Publisher’s Letter

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I live with a sock monster. My dog, Lucy, really likes socks. They are her favorite things in the whole world. Dirty socks and clean socks. Dress socks and athletic socks. When I come home at night and finally get around to taking off my shoes, she waits expectantly and licks her lips in anticipation. She wants my socks bad.

Lucy, a five-year old medium-sized yellow lab, knows that socks come in pairs. When she gets one freshly dirty one, it’s not enough. She waits for the other one. She takes pairs of my dirty socks to my roommate, Sarah, and brings her dirty pairs to me, but mostly she scatters them in the living room, which resembles a war zone with many sock casualties.

Lucy also counter-surfs and grabs things like umbrellas or watches or sunglasses and runs off and chews on them. Just the other day, in the middle of my hurried morning routine, I got out of the shower to find that she had chewed through the Ziploc snack-size bag of meds I had prepared for the day. She was brazenly tasting each one of the pills from it, but not eating any. Like her dad, she didn’t think they tasted very good. As I surveyed the torn pieces of plastic and the now-gooey protease inhibitors all over my bed, I thought, “This is not charming. This is not adorable. Why can’t you play with your dog toys instead of my pills!”

Don’t get me wrong -- Lucy is, in many other ways, very well-behaved. She’s just curious and has her fair share of quirks. Sarah and I adopted Lucy just over a year ago, and I didn’t know then that she would change my life for the better.

Just as I was feeling a little self-conscious about my growing feelings for Lucy, studies showing that having close attachments to pets reduces depression came to my attention. I began to think about my own depression which has been much better this last year, the first year we’ve had a dog. Coincidence? Perhaps. But let me try to explain.

In the past when I would feel depressed, I’d become preoccupied with negative thoughts. My HIV would seem impossible to beat. I’d have thoughts of giving up. I’d search for the motivation to take care of myself, but would often come up empty. One defeated thought would lead to another, and next thing you know I would be spiraling deeper into a mind-set of inevitable disease and death. Lucy interrupts that pattern. Her cool, wet nose, nudging me to wrestle, makes me snap out of it quickly.

One of the more insidious facets of depression is that you feel profoundly alone but, at the same time, you just can’t stand the thought of being with other people. Reconciling those two feelings is

near impossible, but facing your dog or cat is not as hard as facing the world.

Relatively speaking, pets don't need or want very much from you. Food. A litter-box. To be walked. Simple, straightforward affection. They are amazing listeners, and they don't talk back. Best of all, they aren't bothered by your ups and downs. Their love is unconditional in a way that human love can only approximate.

I try to return that love in ways that I'm sure Lucy appreciates but is unaware of. For example, getting a clothes hamper with a lid would put an end to the sock problem. But I don't. Dirty socks are her passion, so I should at least tolerate that, even though it's disgusting to me and a little out of control.

Coming home and fretting about the sock problem, or watching her enjoy herself so innocently, helps me gain perspective. It's so easy to get caught up in the stresses of life: work, friends, family and, especially, taking care of my health. It all makes me cranky. But Lucy is the crankiness cure.

And if all that isn't enough, getting so depressed that I don't leave the house, like I used to do, just isn't an option, because she has to be walked. No matter how lousy I feel, I seem to be able to do at least that.

I realize that if I were sicker, taking care of Lucy would be harder to do, and, cruelly, that would also be a time that I would need her most. Fortunately, there are organizations across the country that help people with HIV and AIDS care for their pets when they cannot. There are PAWS (Pets Are Wonderful Support) and PALS (Pets Are Loving Support) chapters across the country that provide an array of services. Check out the PALS website, www.sonic.net/~pals/links/links.html to find a listing of over 40 groups.

As I write this, that crazy dog Lucy is upside-down on the floor, rolling around making Chewbacca sounds trying to get my attention. Even though she gets all the dirty socks she wants, I do try to keep my watch, sunglasses and meds away from her. Still, when she hears the rattle of the pill bottle, she thinks it's food or a toy or a game -- and for me, she makes it so, for a few moments at least.

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