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Living With Blind and Deaf Pets



JEN REEDER

Philadelphia resident Karen Belfi's dog, Ray Charles, was born without eyes, possibly because his mother had a virus. But when visitors meet the 12-year-old husky/collie/shepherd mix for the first time, he navigates the house so well that "they don't believe he can't see," Belfi says.

Belfi has been so inspired by her pet that she cofounded a support group for owners of blind dogs, Blind Dog Rescue Alliance, which has an email list with more than 4,000 members. Often, owners of dogs who have recently become blind due to glaucoma, diabetes, or from another disease ask if they should have their dog euthanized because of perceived quality-of-life issues.

"It's nice that we can tell people, 'It's not a big deal. They're fine — they're happy dogs.'"

Veterinarians face the same question from owners of newly blind or deaf pets, according to Emily Mao, DVM. In more than seven years of working at Studio City Animal Hospital in Southern California, Mao has treated numerous cats and dogs with disabilities and concludes that, with their other acute senses, the animals can have a "perfectly good" quality of life.

"Animals are very adaptable — owners shouldn't be devastated," Mao says.

She recalls a patient named Wolfgang, a blind miniature schnauzer, who loved to play with his sighted sister in the dog park. Their owners placed a bell on her collar so that Wolfgang would chase his sister by following the jingling sound.

Other tips for helping a blind pet adjust include using scented oils, shampoos, or perfumes on other pets or people; teaching a blind dog the "watch" command (clicker training can be useful); and getting down on your hands and knees to the pet's level to look for things that are sharp or potentially harmful.



Emily Harley's cat Bama, a white Turkish Angora, was found abandoned at a racetrack outside of Birmingham, Ala. — presumably because she was born deaf. But in the Harley household, she's proven to be very playful, which makes discipline a challenge.

"When she's picking at furniture or clawing at a window screen, you have to get up and immediately go to her to address it" — not by verbally scolding, but by making a face that conveys disapproval, Harley explains.

Bama

The biggest issue is keeping Bama inside as much as possible, because when she is outside, she can be badly startled by other animals that she can't hear approaching.



Louise Sattler, owner of Signing Families in Maryland, trained both of her German shepherd mixes — including Tess, who is deaf — to understand sign language when they were puppies. Signs that they commonly use include sit, stay, come, eat, car, bed, outside, walk, and finished.

"Communication has never been an issue," Sattler says.

Gwen Cooper, author of *Homer's Odyssey: A Fearless Feline Tale, or How I Learned About Love and Life with a Blind Wonder Cat*, says that people should not have reservations about adopting a pet with a disability. In fact, she credits Homer, who was born without eyes, with saving her life. About 10 years ago, Homer woke her up at 4 a.m. because a strange man was standing in her bedroom. Homer hissed and growled and "clawed like crazy" until the man ran off.

"I always say that, once upon a time, I saved his life," Cooper says, "and years later, he returned the favor."

Jen Reeder writes about pet health topics from her home office in Denver.

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- Rescue organizations
 - www.blinddogrescue.com
 - www.blindcatrescue.com
- Financial help for emergency treatment
 - www.mollyshope.org
- Shelter for special needs pets
 - www.homeforlife.org
- Gwen Cooper's website
 - www.gwencooper.com
- Deaf Dog Education Action Fund
 - www.deafdogs.org



Gwen Cooper and Homer.
Courtesy of Jessica Hills

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