positive social interaction. Silver provides the latter.

FAU registered nurse and assistant professor Lisa Wiese said holding on to empathy is crucial for people battling cognitive impairment. Because animals have triggered empathy and other positive emotions in patients, Wiese said, a former student thought robotic pets might do the same.

She was right.

The robotic cats project, first introduced by former student Bryanna Streit last summer for three months, not only got all 12 participants cooing and smiling in person, it even reduced their overall anxiety and depression by 6 points and their dementia loss by 1-to-2 points, Wiese said.

"We're so thrilled it's working for cognitively impaired adults because there's very few things that stimulate them," she said.

Now, Melissa Johnston, a nursing doctoral student at FAU, is carrying on part two of the pet project by evaluating how the robotic cats help at

home during quarantine.

The memory and wellness center has 30 cats for cognitively impaired adults ages 55 and older who want to participate. The cats are free of charge for participants as they were already paid for by grant funding through the university or donated by the Florida Department of Elder Affairs.

To get involved, email Wiese at lwiese@health.fau.edu. Participants will be required to give consent, work out a way to receive the cat and regularly complete mood scales and phone questionnaires during the 12-week project.

Johnston said she hopes to start the project by July.

"I think this has the potential to help a lot of people," she said.

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