

Senior Dogs, Best Lives: The Four Pillars To Longevity

Speaker Key

SG Susan Garrett

Transcript

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I have a friend that I've known for probably 30 years, and we get together almost weekly for coffee. We discuss dogs pretty much entirely during that coffee visit. Recently, we were talking about senior dogs and why it is that there are so many senior dogs that make their way to a rescue, or people give up on their dogs, because this friend of mine is a Veterinary Technician and has been as long as I've known her.

So, she's seen both the best and the worst of people and their pets. And we wondered, how could people miss out on what we consider a privilege. The privilege of living with a senior dog. And I decided maybe people just don't realize what might be possible. And that's what brought me to today's Shaped by Dog episode.

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Hi, I am Susan Garrett. Welcome to Shaped by Dog. I'm going to share with you today what I consider the four pillars to giving your senior dog a life filled with fulfillment and purpose. But first, let's talk about what is a senior dog? Because there's a lot of different definitions out there. Often people say, "Well, my dog is over the age of seven, therefore my dog is senior."

And they will then start to adjust that dog's life based on a number. As the old saying goes for us humans, age is just a number. I, at 64 and a half, do a lot of things people 55 and a half can't do. So, age is just a number with your dog. Please don't make decisions based on a number on the calendar.

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Because I've had dogs who at 13 years of age seem to have really hit this cognitive decline, physically yes, they were a little bit slower, but cognitively, sometimes they'd like stare at a spot on the floor, and they wouldn't know where they were. That started at 13. Yet I've had other dogs who've lived to be almost 18 years old who showed no signs of cognitive decline.

Physically, yes, their body started to fail them, but cognitively, they were still engaged with me in just about anything we did together. And today I have two dogs who technically are senior dogs. My dog Momentum will be 11 years old in March, and she routinely gets confused with a 2 to 5 year old dog.

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And my dog Swagger, who will turn 15 in January, just a couple of months from now, he definitely doesn't act like a dog approaching his 15th birthday, even though he's lived more than half of his life with a very serious heart condition.

So, what is it that allows some dogs to have this rapid decline and other dogs seem to just keep thriving as they get older? I believe there's a lot of things involved, and in this episode, I collectively have put them into four pillars that I think are really important to support our senior dogs.

But I also think it starts with you. What do you believe? I always have a goal that my senior dogs are gonna live to be 20. Twenty would be a benchmark I can't wait to celebrate. Twenty is the milestone I want for each and every dog that comes into my home as a puppy. And I know it's possible because I know other dogs in history have lived to be 20.



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But people's beliefs sometimes, is what dictates what's possible for a senior dog. I think it's pretty much like people, if you have a person who once they get older, maybe their body starts to fail them. People look at them as old people and maybe don't even involve them in conversations. And then those people lose their purpose.

And once a person loses their purpose, you'll see them decline rapidly and I believe the same is true for our dogs. So first up is your own mindset. How about you join me in aiming that every dog that comes into your home is going to be a 20-year-old dog. Now, what are those four pillars that are gonna help get you there?

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I've divided the groupings into *physical wellness*, *nutritional needs*, *emotional connection and joy*, and *cognitive functioning*. So first up is physical wellness and topping the list of physical wellness, and I think one of the things that age dogs more rapidly than anything else is 'What is a healthy weight for your dog?' Knowing what a healthy weight is.

I mean, I've seen Border Collies that have been 65 to 85 pounds and people say, "Yeah, I've got one of those bigger Border Collies." My Border Collies always hover around 30 pounds for my females, 30 to 33 pounds, and my males are 38 to 40 pounds. Now, that can change, my two-and-a-half-year-old male Prophet is only 29 to 30 pounds.

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It can be different, but the vast majority of people have their dogs too heavy. I don't care what the excuse is, 'my family feeds them too many cookies', 'they get into the cat food'. You can make this happen. If you knew, by having your dog be overweight, you are dramatically shortening their life, wouldn't you make it a priority to make sure that dog does get their weight cut down.

Now, an uneducated person might look at my dogs and go, "Oh my gosh, they're way too skinny." And I don't believe your dogs need to be in the weight mine are necessarily. Because my dogs are athletes and so they look like athletes. You don't have to have the muscle conditioning that my dogs have, but definitely you can have the weight at a healthy level.

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Oftentimes, people say to me, "Well, my Veterinarian says he's okay." Well, your veterinarian, a lot of times, they don't want to, unless your dog is morbidly obese, they're not gonna say anything because they don't want to cause friction in the relationship with you. And so, they're going to say things like, "He looks okay to me."

A healthy weight is a dog that you can see an uptuck, you can see the dog's last rib if they're a smooth-coated dog. That is a healthy weight. Okay, under physical wellness for our senior dogs, definitely healthy weight has got to happen. Let it be a gradual fitness and change of nutrition that gets your dog to that healthy weight.

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We're gonna look at things like movement. You know, with humans, you hear the expression that "motion is lotion." Absolutely the same for our dogs. Get them moving, get the joints lubricated. Motion is lotion, not just once a week, but on the regular, throughout the day. Mobility, proprioception, I'm going to add to that category, strength.



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And probably should come first right after weight management is pain awareness because a dog who looks like they're slowing down could just be a way of masking. Slowing down doesn't always mean that they're getting old. Slowing down can mean that they're masking some pain.

And I know that better than anyone because my dog Swagger, when he got to be 12 years old, he started declining and it didn't make sense to me because he didn't have a super long career because of his heart issue that came up when he was just six years old.

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It was a friend of mine, Dr. Sherman Canapp, who said to me, "I think your dog's got Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever." And I believe he's probably had it for two or three years looking back at how this decline happened. In the last year since he's been treated for this, he has turned into a different dog. The decline turned around, and it started heading the other way.

Slowing down doesn't mean it is natural aging. Dig deeper. See if there's a possible reason for a what should be a normal and healthy dog suddenly hitting a wall. Now the exercise portion of physical wellness, there's so many things I could share with you.

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So if you would like me to do a follow-up episode on how we can curate an easy exercise program for our senior souls, just jump over to [our YouTube channel](#) and leave me a comment and I will be sure to share with you some of the things that I do with my dog and how you can build up to be doing these things with your senior dog.

But here's the thing. If you're listening to this episode and you have a two-year-old dog or a five-year-old dog, you can start now. You can start with a baseline. So, I knew things that Swagger could do as a 2-year-old, and I use that as a baseline as he got older to see where his range of motion and where his strength has fallen down, so we can work on that.

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So, if you would like to know what is included on what we call the OG Flow or Senior Fitness around here, just leave a comment on this episode and I will be sure to fill you in. So, after our dog's physical wellness is considered and worked on, on the regular, there's nutrition. Now, if you've listened to Shaped by Dog on the regular, you know that [I do feed my dogs raw](#), and I believe it makes a big difference.

When I talked about how I saw a decline in my dogs cognitively as 13 to 14-year-old dogs. Those were when I fed kibble. When I switched to raw feeding, I just didn't see that cognitive decline. So, I'm a big proponent of raw feeding. But I get that for whatever reason right now, you don't feel comfortable doing it. That's okay.

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Even if you add 10 to 20% fresh fruits and vegetables, lightly steamed broccoli, spinach, some berries in particular apples, bananas. If you can add 10 to 15%, take out a little of the kibble because we don't want to increase weight and add some fresh fruits and vegetables.

That alone is gonna make a massive difference to your dog. Because the food you feed and the supplements you give your senior dog can help with things like decreasing inflammation, increasing energy, and supporting good digestion.



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You're gonna see it in not only in the brightness of the dog's eyes, their ability to do more, but also in things like their skin condition, the dullness or the shininess of their fur. My third pillar is one near and dear to my heart, it is emotional connection and joy. For me, emotional connection starts with daily conversations with your dog.

And put up your hand if you are somebody who talks to your dog on the regular. I believe this is a twofold thing. Number one, nobody on this planet knows for sure what our dogs do and do not understand. Yes, we know that they can understand our emotions. They can feel and respond to our emotions, that they respond to intonation. But how do we know they aren't even reading our minds?

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For me, I want to err on the side of giving my dog a fulfilled life, and I'm going to talk to them and tell them daily how amazing they are. What I think is so fabulous about them. Celebrate little things they do every day. Build anticipation for something. "Uh oh! Is it time for dins in the bowl?!" Get them excited so that they, "Oh, it's time for dins in the bowl!"

"Dins in the bowl, my friend!" I sing to my dogs when it's time for their dinner. Things that you're going to do, build some anticipation for it so they get excited so that they get a little bit of emotion associated with something that you two are going to do together.

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And as we've mentioned here on Shaped by Dog before, [big adventure time for senior dogs](#). I just think it's so important and it can take as little as 30 seconds out of your day to do something one-on-one with your senior dog that makes them feel special.

Now, I am so blessed because I have people who work here who, when I don't get a chance to spend that special time with each one of my senior dogs, that I know that there's somebody else in this house that is going to do it, but I still try. Generally, for me, it's in the evenings or early mornings when it's just the dogs and I in the house that I love to give them one-on-one time and tell them how special.

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Even if it's just a group trip over to the building, not to train formally just to do something, connecting with that dog. Daily conversations are the start of that emotional connection. But more important for seniors than just any age dog is the importance of consent. So, things like Swagger needs daily drops in his eyes, and we do that as a form of consent. He gets herbal drops in his mouth.

There are some days when his paws are a little more painful and he doesn't want his nails trimmed. So, we make sure that we set him up to know that he has the right to say, "Not today." I think consent training is just so important, and if you want to learn more about that, you can go to [podcast episode number 106](#) where I talked about how to create a relaxation protocol where your dog can build in the opportunity to say "Not right now."

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And another part that I'm gonna put in this emotional connection is senior dogs, they sleep so deeply. And so, to be respectful of that deep sleep, maybe you were going to give eyedrops to the dog, and that dog you could see is in a deep sleep. I'll just put the eyedrops off and we'll do them an hour or two down the trot when that dog finally wakes up. But if I have to wake the dog up for whatever reason, maybe it's time to go for a walk, I'll do things like sing or shuffle my feet or clap or snap my fingers.



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Whistle is what gets Swagger up, so that they know I'm coming. Because if you walk up to a senior dog who's in a deep sleep and you touch them, they're going to jump, they're going to startle. So, I like to give them that warning and help them to make the decision to come out of that sleep as naturally as they can.

And I get it sometimes it's not possible and you have to touch them but be prepared, they are going to startle. Okay, our fourth pillar of giving your senior dog that fulfilled life filled with purpose is cognitive functioning, and that could be enrichment activities.

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And if you don't know what that means, go to Shaped by Dog [episode number 314](#) and [315](#). It's a two-parter, all kinds of enrichment ideas that would be brilliant for any senior dog. It's things like daily celebrations of anything that the dog does well. It's creating cognitive resiliency by continuing to train your dog.

Yes, for my senior dogs, a lot of that training happens in little parts of Recaller games or Home School the Dog games, but it also can be part of your OG flow fitness routine. It's a way to keep their brain fresh while connecting with that dog on a level that's just so special to them and so special to you.

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Training in a choice-based environment that is surrounded around games for these senior dogs, it increases confidence, it increases joy, and absolutely it increases the connection you have with your dog. If you have a senior dog that you would love to start connecting with in this fun training, then I want you to write my team at wag@dogsthat.com.

And in the subject line, I'd like you to write, 'Connecting with my senior.' And then my team will give you the opportunity to join both Home School the Dog and Wag Nation. Why do I want you to join both? Because Wag Nation, we have a 'trick a month' and some of these tricks are absolutely perfect for senior dogs, and we have a library of tricks in there.

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Now, Home School the Dog is going to give you a structured program that's going to help your dog learn valuable games that both bring connection to you and help that dog feel an important part of your life.

So, that Home School the Dog and Wag Nation, that's normally just under \$400, but because you're listening and you want a better connection with your senior dog, write our team and we'll give you the two of them for just \$97.

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Okay. If you have a senior dog, first of all, celebrate. I hope that dog gives you reason to laugh every single day. But I have a challenge for you. I would like you to, over the next week, add one new enrichment activity.

You can go to our [Shaped by Dog podcasts](#) to find some ideas. Have one big adventure time every day with your senior dog for at least five of the next seven days and keep track of that. And teach your dog something new. One new trick, one new game. And again, if you aren't sure where to start, just write the team and we would love to have you and your senior dog as part of our thriving community.





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If you take me up on that challenge, jump over to this episode on my YouTube page next week and leave a comment to let us all know what you've done to create more fulfillment and more purpose to your senior dog's life. I'll see you next time right here on Shaped by Dog.

Join Wag Nation + Home School the Dog:

Write to us at wag@dogsthat.com with the subject line "Connecting with my senior" for a very special opportunity to join us in Wag Nation and Home School the Dog.

Resources:

[Dogs That YouTube Channel](#)

[YouTube Playlist: Feeding Dogs, Training Treats, Dog Food, Nutrition and Canine Behavior, Raw Diets with Susan Garrett.](#)

[Podcast Episode 62: 12 Keys to Helping My Dogs Live a Long and Happy Life](#)

[Podcast Episode 106: Consent In Dog Training: The Misuse, Misunderstanding And Misapplication](#)

[Podcast Episode 314: Dog Enrichment Secrets Part 1: Using Your Dog's Natural Instincts To Build Variety And Engagement](#)

[Podcast Episode 315: Dog Enrichment Secrets Part 2: 30 Day Enrichment Challenge + Free Planner PDF](#)

[Shaped by Dog Podcast](#)



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About Susan

A world-leading educator of dog trainers, Susan is also one of the most successful agility competitors of the last three decades. She has won multiple Gold Medals at National or World Championship events with every dog she has ever owned over the past 30 years. Susan was one of the very first dog trainers to share knowledge online when she opened her "Clicker Dogs" website many years ago. Susan has helped hundreds of thousands of people enjoy a great relationship with their dogs through her workshops and keynote speaking around the world, award winning books, DVDs, magazine articles, blog posts, podcasts, free dog training and dog agility video series, and online dog training programs.



A natural teacher and an entertaining speaker, Susan is world renowned for her dog training knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. Her understanding of how to apply science-based learning principles to both competitive and family pet dog training has been pivotal in changing how dogs are trained.

Susan is now helping many thousands of dog owners in 82 countries have the best relationship possible with their dogs. The real joy for her comes from bringing confidence to dogs and their owner through playful interactions and relationship building games that are grounded firmly in the science of how animals learn.



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