

# **Living with Chronic Pain and Animal Companions**

Photographies and Stories





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## Introduction

# Visual Stories of living with chronic pain and animal companions

Photographs,  
Texts  
and Design  
Curated By  
**Hafsah Syed**

These visual stories and photographs were produced as part of an undergraduate research study, made possible by the University of Calgary, the MITACS Research Training Award, and the Mabbott Leadership Award, offered through the Faculty of Nursing.

## Project Team

**Dr. Eloise Carr**  
**Dr. Liza McCoy**  
**Hafsah Syed**

This project takes a novel approach in health research: photo-elicitation. We embraced qualitative, participatory-action research, which empowered participants to take digital photographs to visually represent their experiences. Hafsah Syed integrated these photographs during the second phase of the research: the photo-elicitation interviews. During the individual interviews, each participant discussed their photographs and their first-hand accounts of their lived experiences with chronic pain and animal companionship. We received glimpses into their lives, and share this with you here.



Institutional ethical approval was obtained (#REB19-1636). Names have been replaced with pseudonyms, to protect the participants' and their pets' identities. Each page that follows includes one photograph from a participant, and an excerpt from their interview. Together, the stories tell how animal companionship affects four areas of one's life with chronic pain: (1) physical health; (2) mental health; (3) social interactions; and (4) challenges.

The photographs and interviews were completed between the years 2020 and 2022; during this time, the COVID-19 pandemic occurred—a period of heightened isolation. The research project provided a new means to connect; the participants share testimonies of resilience, love, strength, and hope.

## Eliza and Grace



"She was a gem. This picture captures her essence, peacefully gazing out into the water, and what lay beyond; we both loved the water. Even after her passing away, the water brings me peace. If I reflect upon the water or Grace, I can bring the pain to a better place than it was before.

Even as a puppy she was an old soul. She donated blood, kids read to her at the library, and she was in the Children's Hospital Stampede parade. She also visited seniors, patients in the psychiatric units at Foothills Hospital, and she was involved with non-profits (Oops-a-Dazy Rescue, pawsitivematch rescue, Nation Service Dogs, and PALS). When she passed away, we couldn't get another Bouvier des Flandres because she was the gem of all gems; it wouldn't be fair to a new puppy to be constantly compared to her."

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*Eliza is a 61 year old type 1 diabetic (diagnosed in her first year of life). She suffers with chronic pain in her lower back, hips, upper torso, including her arms and hands due to fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis, & osteoarthritis. She also deals with New Daily Persistent Headaches. She has a dog named Doolittle, and her previous dog pictured here.*



## Frank and Joe



"No matter how much money you have, you're never going to have enough— it's [about] what you do with the money. So, I got a dog... [now] I couldn't imagine my life without him... You know, a few hours with JoJo and lying there and— I'm being honest with this— takes away my pain. It's costing a certain factor of our system money, because I'm no longer paying into the medication at the rate that I [would]."

[Joe] is the type of dog that, in the morning, he gets you up. If you're tired, you're depressed, or you want to lie down- it isn't happening! He gets you up, he gets you laughing, and then we do our stretching. Movement, stretching, and laughter— oh, laughter is very important for pain [management].

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*Frank experiences chronic pain around his body, which has impacted not only his daily life, but also his ability to join the workforce, he expressed. He lives with his family, son, and a beloved dog.*

## Rob and Max



"He never leaves my side. He's saved my life, in more ways than one.

There are choices to live or die. Whether to take your life or not— there's always a choice— but, my dog is my choice to stay here.

To me, the medications are a way out of the pain— I've got so many lying around the house, it's very easy to take them all— but, *he's* always here for me. My psychologists asked me 'what keeps you here?' It's my dog, 100% of the time. He doesn't know— he would just never see me again, and that would be the worse thing ever— that keeps me from doing anything. There are choices and, hopefully, always the right one.

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*Rob is 60 years old and has lived with chronic pain for 10 years now. He experiences chronic pain in his legs, arms, neck, and other areas due to fibromyalgia. He has a dog, as pictured, who has been by his side for 3 years and counting.*



## Crystal and Don



"It's really easy to get into your head when you're going through something on the inside, but no one can see it on the outside — like chronic pain.

So, when I get really into my head and I start to spiral, and he comes out, it's [as though] he takes me out of my head and into the present. Now I'm giggling, playing with him, watching him flop around, and [being] silly. It brings a break into that mental spiral— having him on me, purring and warm— it just feels so incredibly lovely, and it just makes me so happy. I love when he comes and snuggles. He contributes a lot to my mental health— in a really beautiful way.

It was funny because, when I first adopted him, I started to realize how beneficial he was— saving me [in] the same way that I was saving him. The way we found each other— it was just so good and so lovely."

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*Crystal is 28 years old and experiences chronic pain in the lower back, right shoulder, and neck after a motor vehicle accident in 2018. 2018 is also the year she adopted her cat, who she describes as a companion.*

## Emily and Sam



[The cats] know when I am sick, flaring, or upset and [they] will come check on me, comfort [me], or hangout with me. Seeing them sleeping, when they are completely zonked out, immediately makes me feel more peaceful and happy. They both have fantastic colouring, and I enjoy their beauty. Feeling their soft coats is soothing. Making them happy, by lavishing them with attention, makes me happy too.

Maybe it's selfish, but I like that they need me. Otherwise, my day-to-day life would be almost entirely about me. That may sound strange, especially to people who have spouses, children, or jobs, but I have none of those things, and haven't for 23 years now.

When those first years brought severe disability, I needed help to care for my cat. Like most people with chronic pain, I have some fear about my illness becoming worse. So, knowing it's possible to be that disabled again is scary.... I don't worry about that a lot because my illness and pain are managed, but it's a realistic possibility that things could change. Fortunately, it's also a realistic possibility that things never get that rough again.

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*Emily began experiencing chronic pain in 1999- when she was 27 years old- accompanied by fibromyalgia and rheumatoid arthritis now. An accident in 2019 further impacted her mobility. She lives with two rescue cats, rescued in 2018, who provide her loving companionship.*



## Kathy and Snowy



"We walk for two hours. Now I am more active. My [chronic] pain usually [occurs] after midnight, so it impacts my sleeping everyday. Before I had this dog, I use to wake up every hour... now I can sleep for at least a few hours... Now I am more stronger and more physically active. I can do more physical activities— like dancing. Before, I had no energy to do them. I stopped dancing, for almost a year because I had no energy to do it. Now I am able to do it again.

... I have been taking some medication[s] because of chronic pain, and it's really impacted my mental and emotional health. Sometimes I get frustrated, depress[ed], or upset easily. And so, the dog feels like family, and brings happiness. Last time I said that I feel hopeless because of the chronic pain— like I don't have good sleep every day— but this dog actually makes me feel like [there is] hope for me. And [I] might have three kids, but this dog is very special and even brings hope for me... it's like a light from the sky. [It] makes me mentally stronger..."

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*Kathy is 39 years old and experiences endometriosis-related pelvic pain, which impacts her sleep and energy levels. She describes her dog as "more precious than a baby" and says "it gives me a reason to take care of myself."*

## Acknowledgement

# Thank you

"I'd like to be part of your research," I approached Dr. Eloise Carr during an undergraduate course that she was teaching. That warm interaction was the beginning of an invaluable learning experience with the Human-Animal Pain Interaction (HAPI) research team at the Faculty of Nursing, which inspired the proposal for this study. This study was made possible by the generous support of the MITACS Research Training Award, the Mabbott Leadership Award, and the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Calgary.

My objective was to develop core leadership skills in the field of qualitative health research. With the mentorship of Dr. Carr and Dr. Liza McCoy (sociology) I focused on developing: (1) interdisciplinary collaboration; (2) critical appraisal; (3) meaningful patient and public engagement; (4) synthesis of research; (5) effective communication; (6) knowledge translation; and (7) application of nursing knowledge.

Thank you to Dr. Carr for being an exemplary model of leadership, and for providing invaluable and unwavering support since the inception of this undergraduate research. Thank you to Dr. McCoy, for generously providing a breadth of knowledge and expertise around the research methodology of photo-elicitation. I would also like to express gratitude to the participants for taking part in this photo-elicitation study—thank you for sharing your experiences of chronic pain, animal companionship, and your testimonies of resilience, hope, and strength.

In qualitative health research, we serve in pursuit of better health outcomes and better quality of life for people. This opportunity has helped me gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for this field of study, and the valuable leaders in health research. I am thankful.

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**Dr. Eloise Carr  
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Hafsah Syed**



**UNIVERSITY OF  
CALGARY**