

# Emotional Support Animal

## Laguna Shores Recovery

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## Pets Help People

Having a support animal can have a **positive impact on people who are in recovery** for substance addiction. This is especially true of pet dogs, which are both helpful and natural companions for humans. Scientists researching the human-companion animal bond have found that by simply being in the presence of a pet, you can improve your general state of mental, social and physiological health. <sup>1</sup> Dogs, in particular, have been known to help humans ease stress.

Pets of many different types have been shown to provide **great health benefits** for their humans, including:

- Lowering blood pressure
- Helping with recovery from heart disease
- Reducing onset of asthma and allergies when growing up with a pet from birth
- Improving psychological well-being and self-esteem <sup>2</sup>
- Providing a sense of safety and acceptance

According to a Harris poll, 95% of pet owners consider their animal to be a member of the family.<sup>3</sup> Not only does having a pet dog reduce your stress levels, but it also gets you out to exercise daily for dog walks. This may be

part of the reason why pet ownership of dogs in particular helps with heart disease health.

A support animal **can ease anxiety and loneliness**, too. A pet will calm, lessen fears and anxiety in children, elderly people and just about everyone of any age. This is true of animals of many types, including rabbits, horses, fish, dogs and guinea pigs, all of which have been used for therapeutic reasons.

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## Florence Nightingale and Pet Therapy

Humans have been using animals, specifically horses, to lift their spirits since ancient Grecian times. By the 1600s, doctors were using equine therapy to help with physical and mental issues in their patients.

The American Red Cross, in the 1940s, utilized farm animals to help veterans of World War II who would care for the animals, speeding their recovery. Interacting with dogs and other animals also aided their mental health, putting painful, traumatic thoughts of war out of focus.

In the 19th century, Florence Nightingale was working as a nurse with psychiatric patients and children. She discovered that when these people interacted with pets, there was reduction in the amount of anxiety felt amongst both sets of patients. In the 1930s, Sigmund Freud began bringing his pet dog to therapy sessions with clients. Dr. Freud believed that his canine was able to distinguish a person's true character as well as relieve his clients from tension and stress.

By the middle of the 20th century, the human-animal relationship was more fully explored. Psychotherapists found that this relationship could be beneficial to the therapeutic process. It wasn't until the late 1980s, however, that animal certification programs first came into being for use in therapy with humans.

## Types of Therapy With Animals

### Pet Therapy

This therapeutic treatment is performed by volunteers who bring their trained pets to settings where people are having a difficult time. These settings include hospitals, schools, nursing homes and the like. It's the simple joy of

petting a gentle, happy dog that provides stress relief to others in otherwise unhappy environments. The experience helps the body release hormones and neurotransmitters that actually help with physical and mental health improvements.

## **Pets Unstressing Passengers (PUPS)**

Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), one of the most stressful airports in the US, began introducing therapy dogs to passengers who had just cleared the TSA checkpoint. Passengers waiting in long lines and undergoing the process of taking off shoes, getting their items in and out of a bin and walking through a screening machine are often stressed and tired. When a volunteer greeter brings their happy therapy dog up to someone, that person is often full of smiles and relief. The program only accepts certified therapy animals for passengers' safety at LAX and it's called Pets Unstressing Passengers (PUPS).<sup>4</sup>

## **Animal-Assisted Therapy**

This type of therapy is performed by professionals, such as social workers, counselors and various other types of therapists. A wide range of animals can be used, with dogs and horses being the most prevalent. As of August 2017, 69 percent of family practice doctors have worked with support animals in medical settings.<sup>5</sup>

## **Therapy Animals**

Support animals, also known as therapy animals, have been used extensively in hospitals to help cheer, heal and calm children who are sick and recovering. Using pets in medical facilities dates back as long as 150 years ago. In 1860, Florence Nightingale recognized the significance of support animals in regards to helping those who are ill.<sup>7</sup>

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) research findings show that just a 12-minute visit with a canine pet can improve heart and lung function, decrease anxiety, lower blood pressure and soothe the mind. Patients suffering with anxiety who participated in this particular study felt 24 percent less anxious after a support animal visit. Those who suffered from high blood pressure saw a 10 percent drop in their left atrial pressure after therapy.<sup>8</sup>

## **Animals Useful For Promoting Human-Animal Bonds**

A variety of animals have been found capable of promoting the human-animal bond including:

For their beneficial assistance during addiction recovery, canine and equine therapy have been found to be the most useful animals.



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## Animal Therapy For Treating Addiction

### Risk Factors for Addiction

Certain factors exist that can help determine who is at risk for addiction to substances. One study found the following factors that may be able to strongly predict those at risk for abusing drugs: <sup>6</sup>

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Stress

Other factors that figured highly were having a positive attitude towards drugs and seeking high levels of excitement. Keeping in mind that drug addiction is a brain disease with social, psychological and physical effects, it's important to maintain one's mental and physical health. If depression, anxiety and stress

are predictors of future drug use, the positive benefits of animal support cannot be ignored.

## How Animals Help

Upon the completion of a successful rehab treatment program, there is always a threat of relapse. A relapse can occur due to cravings, interacting with people who are still using substances, experiencing triggers and visiting places where drugs and alcohol were often consumed. If and when someone does return to using substances, even briefly, depression and feelings of defeat and failure often occur.

Support animals are very helpful in meeting the demands of avoiding relapse, a real risk that goes along with recovery. A therapy animal allows you to better cope with triggers, cravings and reminders of another way of life.

A good program that involves support animals can be life-altering when it comes to avoiding relapse, keeping depression at bay and maintaining the motivation to remain sober.

## Ways that Animals Assist People in Recovery

Since it's been well established that pets can help people who are suffering from stress and other disorders, it makes sense to use that information in the addiction recovery sphere.

Recovering from an addiction to substances takes time plus physical, emotional and mental energy. In addition to the usual stresses involved in recovery, some people also are battling co-existing mental or other types of disorders simultaneously.



## Coping with Addiction

In order to help you cope with everything involved with rehab and recovery, a support animal acts as a coping mechanism for some. A pet has to be cared for. When you must play with, brush, groom, bathe and walk a therapy dog, for example, you don't have too much time to think about your own thoughts of relapsing. A dog can also be trained to communicate to a loved one if their owner appears to be dangerously close to relapsing. Learning how to train a dog to perform certain tasks helps you learn how to relate to others.



## Interaction in Recovery

Having a canine support animal not only keeps you physically active, but it also increases your social interactions. You'll notice that when you walk your pet dog, you'll come across others who want to pet your animal or just say hello. Conversations and new friendships can easily take off from there. Getting out of the house can keep depression at bay, taking away at least one reason for which some people self-medicate.



## Teaching Responsibilities

If you realize that your pet depends upon you to eat and to live, this gives you another reason to avoid using substances again. You'll also come to understand that you need your pet just as much as he or she needs you.

## How Pet Therapy Helps Those Suffering From Addiction

The brain's neurotransmitters become used to the pleasurable stimulation induced by drugs and [alcohol](#). Having a pet to focus on and enjoy stimulates those pleasure receptors and helps speed along the recovery process. You will forge new bonds with a pet that are much healthier than your reliance upon substances. Having a pet also makes you accountable for your actions in being a caretaker.

## Structured Interventions

Animal-Assisted Therapy is not a cure for substance addiction; it is an add-on therapy with its own goals, structure and planned interventions, such as the 12-minute interactions with a dog outlined in the study above.

If you are seeking pet therapy within a rehab program, a trained healthcare provider should be knowledgeable in ways to supervise a therapy animal for the most effective treatment.

## Goals of Animal Therapy

The focus during animal therapy in recovery should be on:

- Improving social skills
- Increasing motivation
- Avoiding triggers that lead to relapse
- Reducing stress and anxiety
- Increasing exercise for physical health

## Service Animals in Drug Rehab Programs

Many programs for addiction recovery already have support animal and pet therapy programs in place to help overcome addiction and deal with relapse prevention. Some programs include therapy dogs in group therapy sessions. Just the presence of a friendly dog helps some people more openly share their feelings and thoughts with others. Having a pet dog at home after recovery continues to help in many of the ways outlined previously.

A person with substance use disorder may be coping with a traumatic or stressful life history. They might be embarrassed of their drug use and be ashamed of talking about themselves in therapy. Working with a support animal provides a relaxing way to melt stress and become more open.

The activities in pet therapy are a positive distraction from cravings and triggers. Just the stress relief that occurs with pet interactions can also be enough to help avoid triggers. Animals other than dogs are also often used to help people suffering from substance use disorders. There are equine therapy programs that have a person interact with a horse.

These interactions with either dogs or horses will consist of grooming, calming, riding (in the case of a horse) and bonding with the animal to form a therapeutic alliance that reduces anxiety about receiving treatment for drug use. This alliance helps patients more readily place trust in and interact well with a therapist during counseling sessions.



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## Equine Therapy

One of the more popular therapies involving animals for addiction recovery is equine therapy. This support animal is also very helpful for those suffering with co-existing mental illness conditions.

### Equine Therapy Activities

Activities included in equine therapy can consist of:

- Picking out a horse to work with
- Grooming the horse daily
- Performing mounted work
- Walking and trotting with the horse
- Lunging
- Playing equine games

### Motivation For Success

When equine therapy is used in conjunction with cognitive behavioral therapy and other forms of counseling, the experience is generally a very positive one that provides a high amount of motivation for success.

### Insight into Relationships

Working and playing with an equine animal gives therapists insights into how interpersonal relationships work in how a particular patient responds to the animal.

The honest responses from a support animal helps patients moderate the way they act and interact with others.

A relationship forged with a support animal such as a horse provides a good model for future, healthy relationships with others.

## Building Trust

The trust that is built between support animal and a person undergoing rehab for substance use is very important towards building trust with humans. It also increases the ability to translate nonverbal cues from people that may have been previously ignored.

## Animal-Assisted Therapy

In order to participate in an animal support therapy program, you must agree to be involved. You will likely go through an orientation program to learn more about the type of animal you will be bonding with and the behaviors of that particular breed. For instance, you will learn what the appropriate interactions with a pet dog should be, such as petting, brushing, instilling positive obedience training and playing games, like fetch.

On the other hand, it's important to know what types of interactions would be inappropriate to engage in with a pet dog. You would not want to hug a dog too tightly or for too long. You'd also not want to provoke, intimidate or hit an animal. Learning just what is expected in terms of where and how to touch a support animal and when an animal is not in the mood to participate in a therapy session are important lessons, too.

## What To Look For in Support Animal Therapy

Verify the facility provider is state-licensed and accredited, first and foremost, to treat disorders of substance use.

Ask about certification and registration in this particular field of therapy. Two reputable accreditations for equine therapy, for example, are EAGALA and PATH International. For canine therapy, Pet Partners and Therapy Dogs International register these dogs for therapeutic treatment.

Check out the provider's reputation and competence on the American Counseling Association and other helpful sites.

Are the animals well cared for? Do they look healthy? Are they well fed and groomed?

Can the animal consent to participate in therapy sessions? If so, how is this determined?

If a negative incident or accident occurs, ask how the provider will keep both the animal and clients safe from harm.

## **Inappropriate Candidates for Support Animal Therapy**

Some people are simply not conducive to interacting with support animals. If you do not like animals, are afraid of certain species or just aren't interested in working with them, then animal-assisted therapy may not be right for you.

Also, if a client has a history of harming animals, this type of support is not a good fit for either party. The same is true if you are allergic to the fur, hair or dander of some pets, especially when that allergy cannot be simply treated with an over-the-counter antihistamine. Some people have religious rules against certain animal involvement or they may have cultural restrictions that apply.

### **Resources**

1. [https://www.aa.org/pages/en\\_US/historical-data-the-birth-of-aa-and-its-growth-in-the-uscanada](https://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/historical-data-the-birth-of-aa-and-its-growth-in-the-uscanada)
2. [https://www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/smf-121\\_en.pdf](https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/smf-121_en.pdf)
3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/22/us/alcoholics-anonymous-without-the-religion.html>
4. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5385165/>
5. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/does-alcoholics-anonymous-work/>
6. <https://ncadd.org/index.php/people-in-recovery/hope-help-and-healing/self-help-recovery-support-groups>
7. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/friendship-20/201506/how-make-your-way-practically-any-group>

# MENTAL HEALTH AMERICA:

## HOW DO I GET A SERVICE ANIMAL?



Taking care of an animal can be a great way to improve your [mental health](#). But not every landlord allows pets. You can get around this if a mental health professional certifies that you need an emotional support animal. There are other types of service animals too—it's important to understand what you're trying to get, because the steps are different for each type.

### Emotional support animals (ESAs)

An **emotional support animal** (ESA) is just what it sounds like—a pet that provides emotional support. ESAs don't need any special training (beyond the normal training a pet needs). Dogs and cats are the most common, but any domesticated animal can be an ESA.

ESAs are covered under the [Fair Housing Act](#). This allows people with an ESA to have their pet in their home even if there is a "no pet" policy. The law also prevents additional pet fees for ESAs. Small ESAs can also travel with you on a plane free of charge.

In order to get the benefits of an ESA, you will need a "prescription" from a mental health professional. This is basically just a signed letter stating that you have a [mental health condition](#) and that your pet helps

you deal with it. Some landlords and airlines will accept a letter from a medical doctor, but usually it needs to be a [therapist](#) or a psychiatrist.

ESAs aren't allowed into public places that don't normally allow pets. For that, you'd need a service animal.

## Service animals (dogs only)

The [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#) defines **service animals** as dogs that are individually trained to perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability. This can be a physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability. *Only dogs* are legally considered service animals. Other domestic animals are covered only as emotional support animals or therapy animals.

Qualifying for a service dog is simple. Actually getting one is a bit harder. To qualify for a service animal, all you need to do is get written documentation from your healthcare provider that you have and are being treated for an emotional or psychiatric disorder or disability and require the assistance of an animal because of it. The work a dog has been trained to do must specifically relate to your condition. Training a service dog yourself can be difficult and can take years. Usually you would get a service dog from someone else who has already trained it.

## Psychiatric service dogs (PSDs)

A **psychiatric service dog** (PSD) is a specific type of service animal trained to assist those with mental illnesses. These include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder. For example, a dog may assist someone with PTSD in doing room searches or turning on lights. Or it might help someone in a dissociative episode from wandering into danger. Providing companionship, calming anxiety, or providing a sense of safety merely by its presence are not legally considered "tasks."

If you're not sure whether to get an ESA or a PSD, think about what your specific needs are. Is this animal going to assist you in tasks you wouldn't otherwise be able to do? You'll probably need a service

animal. Are they primarily going to provide companionship, non-judgmental positive regard, and affection? That sounds more like an ESA, which is much easier to get anyway.

## Therapy animals

**Therapy animals** are used in therapeutic settings, like hospitals or nursing homes. Some examples might be a cat that lives at a treatment facility, a dog that is taken to visit people in a disaster area, or a horse used in equestrian therapy. Therapy animals provide affection and comfort to people, but they are different than PSDs or ESAs. They are screened for their ability to perform a specific type of therapy, and they are handled by professionals.

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Before getting any kind of pet or service animal, it is important to seriously consider the responsibilities that come along with it. Think about whether you can care for it physically, mentally, and financially. Service animals in particular are a big commitment. ESAs are a little easier since they don't need special training, but any pet is still a commitment. If you can't handle a dog, consider a lower-maintenance pet like a cat or a fish. If even that is too much, try starting with a plant or a stuffed animal, or another form of treatment