

The Benefits of Pet Therapy

Exploring the benefits of pet therapy is fascinating. Pet therapy is utilized in nursing homes, hospitals, prisons and counseling offices. Studies show that the presence of a dog decreases clients' anxiety, lowers their blood pressure, and increases their life expectancy. Many people come into counseling because they feel they have not been "heard." Some have all but given up trying to communicate their feelings. They have stuffed their emotions in, causing a myriad of negative symptoms ranging from depression to rage to physical illnesses. Therapy dogs provide social stimulation and physical contact, thereby boosting moral, alleviating depression and improving relationships.

Gizmo, my canine companion, is a 5-pound Pomeranian. He brings a sense of energy to my office, which did not exist prior to his arrival. He provides an atmosphere of trust allowing clients to feel comfortable disclosing their feelings, gaining the confidence they need to tell others how they feel. Maybe it is because Gizmo's presence makes therapy less intimidating.

Adolescents who were once adamant that they did not want to see a counselor, find their voice when they scoop up Gizmo and gently place him in their lap. Clients who feel that they are drowning in the depths of sorrow, simply relax by stroking Gizmo. Couples, who were previously arguing, appear to relax when Gizmo is perched between them. Gizmo encourages people to step outside of themselves and become more compassionate and empathetic.

Dogs exhibit a sixth sense in therapy and are much more adept with their physical senses than humans. Gizmo seems to understand when he needs to comfort clients or leave them alone. I find myself watching how Gizmo behaves. Is he avoiding them? If so, do they have a "wall" that prevents them from opening up? If Gizmo is overly affectionate, I wonder, are they grieving? Are they depressed? What are they not telling me? Many questions are brought to the surface simply because Gizmo is there.

As a team, Gizmo and I offer a safe place for clients to uncover who they are. They don't have to be fearful or anxious. They will learn that true acceptance is unconditional. Quite frankly, once clients embrace this fact, then all things are possible.

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