

Is Pet Therapy Right for You?

Getting a pet may seem like a simplistic way to combat a mental health problem, but there are dozens of studies that show that pets, particularly dogs, can have a profound effect on your mental and physical health. Without your really realizing it, pets can change your life in many positive ways.

- Pets provide a sense of security.
- Pets help provide a schedule and routine to your life.
- Pets can be an avenue to more social interaction.
- Pets give you unconditional love.
- Just being around pets appears to have significant positive health effects including lowering your blood pressure and strengthening your immune system.
- Although pets can require a significant amount of work, that isn't necessarily a drawback. Doing meaningful "work" is always an important part of feeling good about yourself.
- Pets will almost always make you smile.

Although some studies suggest that having any pet in your home, even a fish or a hamster, can have psychological benefits, formal programs using dogs and horses are more thoroughly researched and seem to give the most therapeutic benefits.

There are therapeutic horseback riding programs throughout the country, many specializing in specific conditions like PTSD, anxiety problems, and more. If this is something you are interested in, make sure you research and visit the program before you enroll.

If you are not ready to commit to getting a pet, but you do like animals, you might consider volunteering at a rescue shelter or being a foster parent to a dog or cat. You can contact your local chapter of the ASPCA to find out about opportunities in your area.

Use the worksheet to help determine how Pet Therapy might be helpful

Reference: [Animal Assisted Therapy and What Science Says.](#) (UCLA Health)

Are You Ready for Pet Therapy?

Use the statements and questions below to see whether having a pet might be useful and practical in helping you with your mental health issues. Obviously, some of these are more important if you are considering a “high need” pet like a dog or cat. Put a check mark by each statement you agree with. Then review your answers, as well as the answers to the questions on the following page, before making your decision.

1. _____ I have the time to take care of a pet.
2. _____ I have had good experiences owning pets in the past.
3. _____ I really enjoy being around animals.
4. _____ I can afford the costs of a pet (food, veterinarian, grooming, etc.).
5. _____ I have help caring for a pet if I go away.
6. _____ Owning a pet is something I have thought about for a long time.
7. _____ I know exactly what kind of pet I would like.
8. _____ I can commit myself to the needs of a pet.
9. _____ I can make my home “pet friendly.”
10. _____ I am willing and able to change my schedule to meet the needs of a pet.
11. _____ I have the time and energy to learn how to train a pet.
12. _____ The other people I live with want a pet.

More to Think About

If you can't have the pet you want in your home, can you think of other ways to spend time around animals?

If you decide to buy or adopt a dog or cat can you think of problems that might occur?

List ways that you might need to accommodate to a pet.

List people in your life who might help you meet the needs of a pet.

List other things to consider before getting a pet.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(**1** = not very helpful, **5** = moderately helpful, **10** = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
