

Healing Hearts With Therapy Dogs

Find out how therapy dogs help heal hearts and minds, from lowering blood pressure to alleviating depression in both children and adults.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Therapy dogs have been found to provide relief from stress, anxiety, fear, pain, loneliness, boredom and depression, among both children and adults
- While all dogs have lovable qualities, not every dog is cut out to be a therapy dog
- Therapy dogs should be friendly, calm and tolerant of petting, crowds, new places, loud noises and distractions
- In order to become a therapy dog, most organizations require that they pass the American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen (CGC) test, which involves 10 practical skills
- As a handler, you must be your dog's advocate and provide for his physical needs (food, water and bathroom breaks) as well as be in tune with his body language during sessions

Therapy dogs provide immeasurable comfort and support to people in stressful situations — from college students facing exams to physicians working in an ER. Unlike service dogs, which are certified to help people with disabilities, such as seizure disorders or visual impairments, therapy dogs are trained to offer affection and emotional support in a variety of settings.

Hospitals, nursing homes, schools and prisons are just some of the locations where therapy dogs frequent. In unpleasant situations, therapy dogs have been found to provide relief from stress, anxiety, fear, pain, loneliness, boredom and depression, among both children and adults.¹

Even physical improvements, such as benefits to blood pressure and heart rate, are noted when therapy dogs are around. While it's true that just being around your pet may make you feel good, there's something special about therapy dogs that make people feel at ease in their presence. Wondering if your dog has what it takes to join their ranks?

Qualities of a Good Therapy Dog

While all dogs have lovable qualities, not every dog is cut out to be a therapy dog. If you like the idea of working with your dog to engage in animal-assisted therapy programs at your local health care facilities or school — such as via programs in which students read to a therapy dog — consider getting a therapy dog registration from a reputable therapy dog organization.

Such organizations offer training for both dogs and handlers, provide liability insurance for those that are registered and help set up opportunities for events. In order to become a registered therapy dog, your dog should meet the following qualifications:²

- At least 1 year old (some organizations require a minimum age of 18 months or 24 months)
- Friendly
- Affectionate
- Enjoy being petted by strangers
- Calm
- Basic good manners
- Clean and well groomed
- Comfortable traveling
- Interested in interacting with people more than with other animals

As a therapy dog handler, you should also enjoy interacting with people and be willing to learn the appropriate handling techniques for successful sessions.

10 Skills Therapy Dogs Should Possess

In order to become a therapy dog, most organizations require that they pass the American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen (CGC) test. This involves 10 practical, functional behaviors that AKC says "every dog should have to be welcomed in the community." This includes:³

1. **Accepting of a friendly stranger** — Your dog should allow a friendly stranger to approach him without showing resentment or shyness.
2. **Sitting politely for petting** — Your dog is open to being pet on the head and body by a friendly stranger.
3. **Appearance and grooming** — Your dog welcomes being groomed via combing, brushing and having his ears or feet touched.
4. **Relaxed during walks** — Your dog will walk calmly on a loose leash.
5. **Walking through a crowd** — Your dog will stay calm when walking through a crowd of people, and won't jump on people in the crowd.
6. **Sit and stay** — Your dog will respond to cues to sit and stay in place.
7. **Come when called** — Your dog will come when you call him.
8. **Behave politely around other dogs** — Your dog should remain calm when other dogs are around.
9. **Calm reaction to distractions** — Your dog should not panic or bark when presented with common distractions, such as something being dropped or a person jogging by.
10. **Well-mannered when handler leaves** — Your dog should remain calm and behaved even if you're out of sight for three minutes.

Therapy Dogs Work Around Lots of People

A key point to remember is that therapy dogs will find themselves in a variety of new locations, around a variety of different people that will likely want to interact with them in different ways. Some people may pet a therapy dog. Others may hug him or want to snuggle. Your dog may be around wheelchairs, beeping machines or a large group of people at once.

As such, therapy dog organizations often test potential therapy dogs to see how they react to the following situations, Whole Dog Journal explained.⁴

- All body parts being handled
- Clumsy petting
- A restraining hug
- Angry yelling
- Being bumped from behind
- Being pet by multiple people
- Exposed to distractions like toys or food

In order to succeed as a therapy dog, your dog should remain calm during these types of hectic situations.

Consider Your Dog's Personality and Welfare

While you may love the idea of traveling to hospitals or schools with your dog, it's important to consider your dog's personality, too. You want to be sure he's an enthusiastic participant, not just one who tolerates it for a treat. Fortunately, assuming your dog is outgoing and enjoys people and new places, research suggests therapy dogs really do love their work.

In one study, little difference was found in therapy dogs' cortisol levels when measured at home or during a therapy session, so it appears therapy dogs are not stressed out by their work.⁵ Further, when researchers analyzed 26 canine behaviors — some **stress signals**, such as shaking, and others more friendly, such as play-bowing — stress behaviors were not more common than other, friendlier behaviors. That being said, it's always important to closely monitor your therapy dog for subtle signs of stress or emotional fatigue.

As a handler, you'll be your dog's advocate and must provide for his physical needs (food, water and bathroom breaks) as well as be in tune with his body language for emotional cues. To ensure that your dog remains in good spirits during sessions, Pet Partners, the largest nonprofit group registering therapy dogs, recommends handlers:⁶

- Allow the dog to relieve himself before the visit
- Provide water and be sure the dog is not overheating
- Instruct both children and adults how to touch and interact with the dog appropriately
- Start with very short visits and gradually increase the lengths
- Keep visits to a maximum of two hours per day
- Leave visits if the dog is becoming stressed

- Watch the dog's body language cues and give stress breaks when needed, including giving the dog the opportunity for a potty break at least once an hour
- Keep the dog at a safe distance from other animals

Sources and References

¹ [Animals \(Basel\). 2022 Jul; 12\(14\): 1842](#)

^{2,4} [Whole Dog Journal January 2, 2023](#)

³ [AKC, Canine Good Citizen Test Items](#)

⁵ [Applied Animal Behaviour Science March 2018](#)

⁶ [Pet Partners Position Statement on Animal Health and Welfare February 2016 \(Archived\)](#)
