

Therapeutic Animals

By Dr. Ed Feraco

Alaska is well known as being a dog-friendly state, perhaps due to the exciting and famous Iditarod great sled race. More and more, people are seen in public areas with service animals mostly due to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and therapeutic animals are often seen walking in the hallways of schools, elderly housing developments, and/or nursing/rehabilitative facilities.

Studies report that children who live in homes in which a pet is considered a member of the family are more empathic than children in homes without pets. Children seemingly see animals as peers and can identify better with animals than with human beings. According to animal psychologists, children can read an animal's body language easier than that of an adult.

Individuals with mental illness or low self-esteem tend to focus on themselves. An animal can help them to focus on their environment; hence, rather than thinking and focusing on their problems, they watch and talk to and about their animals. In therapy, a service animal or therapy animal can open a channel of emotionally safe, non-threatening communication between client and therapist. The animal's presence may open a path through any possible clinical resistance.

Animals love unconditionally, without qualification. They do not care how we look, what we say, are non-judgmental, forgiving, and accept us for who we are. This is unlike most humans. Studies have shown that when cats or dogs come to visit a care facility, there is more stimulation and interaction than during any other "therapy" or entertainment times. The presence of a therapeutic or service animal serves to brighten the environment, increasing amusement, laughter, and play. These dynamics help to decrease people's feelings of anxiety, depression, isolation, and/or alienation. Tests have shown the decrease of heart rate and blood pressure can be dramatic simply from watching fish swim in a fish tank.

Some people feel spiritual gratification or an oneness with life and nature when they are with their animal family members. Some authors have described their relationship with their animal as "part of their sustaining life energy and/or their communion and relationship with God".

While many types of animals, fish, and/or reptiles have been used as either service animals and/or therapeutic animals, it appears that dogs seem to be the best fit for many people, particularly as a service animal. The US military has begun a pilot program of assigning trained service animals to returning soldiers, airmen, and marines which offers both reintegration for the disabled service member and an intriguing use of animals to help rehabilitate our American heroes. A closing reminder is that it is often best not to pet or interfere with a service animal should you cross paws with one at an airport, grocery store, community fair, hospital, and/or any other venue.