



Some Things to Consider About the Human Expectations Placed on Therapy Dogs during Volunteer Work

The majority of companion animals that test at New England Pet Partners, Inc. are dogs, so we'll focus on them here, but this can apply to other companion animals too. It can be intrinsically stressful when dogs (or other companions) visit clinical, educational, home, health, hospice or post-trauma situations. Other canine related events like dog sports, showing or competing in Rally O, do not require the same intensity, as when a dog enters the intimate zones of unfamiliar territory. Often, they are required to remain there sometimes for up to an hour, enduring strange sights, sounds, smells, as well as a variety of people, touches, reactions, equipment and environments.

Search and rescue dogs often work in chaotic environments, but not with prolonged physical contact of unfamiliar people. Service dogs work wonderfully in public settings, but the public is actively discouraged from any interactions. Humans have developed a role for visiting dogs (and other species) unlike any other in existence.

Kris Butler shares in her delightful book, "Therapy Dogs Today", "most dogs have been bred for generations to distinguish between outsiders and family, and to act accordingly. There has never been a breed of dog designed to enjoy encroachment from strangers. Dogs who actually enjoy interactions in clinical and educational settings are very rare, and the uniqueness of their talent should be appreciated." (p.31).

All dogs (and humans) have a particular and comfortable spatial bubble. We need to be aware of this special bubble and act accordingly as our dog's advocate. Dogs that are comfortable and enjoy unfamiliar people will remain engaged with their assessors. Most will offer some eye contact.

Conversely, there are some dogs who prefer to interact with only certain humans or offer eye contact. Being aware of our dogs and how our emotions affect them is a key element in assessing whether it is a good idea, or not, to engage in therapeutic and/or visiting opportunities. A good question to ask ourselves is this: "does my dog (or other companion) really enjoy this or I am doing it solely for my own benefit because it feels good?" It needs to FEEL GOOD for the dog too.

For dogs, the effects of real human emotion, the stress of having large numbers of unfamiliar humans grabbing and hugging them, contact with toxic surfaces, and overcoming sensory stimuli are not simple training issues. These are human issues. Certainly, dogs can be trained and desensitized to persevere in spite of distractions and sensory bombardment. Sadly, this conditioning process inadvertently teaches these dogs not to use calming signals® (body language). Less savvy handlers and evaluators mistake the lack of signaling for "being comfortable with" ... Just because some dogs are willing to tolerate overwhelming environments does not mean people have license to exploit their visiting partners. Some environments impose too much upon dogs." (p. 59-60).

It is our responsibility to be realistic and make good choices for our dogs as a team!