



Counseling & Testing Center

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Star
Therapy Dog

CTC Closed

The Counseling & Testing Center will close Dec. 14, 2016-Jan. 2, 2017, for the holidays. CTC will reopen Jan. 3, 2017. Stay safe and see you next year!

Therapy is going to the dogs (and cats, horses, the occasional bunny)

By Dr. Karl Laves
Associate Director

Q: What is the deal with animals showing up in therapy?

A: Animals as a part of therapy isn't really a new phenomenon; the benefit of using animals as a part of therapy has long been appreciated and it has been more recently empirically validated. Therapy almost always involves heightened awareness and expression of powerful, but at times edited or censored, emotions. The presence of an animal is thought to help people be more open to emotions and more willing to express those emotions (and yes this is still more of a clinical judgement than an evidence based conclusion).

Q: What are the different ways animals may be a part of therapy?

A: Some animals provide a specific service to the person; they perform essential tasks. These are service animals; they have been trained to perform tasks, they often wear vests or other indications of their status. For example, a dog may be trained to open doors or alert the owner when the dog senses a seizure is beginning. Some animals are used to assist therapy; they are called therapy assist animals. For example, a horse may be used to help a person improve his/her balance through riding lessons or a horse might be used to stimulate a person to be more verbal, interactive, or expressive. A dog or cat might be used as a part of a therapy session to provide a sense of comfort as the client works through traumatic memories. A more recent use of animals would be emotional support animals, usually called ESAs. An ESA is essentially a pet that also

serves as an accommodation for a disability. Here is the short story; a person diagnosed by a professional as having a psychological disorder (usually depression or an anxiety disorder) can seek to be qualified as having a disability. A person with a disability can then seek accommodations that will help the person achieve their life goals. A common example would be a person with an anxiety disorder who is determined to have a disability requests an emotional support animal for his/her living space (residence hall, apartment, or work space). Obviously this isn't a necessary process if the person lives where pets are already allowed. Not all work spaces, in fact most work spaces, are not required to allow this accommodation. Residence halls or rental property that allow this accommodation can also set specific rules to protect property and other residents from unwanted interruption or intrusion by the emotional support animal.

Q: Seems like everyone with a disorder would get qualified as having a disability so they could ask for an emotional support animal?

A: Most of us who have pets would certainly understand this. But the benefit of an emotional support animal, having a pet that is exciting to see you when you come home, is balanced against the additional costs and responsibilities of having an emotional support animal. And some would question if it is in the animal's best interest as well. While a student might take comfort in cuddling with a cat at night in his/her residence hall room, is it fair to the cat to be confined to a small room for life? Particularly for students there is the added potential stress of *having to attend to the pet*

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despite having classes. A trip to the veterinarian, frequent walks outside, emptying the litter box, all compete for time.

Q: So while an ESA might provide a lot of comfort to a student, it also might not be practical. What other options would students have?

A: Good question; as there are many other activities that can provide the same level of physiological relaxation as spending time with an ESA. First of all, let's not forget that there are ways to spend time with animals without being an owner. Local animal shelters/humane societies often allow students to visit and walk with/play with the animals. Meditation, music, yoga, mindfulness, prayer, exercise, comedy, worship, and doing fun repetitive activities like coloring, sorting, braiding can provide the same amount of soothing or more. Visit the CTC to see Star!

Q: So are emotional support animals valid treatment supplements or just hype?

A: Well, honestly, for most they are valid treatment supplements but for some they are just a way to have a pet if you live somewhere that won't allow pets. But the small number of people that misuse the ESA process don't negate the benefit that most people do get from an ESA. The point to keep in mind, we think,

is that there are many other ways to get the same benefit without taking on the cost and responsibility of a pet.

Q: What should I be thinking about if I was going to consider having an ESA?

A: How would you pay for an unexpected trip to the veterinarian's office? Would an unexpected \$500.00 bill put you at financial risk? Can you honestly say you have tried other techniques to reduce depression or anxiety and they did not work? Can you honestly say that your depression or anxiety is less when you are playing with/cuddling/caring for your pet? You assume it would be, but can you say that it is for a fact? Is the place you are currently living a decent enough environment for a pet? Is it crowded, small, loud or noisy, are there a lot of people coming and going, can you keep your pet away from other people, and is it a place you feel good about leaving your pet for a day while you are at classes?

A lot of us here at the Counseling and Testing Center have pets. The Center has a dog on staff (see Star below). We understand the bond between pets and owners. So we think it is important to take time when considering and emotional support animal. That is would be fun or cool isn't good enough for you or the animal. Feel free to talk with someone on staff if you have questions.



*Whether you celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, etc.,
we wish you Happy Holidays!*