

The Therapeutic Benefit of Animals

Animals can have great benefit to physical and mental health. Some of my clients have pets as their best friends. Even local housing complexes are known to waive the pet deposit for those clients whose pets have been deemed to have therapeutic benefit. These pets help clients have a reason to continue living and “someone” who needs them. They also help them to get exercise. At other times pets help homes to not be so lonely after the death of a loved one.

Some of my abused clients have had their family pet killed as part of their abuse. The opportunity to hold a small animal in therapy and see life has been refreshing for them. This pet therapy helps them to relearn healthy pet interaction, experience giving and receiving love, and to begin healing from some of the trauma.

I’ve seen the amazing benefit of animal assisted therapy first hand. A couple of years ago I had the opportunity to have a little dog named Lumus present in my counseling sessions. I’ve always had a love for animals and they were always a part of my life since I grew up on a dairy farm, but I had no clue of their therapeutic benefit.

One week a guardian brought an abused teen girl to my office. She was not happy to be here and she hardly said a word. The next week “Lumus” was at the office when she arrived. She was happy to see him and would talk to him. Lumus became the therapist. He was safe. Animals had not hurt her, but she had suffered severe sexual abuse from people. Somehow Lumus gave us a bond. Since Lumus trusted me I was now safe to talk with too.

This client accompanied Lumus and me for a walk along the river. He provided excellent object lessons. One of them stands out in my mind. As we walked about the trail I used a little bag to pick up his “poop.” I didn’t quickly discard it, but I carried it about. This bothered the client and she wanted to know how long I was going to carry this garbage. I told her that it was just what she does by carrying around her past and not letting go of her own garbage. Lumus had a major impact on this client and the others he shared time with.

I do not currently use animals in my practice since building regulations are not legally required to give therapy dogs the same access as service dogs. Service Dogs are specifically trained to assist those with special needs. They can be the

individual's eyes, ears, diabetic monitor, or a host of other accommodations. While in training, service animals are allowed to go anywhere a potential owner may go. They wear identification vests noting that they are service dogs in training. They can go anywhere even to a movie theatre, Wal-Mart and to church. Those training service dogs must sometimes educate establishments about their legal rights to enter establishments.

Dr. Jean Meade, MD, DVM, PhD, facilitates classes at West Virginia University on training service animals. This new program is able to quickly place dogs with those needing assistance at no charge. WVU actually customizes the dog's training to the person's needs. Some dogs retrieve water from the refrigerator, some remove socks, etc. One dog is even being trained to take the cap off of magic markers for a little girl with Cerebral Palsy. They are also placing service dogs at the Clarksburg VA Center to help the veterans.

Animal assisted therapy is gaining acceptance in the treatment world, even in local nursing homes. Animals contribute to our well-being whether they are pets, therapy, or service animals. Those in our community may benefit from an occasional visit from your pet. More information on therapy dog registration, support and insurance may be found at www.therapydogs.com