

# **Pet Therapy Dos & Don'ts**

**How To Use Your Pet For Therapy Without  
Breaking The Loving Trust You Share With  
Them**

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## **The #1 Mistake Pet Owners Make...**

The #1 mistake pet owners make when they hear the term “Animal Assisted Therapy” is “assume” their pet is ideally qualified as a helping friend. They may decide of their own accord to grab up their cat, dog, parrot or other friend and march over to the nearest assisted living center facility to “help” others heal.

Pet therapy is a complicated process. It can be used formally or informally. You certainly CAN use your pet informally as a therapeutic friend, to help you feel happier and to improve the quality of your life, and that of your family.

What you can't do however, is automatically assume that YOUR beloved friend will serve well as a formal patient aid in an Animal Assisted Therapy session. Most animals participating in AAT programs are carefully trained, screened, evaluated and tested. Not every pet is ideal for an AAT program.

### **Do Not Assume Because Your Pet Loves You, He or She Will Love Others...**

Pets, like people, can be picky. They can become easily frightened or stressed. In fact, most animals used in informal AAT programs undergo daily stress. Most of the environments they are introduced into are stressful and often volatile. Remember this. What would you do if your darling puppy started barking loudly and biting people at the clinic you freely marched into?

(Don't worry, the good news is MOST centers will NOT simply let you walk in and introduce your pet).

Now, if you do have an interest in volunteering in AAT programs and think your pet might be a good candidate, you can have your pet evaluated by a formal AAT

center. Your veterinarian may help you decide what your pet's temperament is, and whether there is an AAT training center nearby. Sometimes centers also offer adoption programs if you do not have a pet but are interested in using a pet for pet therapy.

Remember however, your pet may not be the right pet for everyone. Very often, pets can easily adapt to unusual and new environments. This is not always the case however so keep this in mind. While your pet may act "naturally" as a sedative and calming agent for you, he or she may provoke anxiety in others. While AAT is beneficial for many people, some people do not like animals. Period. So always, always have your pet tested and evaluated before you proclaim your best friend the next "healer." Do not assume your pet can help everyone.

That said, if a member of your family visits and is depressed, they may benefit tremendously by spending some time outside playing catch with your dog, or petting your favorite cat. Just keep a close eye on them. Make sure they become good friends before you try to label your pet as a "therapist."

## The #2 Mistake Pet Owners Make...

Now, step #1 isn't meant to discourage you. Just because formal AAT programs require evaluation and training doesn't mean your pet won't qualify. If you have an interest in volunteering or becoming a pet therapist, don't doubt your pet just yet.

Why not have your pet evaluated? You can even informally evaluate your pet by taking them with you to the homes of close friends and family. If you do not have a lot of children, introduce your pet (but keep a CLOSE eye on him or her) to see how they react. Do they startle easy? Do they adapt well? Do they jump on the table and bark? (not a great sign)

If your pet seems to handle unexpected or stressful situations very well, they often prove to be very good candidates for AAT programs. So don't make the mistake of doubting your ability or your pet's ability to become a good friend, companion and formal or informal therapist. There are dozens of benefits you and your pet can reap from entering an AAT program, just as many benefits as the people you see will gain. Remember also that pets can learn, therapists can train them, so even if on initial evaluation you are not confident of your pet's ability, don't give up just yet. Try it.

Another way to evaluate your pet is to think about the many ways your pet has improved your quality of your life. Does your pet make a good companion? Is your pet great with kids?

Does your pet treat great grandmother with all the respect, love and dignity a Queen Bee deserves? If so, you might (MIGHT) informally consider your pet a good candidate for evaluation.

You and your pet will benefit from the warm and fuzzy feelings created in a therapeutic environment. There is much to be said for spreading joy and happiness in the lives of those that suffer. People living in hospice or assisted living centers often thrive when visited by children and pets alike. So why not consider your pet a candidate for formal pet therapy?

Keep reading. Let's talk about some pet owner positives when it comes to pet therapy. In the next section, you'll find great tips on do's and just one or two more don'ts when it comes to pet therapy. Ready?

# Do Require A Pet Therapist To Provide Credentials

If you don't own a pet but have an interest in trying Animal Assisted Therapy, then ask your doctor for a reference. If you find someone through a local placement center, make sure you check their references. Remember, anyone can call themselves a trained therapist, just like anyone can claim they are a great doctor. But you wouldn't visit a new doctor without first verifying their credentials, would you? (you should)

Are they formally or informally certified? What types of therapy do they offer? What type of therapy does your doctor think you will benefit from the most, and how does the practitioners experience and credentials align with these perceptions? How long have they practiced AAT?

Remember, most AAT programs are formal and require that practitioners and their pets receive proper training. Most will specialize in one or two areas of pet therapy. An equine specialist may provide support for individual's suffering from mobility problems.

A psychologist who uses a dog as part of therapy may specialize in socialization, anxiety, depression and related disorders. Your psychologist may recommend you buy your own pet ... but ...

## **Don't buy a pet if it makes you anxious or nervous...**

Your doctor may recommend you try AAT, but buying a pet may not be the answer to your problems. If you are a busy single mother of two young children working two jobs and raising your kids without the support of family, a dog may prove helpful, or may add to your burden.

Consider your personal circumstances BEFORE you take on the responsibility of raising a pet, because much like a child, a pet will require routine maintenance, training, love, affection and even discipline. It's a lot of work. It can be VERY rewarding, but remember every person has a unique situation. So evaluate the pros and cons of your situation before agreeing to take action.

If you spend more time focusing on caring and training your pet, you may find the circumstances rewarding. You may find they help you better organize your life. OR, you may find the entire process overwhelming. You may still benefit from pet therapy, just not by owning or caring for a pet yourself. That, or you may have to connect with the right pet. Any pet can provide therapeutic benefits. You don't have to buy a wild, loud or boisterous animal. What about a fish? A hamster? Start small.

If you DO decide buying a pet is right for you, then do your homework. Do NOT buy a rambunctious animal if you are trying to learn how to release your anxiety and depression. Now, if you need an animal to keep you motivated, enthusiastic and more organized, you may find buying a dog that is high-energy and requires a lot of discipline or maintenance very rewarding. You may discover new ways to challenge yourself and improve your life.

But, usually, most people seek pet therapy to find more peace in their life. If this sounds like you, your doctor will probably recommend you DO buy an animal that is calm, cheerful and supportive. If your doctor recommends a pet, see what type of animal they think is best.

They may tell you to buy a fish to start. Not a bad idea for a first timer.

## **DO Give AAT Serious Consideration**

It is not uncommon for a patient to do a “double take” when they see their therapist walk in with a dog or cat. (Most SHOULD warn you in advance they plan to practice AAT). But just in case they do not, do not think they have lost their marbles.

There are multiple scientific studies showing animal assisted therapy is a very positive and influential form of therapy for patients. So do consider it, whether your problem is emotional, psychological, physical or physiological in nature. You might be surprised to learn just how many ways animals can help people recover from chronic illness, injury, stress, anxiety and other problems.

An animal may even prove helpful for boosting your self-confidence, or enable you to interact more easily with your therapist. Give it a try. What is the worst that can happen after all? You go home with a funny story to tell your friends.

## **DO Ask Your Doctor About AAT**

If you have a pet, and find your pet comforting and stabilizing, ask your doctor if they are familiar with AAT and would consider letting you bring your pet to your next session. While some doctors may be vehemently opposed to this, others, especially psychologists, may welcome the opportunity to forge a closer and more intimate bond with you.

If you feel relaxed and calm, your therapist will too, and this will lead to a faster, more positive and more helpful outcome. The bottom line is this – do not hesitate to ask your therapist or doctor about the

possibility of bringing your own pet into a session. You may even find your therapist or doctor has a pet of their own, and you have something more in common.

If your doctor is not open to this idea, ask them if they know someone that is, or find another doctor you feel more comfortable working with.

## **DO Find Out If There Are AAT Centers Or Therapists In Your Area**

Typically a pet therapist is the best person to tell you if you are a good candidate for pet therapy, and what types of pet therapy may be helpful for you. Of course, most animal therapy specialists believe most people can benefit from some form of therapy. For example, you'd be surprised to find out how many useful purposes a horse serves, aside from looking majestic and carrying about the hides of human beings.

For example, equine therapy has been used to promote positive physical and emotional changes for many disorders or health problems or conditions and challenges.

Many people engage in outdoor exercises with horses that challenge them physically to help them confront feelings of avoidance or self-consciousness. Some eating disorders clinics for example, also engage patients who are willing with equine therapy, which can help them address feelings of perfectionism, common in eating disordered patients.

Interacting with horses can also help one assess what appropriate versus non-appropriate levels of risk taking may be, or simply get someone to get "into" the habit of taking care of themselves and exercising.

Therapy doesn't have to be complex. It can be as simple as riding a horse or jogging with your dog. What if that was all it took to change your outlook on life and get back into shape?

Working with a horse can help you outsmart your obsessive patterns of thinking or self-defeating patterns of thinking and give you a new perspective on life. While certainly not a cure-all for everyone, pet therapy can prove an exceptional complementary therapy for patients who've tried all that traditional medicine has to offer, yet are looking for something more.

Here's a quick recap to remind you what you should focus on and avoid when considering AAT:

- ➡ **Do NOT assume you are a pet therapist because you own a pet, or that your pet is ideally suited to help others because YOU get along with your pet.** AAT is a serious form of therapy that requires specific and measured training.
- ➡ **Do not feel discouraged if you find your animal is not the best tempered for AAT adventures.** You may find you can volunteer as an assistant or pet therapist using a center's highly trained animals. Consider for example, an equine therapy center.
- ➡ **Do give AAT some consideration.** If you aren't sure how it can help you then meet with your doctor to talk about it.
- ➡ **Do search for local AAT providers or certified therapists in your local area.** Meet with them, talk with them and find out if you might be a good candidate.
- ➡ **If interested in AAT, find a training center, get certified and go for it!**  
The possibilities are limitless!