

## Finding Happiness With Ferra-Care

**Ferrets bring joy into the stress-filled lives of an Alzheimer's patient and her daughter.**

*By Deva Kolb*

What is Ferra-Care? It is caring for an elderly or sick person with the use of ferrets. Simple as that!

Several organizations take animals into nursing homes, and this practice successfully raises patients' spirits. Very few of these organizations, however, use ferrets; and fewer still visit the homes of elderly people with Alzheimer's disease (AD).

Growing old is not for the faint of heart. As abilities fade and depression increases, for some people the only place to find comfort or solace is in their mind. They begin escaping more often and for longer periods of time to find that place of comfort and safety. After months or years of this, the "other" place becomes more real, while the real world becomes more distant.

Being a caregiver to my mom, an Alzheimer's patient, I observed her transition over a period of six years. Where does she go when she goes inside her mind? What goes on in there? How do I get her back? Where is she when she looks right at me but doesn't see me? How can I talk with her if she's not there mentally? These questions have yet to be answered by the medical profession. In my experience, the more questions I ask doctors, the less they seem to know about this part of the disease.

I am told to just make her life as happy as possible. That is simply not good enough for me. If I had answers, perhaps I could make her life happier. If I knew what I was working with, maybe I could counteract it better.

### A Furry Answer

Anyone who has been through this knows all too well the heartbreak of watching a loved one's life fade. Online support groups offer help, but there's little actual help in the home. In the evenings, when I am lucky enough to have a little time to myself, I end up asking, "What can I do to improve the quality of Mom's life?"

My answer? Ferrets. Yep, I said ferrets. When I realize I am talking to a body with an absent mind, I put a ferret in her arms. She instinctively starts petting the warm little furball. Within minutes she starts humming to the ferret, and then eventually she starts talking to the ferret. Then she looks up and actually sees me. Then she starts talking to me. She's back!

Finding my mother on her bed crying, feeling she has nothing to live for and that she is a burden, I hand her a ferret or two. They start playing on the bed and soon she stops crying and starts laughing. She picks up one of the ferrets, and starts hugging and kissing it. "I love these guys so much," she says. "I wish I had a hundred of them."

### Living The Ferrety Life

Walking out into the living room at 3 or 4 a.m., I've found Mom pacing because she can't sleep. She carries a ferret in her arms, sound asleep, while she strokes it. During the day, she uses her walker to move around the house, and she puts the ferrets in the lower basket or on the seat of the walker to give them rides.

This is a lot of fun for the ferrets. They climb onto the walker on their own and look at her when they want a ride. Mom can't resist this and ends up walking them and getting exercise that she needs — a win-win situation.

I found Mom giving the ferrets candy from a candy dish one day. I tried to explain that candy was very bad for ferrets. She looked sadly at me and said, "But, they love it!" I am sure they do, but that doesn't mean candy is good for them.

I told some friends of mine about the candy dish incident, and one of them sent a candy dish with ferret treats in it. Mom is now able to give the ferrets "candy" and everyone is happy. The ferrets don't like these treats, but they are kind enough to take them and run off with them so Mom thinks they are happily eating them somewhere. I then retrieve the treats from under the beds and put them back in the ferret's candy dish. We never seem to run out of ferret treats!

Mom developed her own communication with the ferrets. One thing she loves to do is steal all their toys from beneath the bed using a long-handled back scratcher. She then hides them in a high place, where only she knows their location. The poor ferrets look under the bed, see that their toys are gone and then run up and stare at her. They know she took them.

She looks at them innocently and says, "What?" Like she didn't have anything to do with the disappearing toys.

#### Calling Dr. Ferret!

The ferrets rarely go up on Mom's bed, but when she isn't feeling well and takes a rest, often one of the ferrets goes on her bed and either curls up in her blouse or under the blanket to take a nap with her. If Mom needs to spend time in the bathroom, the ferrets scratch at the door until she lets them in with her. They then curl up on the little rug and stay with her.

If Mom is asleep, working in her crafts room or in her favorite chair reading, the ferrets go off to sleep. But when she is physically or mentally upset, they come out and be with her. How they know is beyond me. I watch how the ferrets act around her to determine what her condition is.

No dog or a cat has developed this sort of bond with her. Only the ferrets have been able to weasel into her brain and see what is happening. If they cuddle and sleep with her, I know she is having a bad time. If they look at her and leave, I know she is doing OK. These little fur-angels have been an incredible comfort to Mom.

They have also been a great comfort to me as they seem to be able to answer more questions than the doctors — and they are a lot less expensive! Perhaps ferrets can't talk, but they are intelligent and find ways to show you what they want. You just have to be willing to watch them and interpret their actions.

#### Find The Perfect Fit

After visiting the home of a friend who owns many ferrets, Mom gets excited on the drive home and asks if we could get more ferrets. Her spirit is higher, her energy level has increased and she has taken an interest in things outside of her mind after playing with ferrets.

Ferrets aren't for everyone and it is strongly advised that you research them before obtaining them. Ferret-proofing your home; types of cages, foods and toys that are good for ferrets; and setting up a medical expense account for them to handle any emergencies that could happen are only a few of the things you need to know before you adopt or buy a ferret. Many online ferret forums and mailing lists can provide answers to any ferret care questions. The most informative and friendliest one I found is [LovingFerrets.com](http://LovingFerrets.com).

But for those who have ferrets, there is no better pet on the planet. Some ferrets make great companions to the sick or elderly, as in the case of my mom and me. Not all ferrets are suited for this job, but when it works out, it is a great source of comfort for someone with special needs.