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Emotional Support Animals… Service Animals….Therapy Animals…OH MY!

By: Dr. Nicole Wozniak, Psy.D.

There is simply no denying the value of pets on our emotional well-being. A bond with an animal can provide comfort, companionship, strength, and confidence. It only makes sense that we want to be around our babies as much as possible. More now than ever, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, people have turned to animals for support. As mental health professionals, we frequently receive requests for emotional support and/or service animal recommendations. The following information may help you understand the differences between the various types of animal designations:

Emotional Support Animal

An emotional support animal (ESA) is any companion animal that is providing therapeutic benefit to someone with a medically diagnosed condition or disability. They are not required to be registered or certified, and a mental health professional must provide confirmation of the diagnosis and the need for an ESA as part of treatment recommendations. Many animals can be considered ESA's, including dogs, cats, rabbits, and even rats! There is no agency which "picks" or trains ESA's. ESA's have a few protections under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), but not as many as a certified service animal. For example, some airlines have banned ESA's from traveling free of charge, and restaurants and other establishments have the right to refuse entry to an ESA. It can help to have your pet registered through the ESA Registration of America, though this does not automatically make your pet into an ESA. If you are looking for an animal for use as an ESA, choosing an animal with a calm, unflappable temperament is usually a good place to start.



Cobi- MFS's certified service dog

Service Dogs

In contrast to ESA's, only dogs and miniature horses can be certified as "service" animals. A service animal is specially trained and certified to perform a certain role or function. They go through months of training to prepare for their jobs which could include things like helping individuals who are deaf/hard of hearing, assisting those without sight, seizure detection, etc. Essentially, the animal provides a service that an individual cannot perform on their own due to intellectual, physical, or emotional disabilities. As such, they are almost fully protected by the ADA which asserts that the animals must be allowed in public places and reasonable accommodations must be made for service animals within those spaces. Service animals wear harnesses or vests to distinguish them from other pets and are usually leashed unless their function requires them to be off the leash to provide their role. An agency is usually responsible for matching a service dog with an owner.



Hank- One of the BEC/MFS therapy horses

Therapy Animals

Some specially trained mental health professionals may utilize animals in treatment as part of animal assisted therapy. Mental health providers who utilize animals in therapy have undergone special training and certifications to utilize animals in treatment. Most of the time, the animals have undergone training as well. The exception would be something like an equine assisted therapy program (EAT). In an EAT program, the horses are well-trained, well-handled, and safe, but they have not undergone special "therapy" horse training. The equine specialist (who may or may not also be the mental health provider) is certified to establish whether a horse is suitable for an EAT program. In contrast, a therapy dog who is present in psychotherapy sessions has usually undergone specialized training to ensure their ability to react appropriately in intense emotional environments.

My mental health provider is unwilling to say I require an ESA. Why is that?

As mental health professionals, we are not qualified to say whether an animal is registered or certified, has the right temperament to provide emotional support, or whether they should be allowed into a certain place. At McCaskill Family Services, we *can* document your mental health diagnoses, but we *cannot* state that an ESA is required for your treatment or that a

specific establishment must allow it. Your primary care physician and/or other medical providers may be able to provide additional support.





Marty and Gus- Two of my very much not certified or trained in any way "emotional support" animals.

For more information on equine assisted therapy programs offered at McCaskill Family Services, please visit https://www.mccaskillfamilyservices.com/counseling-services/equine-therapy.html. For more information about having a pet registered as an ESA, visit www.esaregistration.org.