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## Dog and Owner Emotional Relationship Training

Andrea Sowles  
*Western Michigan University*

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**Dog and Owner Emotional Relationship Training**

**Doctoral Occupational Therapy Program**

Andrea Young

Western Michigan University

Department of Occupational Therapy

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this capstone experience was to develop a program for emotional relationship training to create a human-animal interaction (HAI) with a dog and their owner. Along with promoting the importance of mental health and engagement in occupations. The program focused on helping the dog provide emotional support to their owner through participating in the training of the Canine Good Citizen (CGC) test. This outline helped deepen the bond between dog and owner and allowed them to become more connected as a team. There is a gap in knowledge between the use of animal assistance in therapy and the benefits of the relationship between animals and humans. Education and awareness were provided on the different certifications of animal therapy and the benefits of deepening the relationship. Throughout this capstone experience, participants in the program were given opportunities to meet the needs of both the dog and their owner and build toward their desired goals.

## **Introduction**

This capstone experience concentrated on program development. The population served during the project were dog owners in the community. The capstone mentor was a certified professional dog trainer and behavior consultant. She was certified by the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers (CPDT-KA) and the American Kennel Club as a Canine Good Citizen (CGC) evaluation. She had been working and volunteering with dogs for over 20 years and was an active member of the Association of Professional Dog Trainers (ADPT). She also attended educational conferences on canine behavior and stayed current on the latest published

research. Additionally, she would collaborate with other animal behavioral professionals. The site mentor contributed to the capstone student's learning during the capstone experience and project because she was committed to providing clients with the most effective convenient training solutions.

## **Literature Review**

### **Human-Animal Interaction**

Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) describes the relationship and interactions between animals and humans and has become an increasing interest to researchers (Ratschen et al., 2020). The emotional relationship that can stem from HAI may be beneficial for an individual's overall health and well-being. The companion of an animal has the potential to affect a human's physical and mental health and is one area of HAI research that is prevalent (Ratschen et al., 2020) There is a unique natural bond that occurs between a HAI, specifically with dogs. Research has suggested that dogs have become aware of human instincts and compatible in forming relationships. With humans, dogs are sensitive to our emotional states, social gestures, and can communicate using complex cues (Gee et al., 2021).

Furthermore, using an animal model and the use of interactions with animals could be appropriate for interventions and research in occupational therapy (Dumont, 2014). Occupational therapists may be able to enhance practice using HAI and may range from occupations relating to caring for a pet to using an animal for therapeutic interventions (Dumont, 2014). Involving an animal into a person's daily routine can represent a significant occupation that allows the pet owner responsibility, social integration, and activities (Dumont, 2014). There are also benefits for using the companion of animals for persons with mental health problems. Animals are

nonjudgmental and accept those as they are regardless of difference and limitations (Dumont, 2014).

The beneficial effects of HAI's also involve children development as well. These areas include social, cognitive, emotional and language development (Dumont, 2014). Using animals in treatment for children might improve occupational performance in activities including school performance, leisure activities, and personal independence (Dumont, 2014). This is particularly helpful for children with developmental delays, behavior problems, and autism. The purpose of this literature review is to bridge the gap of knowledge with dogs providing emotional support and increasing an individual's overall well-being.

### **Mental Health**

There are multiple studies that have shown a positive association between interacting with animals and psychological wellbeing. There are correlations that dog activities increase positive owner relationships and have the potential to help or reduce depressive and anxiety symptoms. The role of caring for pet provides meaning and purpose for the owner. Dog's characteristics are non-judgmental and loving, which contributes to owner's feelings of positive self-worth (Merkouri et al., 2022). Many owners describe their dogs as intuitive and aware. The nature of dogs can result in them providing comfort when their owners are unhappy. This comfort can help reduce mental health symptoms and impact stress relief and depression (Merkouri et al., 2022).

Pet companionship provides a source of pleasure and the interaction with animals stimulates physical reactions that are necessary and important to humans (Fine & Beck, 2019). The companionship can also decrease loneliness and stimulate conversation by creating a

connection to the outside world (Fine & Beck, 2019). The presence of a dog can stimulate social interactions that can positively affect physical and mental health. Research has also indicated that dogs promote owners to participate in activities that can continue to the development of new skills and personal growth (Merkouri et al., 2022). Dogs give their owners structure with routines and encourage a healthy lifestyle.

### **Occupation Caring for a Pet**

Pet ownership can be considered a form of occupation filled with personal and social meaning and involves a variety of performance activities and experiences (Zimolag & Krupa, 2009). Taking care of a pet can also contribute to improving quality of life and contribute to life purpose. Being responsible for another living being and their well-being can also enhance feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (Zimolag & Krupa, 2009). The relationship between the owner and their pet provides a sense of purpose and promotes more engagement in meaningful activities. In one particular study, the Engagement in Meaningful Activity Scale Score (EMAS) was used, and pet owners had higher scores than non-pet owners (Zimolag & Krupa, 2009). Owning a pet can also increase the physical activity of the owner. One study found that dog walking is associated with better health and health behaviors (Curl et al., 2016). The findings also found that dog walkers with a stronger bond to their animals engaged in more walking (Curl et al., 2016).

Another study looked at the use of animals for children with autism in their occupational therapy intervention. They found that children with autism demonstrated significantly more social interactions and used language in sessions more than using standard occupational therapy techniques (Sams et al., 2006). These studies indicate the use of animals and forming a

relationship with them in therapy can influence the outcomes. Throughout the years dogs have been used for therapeutic purposes in various settings, with people of all ages (Le Roux & Kemp, 2009). Animals, specifically dogs, can assist with engagement in activities along with physical, emotional, and social skills.

### **Definitions of Assistance Animals**

In addition to benefits from emotional relationship with animals, there is confusion to the public on various types of assistance animals. The individual terms used to designate the function and role also have different organizations and statutes (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017). There is confusion on the different types of assisted animals, with the sub-categorizes being service animals, emotional support animals, and therapy animals.

A service animal is defined as an animal that provides assistance related to a person's disability and enjoys broad access to public locations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017). They have an advanced level of training and assist people who suffer from anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, major depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017).

Emotional support animals (ESA) are defined as an animal of any species that provides emotional support and/or therapeutic benefit to an individual with a mental or psychiatric disability (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017). ESA animals can become registered or certified but doesn't require specific training. Therapy animals have varying levels of training and assist professionals, such as counselors, social workers, physical therapists, occupational therapists, in performing their work with clients (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2017).



## **Animal-Assisted Interventions**

There are various ways in which animals, specifically dogs, can be incorporated in interventions to utilize patient involvement. Animal-assisted interventions (AAI) incorporate animals in health, education, and human service to facilitate improved health and wellness (Winkle & Ni, 2019). The four main AAIs are animal-assisted activities (AAA), animal-assisted education (AAE), animal-assisted therapy (AAT), and animal support (AS). Occupational therapy practitioners can include animals to benefit their treatment plans.

AAA and AAE are delivered by specifically trained teams that meet specific criteria. The teams are trained, evaluated, and registered to provide short, informal opportunities for educational, motivational, or recreational benefits (Winkle & Ni, 2019). AS advocates for the animals to ensure safe and enjoyable interactions and their overall well-being (Winkle & Ni, 2019). Occupational therapy practitioners are responsible for AS after becoming educated in animal behavior, handling, training, advocacy, and welfare so they may work with animals in practice appropriately (Winkle & Ni, 2019).

AAT is where occupational therapy practitioners include animals in planned, goal-directed, and measurable intervention activities to promote improvements in client goal areas (Winkle & Ni, 2019). Both the practitioners and animals receive continuing education training and the necessary skills to participate in this specialty practice (Winkle & Ni, 2019). Within the context of occupational therapy, this type of therapy can encourage participation, improve quality of life, and can be a meaningful way to connect with individuals (Winkle & Ni, 2019). Practitioners are also able to address goals in many areas of occupations including ADLs, IADLs, play, leisure, work, and social participation to improve motor skills, social interactions, and process skills (Winkle & Ni, 2019).

### **Canine Good Citizen Test**

The Canine Good Citizen (CGC) is a 10-skill test that teaches good manners to dogs and responsible dog ownership (Gibeault, 2020). The CGC title is a prerequisite for many therapy dog certifications and focuses on the basics of dog training. The nature of participating in the CGC helps deepen the bond of dog and owner and helps them become a more connected team (Gibeault, 2020). The guidelines for the test items have the potential to promote further engagement in occupations and improve the mental health for both the dog and the owner. For example, one of the test items is walking, which has multiple benefits. There are numerous studies supporting that dog walking is a great opportunity for socialization for both the dog and the owner and helps manage stress (Reisen, 2019). Additionally, the test items can increase self-esteem for both, along with having the companionship of a nonjudgmental and loving dog has several mental health benefits (Reisen, 2019).

### **Barriers**

There is currently a lack of knowledge and lack of training for practitioners and educators in animal relationships. Rehabilitation professionals also face barriers in recommending service dogs for clients due to not having guidelines to help them go through the process (Lamontagne et al., 2019). There is additionally a gap in knowledge on the various categories of assistance animals and understanding the differences. Previous research has in contrast viewed the negative consequences of owning a dog, however certain participants in this study believed that the positive consequences of service dogs partnership outweighed the negative (Lamontagne et al., 2019).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, a HAI can build a unique relationship between an owner and their dog. This bond can create an opportunity for an individual to be more involved in their daily lives. There are examples in literature of dog ownership reducing depression, anxiety, and other mental health difficulties (Gee et al., 2021). Research has also associated dog ownership with higher satisfaction and greater well-being (Gee et al., 2021). There is still a gap in knowledge between the use of animal assistance in therapy, but there is value to building an emotional relationship between a dog and its owner.

## **Needs Assessment**

With owning a pet there are various roles and responsibilities. There are also many benefits that can impact occupation engagement and mental health. However, there is a need in the community to educate on the correlation between deepening a relationship with an owner's dog and the positive outcomes involved. There is also a need in the community on further education in the different animal therapies, and the best option for them and their dog. Many have expressed interest in the process and difference between a service dog, therapy dog, and emotional support animal. The purpose of this project was to educate on deepening relationships with owner and dog and provide mental health awareness on the occupation of owning a pet. Additionally, to provide resources to educate on different animal therapies and the relationship between animals and humans.

## Objectives Achieved

Within the 14-week Doctoral Capstone Experience, below are three objectives that were achieved. Various learning activities were pursued to achieve and promote the project. The objectives are as follows:

1. By week 7 of the Doctoral Capstone Experience, student will address the different certifications of animal therapy using evidence-based research to educate the community by providing an education handout.
2. By week 7 and 14 of the Doctoral Capstone Experience, student will promote the importance of mental health and engagement in occupations by providing a self-reported survey before and after the program to implicate the use of dogs providing emotional support to their owner to perform such tasks.
3. By the end of the 14-week Doctoral Capstone Experience, student will implement the program to help the dog provide emotional support through deepening the relationship and meet the needs of both the dog and their owner.

Throughout the capstone experience, research and resources were completed for the program development. To address the different certifications of animal therapy, research was done using evidence-based research. A presentation was created to educate on the definition, rights, examples, and role of the different certifications. Additionally, additional presentations were created on each specific certification to go in more detail to educate the community.

To promote the importance of mental health and engagement in occupations, research was conducted on mental health and engagement in occupations. Also, research was performed on how the use of dogs can provide emotional support to their owner. Furthermore, a self-reported

survey was created for before and after the program to educate and the use of dogs in mental health and how they can assist their owners to perform certain tasks. Finally, in order to implement the program, a website was created for both client recruiting and to provide resources for the community and participants. Handouts were additionally provided on information on how dogs can provide emotional support and how the CGC can deepen the relationship to help meet both the dog and their owners needs.

### **Implications of Capstone**

The outcomes of this project have impacted the capstone site and those it served. The results of the program had a positive impact towards having an emotional bond with participants and their dog, along with promoting the importance of mental health. The profession of occupational therapy wasn't a familiar concept at the capstone site prior to this experience and how it pertains to mental health. The role of caring for a pet is an occupation that has the potential to benefit both the dog and their owner.

The outcomes from the capstone project impacted the participants knowledge in the field of occupational therapy and how activities with their dog can improve their mental health. The capstone project results support that they will be sustained and can be continued by the capstone site mentor. There was a positive association through participating in the CGC test items and how this related to increasing the emotional bond in the program. Additionally, the results supported engagement in activities with dogs can help provide emotional support.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this capstone experience challenged the student but also was fulfilling to benefit the community and help bring awareness in the importance of mental health and the benefits of increasing the emotional bond between an owner and their dog. The capstone student learned to be creative in ways to provide education from a different perspective while keeping the role of occupational therapy as well. A website was created by the capstone student to help aid in the organization of information during the capstone experience as showing in Appendix A.

Following program development, participants completed this self-survey prior to the program, which is shown in Appendix B, on the activities they enjoyed engaging in with their dog. They indicated if they felt any internal or external factors were interfering with their ability to engage in these activities. The most common factor was busy schedule and weather conditions. Participants additionally completed on the same form if they felt any internal or external factors were interfering with their ability to engage in other occupations. The most common fact was also busy schedule. Overall, external factors seemed to have more of an impact on the participants ability to engage in both activities with their dogs and occupations. To emphasize mental health in the survey, participants were asked to choose techniques they used to help when they felt stressed or overwhelmed from responsibilities and their roles. All participants indicated that their dog helped them feel better when having a challenging day.

Throughout the program, each week the capstone student provided resources and handouts on the various ways engagement in occupational and activities with their dog can influence their mental health. They were educated on the role occupational therapy plays in mental health and how various interventions with their dog can impact their overall well-being. The CGC test items were additionally taught each week in the program and how performing these items helped

increase the emotional bond between an owner and their dog. The capstone student provided a correlation table on how each CGC item related to mental health and occupation engagement. Appendix C is the handout table that was provide for participants. The capstone student also provided a handout explaining the benefits of performing the CGC test items and how it can lead to further training in animal assisted therapies.

Lastly, the capstone student provided a handout and resources on how the occupation of caring for a pet can have a role in mental health. It explained the benefits of caring for a dog, the activities that it can involve, and how the characterizes of a dog also play a role. There were eight participants and their dogs from the community that finished the program, and everyone graduated from the class. In addition, five participants and their dogs passed the CGC Test.

Following the program, a final self-survey was sent out to capture how the project impacted those it served as well as implications for the field of occupational therapy. Each participant specified that they felt they had a better understanding of occupational therapy, and they had a stronger emotional bond with their dog after completing this program. There was also a complete understanding of the different certifications of animal therapy, Appendix D shows the presentation that was provided for educating the different certifications. and participants felt they had appropriate tools to help if they felt stressed or overwhelmed. Most specificized that after completing this program, that their dog can influence their engagement in other activities and occupations. Each stated that their person goals had been met during the program as well.

Appendices A, B, C, and D relate to the development of the program and have the potential to be used continuously at the capstone site.

## Appendix A

### Program Website

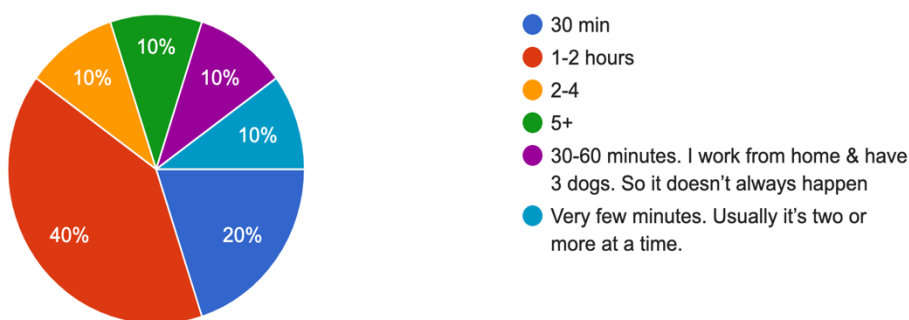
<https://capstoneprogram.my.canva.site/>

## Appendix B

### Participation Survey Form

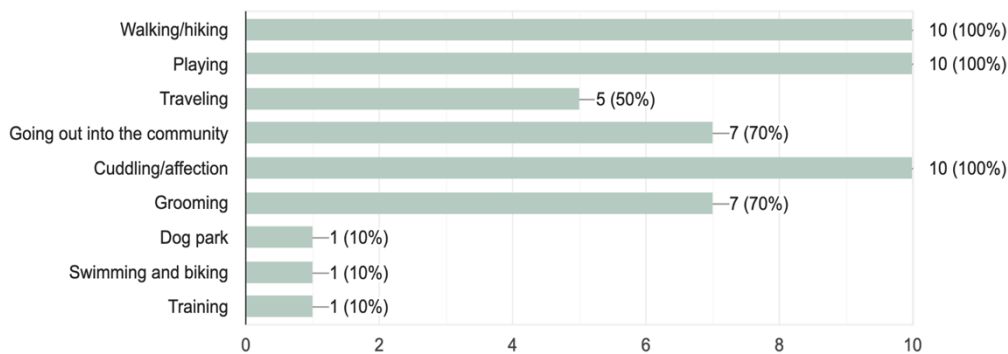
On average, how often in a day do you spend one-on-one with your dog?

10 responses



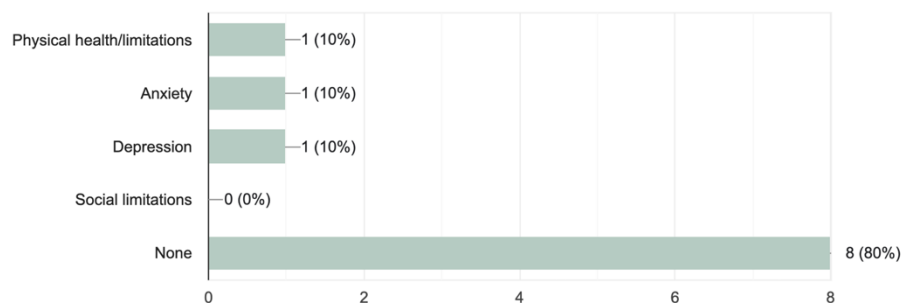
What typical activities do like to do with your dog? Choose all that apply

10 responses



Are there times you are unable to do certain activities with your dog due to internal factors? Choose all that apply

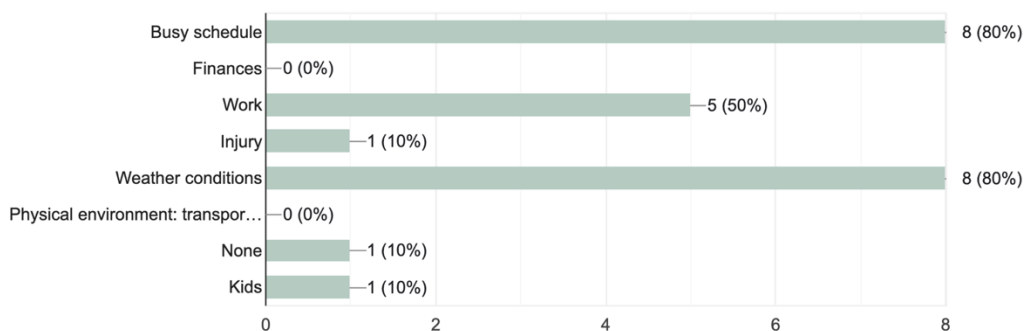
10 responses





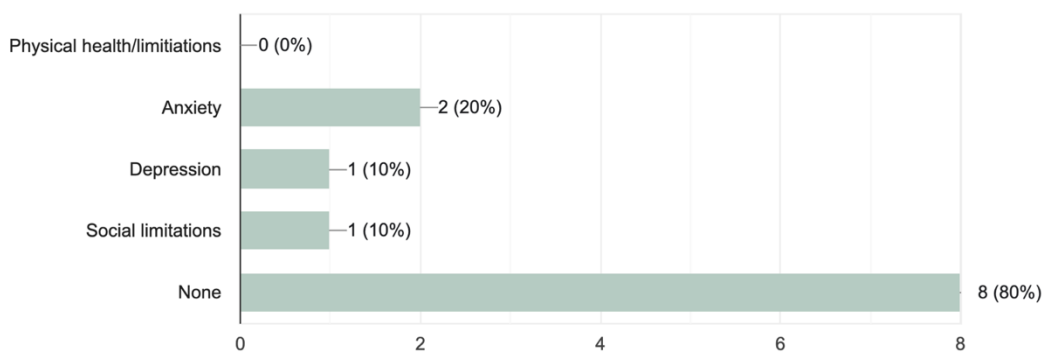
Are there times you are unable to do certain activities with your dog due to external factors? Choose all that apply

10 responses



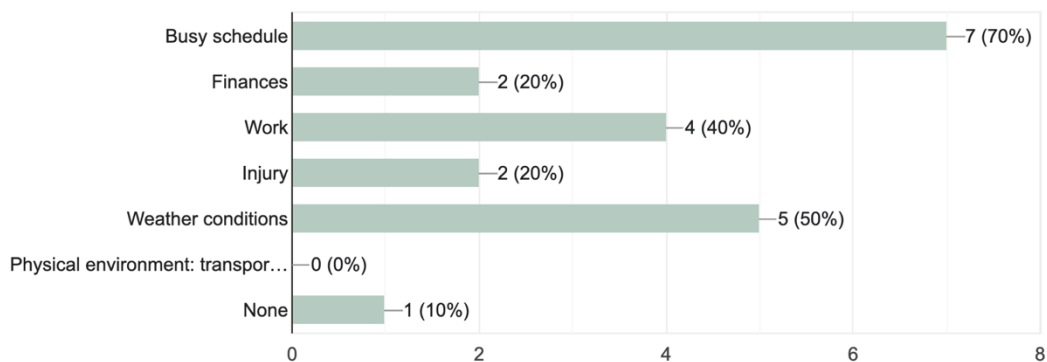
Are there times where you feel you are unable to engage in occupations/activities you enjoy due to internal factors? Choose all that apply

10 responses



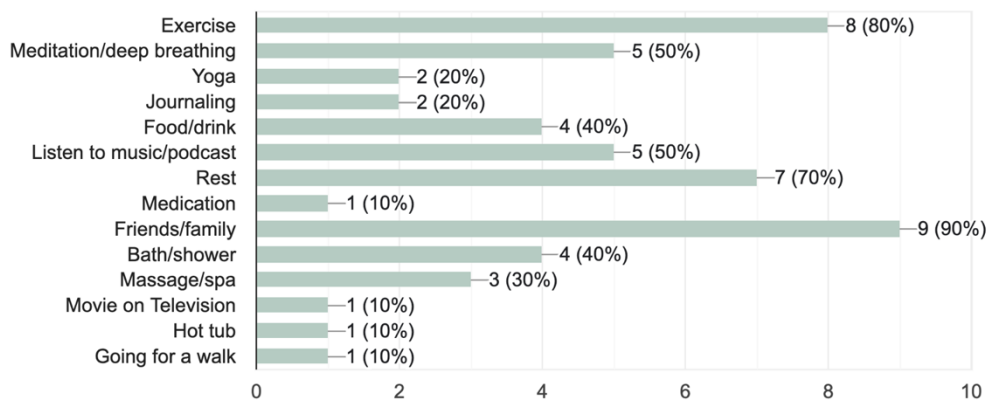
Are there times where you feel you are unable to engage in occupations/activities you enjoy due to external factors? Choose all that apply

10 responses



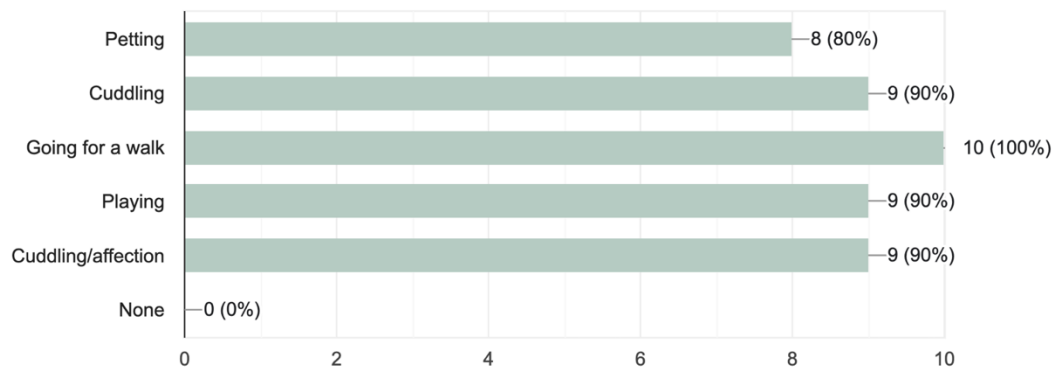
If you feel stressed or overwhelmed from responsibilities/roles what do you typically engage in to help? Choose all that apply

10 responses



Has your dog ever made you feel better when you are having a challenging day? If yes, choose all ways that apply

10 responses



## Appendix C

### Correlation Table

#### Canine Good Citizen Test Items Correlations to Mental Health/Engagement in Occupations

CGC Test Items	Mental Health/Engagement in Occupations
Test Item 1: Accepting a Friendly Stranger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Socialization</li> <li>• Personal growth for both you and your dog</li> <li>• Encouraging positive relations with others</li> </ul>
Test Item 2: Sitting Politely for Petting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lowers the stress hormone cortisol.</li> <li>• Dogs experience petting as a form of affection and is supportive of your dog's mental health.</li> <li>• Dog brains release the love hormone oxytocin when they're petted.</li> </ul>
Test Item 3: Appearance and Grooming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet the needs of your pet for both comfort and health.</li> <li>• Brushing your pet is a great way to bond with your pet.</li> </ul>
Test Item 4: Out for a Walk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve cardiovascular fitness, lower blood pressure, stronger muscles, and bones.</li> <li>• Decreases stress.</li> <li>• Exercises both you and your dog's mind.</li> <li>• Vitally important for your pet's health.</li> <li>• Improve and promote sleep for both you and your dog.</li> </ul>
Test Item 5: Walking Through a Crowd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Socialization for both you and your dog.</li> <li>• Keep your dog mentally stimulated.</li> <li>• Confidence building for both you and your dog.</li> </ul>
Test Item 6: Sit and Down on Command, Staying in Place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helps to increase and teaches your dog calm, controlled behavior.</li> <li>• Possible starting point for place work- can help with dog anxiety.</li> </ul>
Test Item 7: Coming When Called	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promotes safety for your dog.</li> <li>• Encourages a bond between the two of you.</li> <li>• Increase activity engagement.</li> </ul>
Test Item 8: Reaction to Another Dog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence building for both you and your dog.</li> <li>• Increases dog communication and cues.</li> <li>• Encourages positive relations with other dogs.</li> </ul>
Test Item 9: Reaction to Distraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence building for both you and your dog.</li> <li>• Decrease anxiety and stress for both you and your dog.</li> </ul>
Test Item 10: Supervised Separation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence building for both you and your dog.</li> <li>• Decrease anxiety and stress for both you and your dog.</li> </ul>

## Appendix D

### Animal Assistant Presentation



## SERVICE DOGS

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- As defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), service dogs are individually trained to perform specific tasks and to work with people with disabilities
- According to the ADA, disabilities can be "physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability."
- The work of the service dog must be directly related to the handler's disability



## EXAMPLES OF WHAT SERVICE DOGS DO

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- Guide dogs help blind people navigate in the world.
- Hearing (or signal) dogs alert deaf people to sounds, such as a knock on the door or a person entering the room.
- Psychiatric dogs are trained to detect and lessen the effects of a psychiatric episode.
- Service dogs help those in wheelchairs or who are otherwise physically limited. They may open doors or cabinets, fetch things their handler can't reach, and carry items for their handler.
- Autism assistance dogs are trained to help those on the autism spectrum to distinguish important sensory signals, such as a smoke alarm, from other sensory input. They may also alert their handler to repetitive behaviors or overstimulation.
- Service dogs that are trained to recognize seizures and will stand guard over their handler during a seizure or go for help.

## RIGHTS OF SERVICE DOG OWNERS

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- The ADA mandates that service dogs have full public access rights, which means they are allowed to go places where animals aren't allowed
- They can be brought into restaurants, stores, libraries, and other public spaces
- They must be permitted in housing, even if other pets are not allowed
- Service dogs are also allowed on airplanes and other public transport
  - Most require that the dog sits on the traveler's lap or at their feet
  - Dogs cannot block the aisle or sit in the emergency exit row
  - Service dogs are exempt from the pet fees that airlines charge

## EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ANIMALS (ESA)

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- Defined as an animal of any species that provides emotional support and/or therapeutic benefit to an individual with a mental or psychiatric disability
- ESA animals can become registered or certified but doesn't require specific training
  - They may be trained for a specific owner, but they are not trained for specific tasks or duties to aid a person with a disability
- Emotional support dogs are not considered service dogs under the ADA

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## EMOTIONAL SUPPORT DOGS

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- They're considered companion animals and ease anxiety, depression, some phobias, and loneliness
- In order to be considered an emotional support dog, it must be prescribed by a mental health professional for a patient with a diagnosed psychological or emotional disorder, such as anxiety disorder, major depression, or panic attacks.



## RIGHTS OF EMOTIONAL SUPPORT DOGS

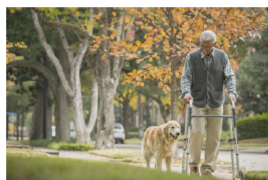
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- ESA owners have only limited legal rights and those typically require a letter of diagnosis from the owner's doctor or psychiatrist
- Fair Housing Act mandates "reasonable accommodations" for emotional support animals even in buildings that don't allow pets
- As of January 2021, airlines are no longer required to accommodate emotional support animals.

## THERAPY DOGS

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- Have varying levels of training and assist professionals, such as counselors, social workers, physical therapists, occupational therapists, in performing their work with clients
- Provide comfort, affection, and even love in the course of their work
- Therapy dogs are trained to be comfortable in new environments and to interact with different people
- They should have a calm temperament, be unfazed by unfamiliar noises and movements, be comfortable being handled, and love people



## THERAPY DOG RIGHTS

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- Therapy dogs are not considered service dogs under the ADA and don't have the same legal right to access in public spaces.
- There are no uniform state or national rules that regulate and certify therapy dogs, and different organizations have different guidelines
- As a general rule, therapy dogs should be trained, insured, and licensed by the non-profit that's offering their services.

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