Having a pet when living with illness or disability

Pets can play such an important part in the life of those with chronic illnesses or disabilities. No matter what the breed, if chosen suitably for the situation, they can provide so much good; love, happiness, comfort, company, healing and motivation. I highly recommend pets as a part of the healing (and general living!) process. Obviously, certain factors must be aligned, such as support from others on days you are not well enough to provide care, and suitability for animals in your place of living.

Last year in May, after months and months of research, I finally met the 10 week old beautiful boy who decided he wanted me to be his human. There were two pups to choose from – torture! – but as they both sat on my lap, tiny and timid, I was drawn to the smaller and more quiet of the two. He was so still and gentle that I was prompted to ask the breeder if he was healthy. As he played with his mother and siblings, I came to see a special, inquisitive spark, and absolutely fell for him. The big decision was made, and he came home with me that day – and life has been so much better for it.

Before Captain Albi joined my family's ranks, I rarely went downstairs or outside. My strength and energy levels kept me between the bed, couch, bathroom and kitchen. The first week I had Albi in my care, my body ached and throbbed in every

muscle! He was only 1.8 kilograms, but bending, lifting, squatting and walking up and downstairs, all tormented my inactive body. However as the days went by, my strength increased, born out of the necessity to care for the cutest ball of fluff who needed frequent garden trips, brushing, feeding and vet visits. Such simple activities, but major physio for me. Now, a year on, I find stairs much easier, I sit outside and enjoy the sunshine more often, and I am slightly less weak – all thanks to my tiny boy (who now proudly weighs in at 4.8 kilograms!). We also go for short walks from time to time when I am up to it. Having someone who motivates you to go to the park (perhaps out of guilt!) can go a long way; just be mindful of not overdoing it.

The happiness, love, comfort and company that he provides me is immeasurable. We have established a routine whereby, after his morning walk with my mum, and breakfast, he comes into my room, and snuggles in for a sleep. His favourite spot is pressing up to my back, with his head on my pillow! Many days, I wake up hanging painfully off the bed, having been pushed by the tiny mound of cuteness nearly off my double bed! However, how can you not be happy when you begin the day with such a lovely being cuddled up to you? I really can't imagine anything better!

He is so patient; he knows now that I sleep late, and he rarely intentionally wakes me now. When I do move, he is so excited and showers me with licks. I can tell he is keen to get up, but has quietly waited for me (although, sometimes he is so sleepy he doesn't want to move, but always follows me). For the rest of the day, he Is my shadow. He loves my family,

but is generally wherever I am. It is so different from a year ago, when I would miserably lie in bed, feeling unwell and bored (though with frequent family visits of course!). He sleeps next to me on the couch, sits at my feet at the table, and gives me massive greetings after the rare times we are apart.

Occasionally the exuberance or puppy naughtiness can be too much for me. Chasing after stolen socks or being barked at non- stop at point blank range is not so compatible with light headedness, fatigue and pain! However, I have a great support team in my family who always take over when I can't – including trips to the garden when the stairs become unachievable for me!

Having a puppy for company makes me smile. I still can't believe he is here. He makes me laugh constantly, he gives awesome cuddles, he licks tears off my face, he gets me moving; I am so grateful for his presence. If you're in any doubt, I am here to say: as long as you have the back up support, get an animal! It will be the most therapeutic and awesome decision you have ever made!