



Human Expectations Placed on Therapy Dogs Maureen Ross, M.A.

Most companion animals that become registered teams at New England Pet Partners are dogs, but this can apply to other companion animals too. It can be intrinsically stressful when dogs visit clinical, educational, home, health, hospice or post-trauma situations. Pet therapy dogs are often required to visit intimate and unfamiliar territories. Positive training, socialization and manners (SAM), and the dog's good health and well-being take precedent.

Service dogs work reliably in public settings. The public is actively discouraged from interactions, for good reason. The dog's job is to care for their human. Therapy Dog Teams endure prolonged physical contact and interaction, oftentimes in unfamiliar situations. We need to be their advocates and aware of what is going on around them. This helps us manage stress levels.

Kris Butler shares in *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 enjoy interactions in clinical and educational settings are rare, and the uniqueness of their talent should be appreciated."

Dogs and humans have a comfortable spatial bubble. Recognizing our dog's energy, thresholds and stress levels, we can take a deep nose-to-navel breath and balance visits to help make it pleasant and effective, knowing when to back up or move forward.

Some teams visit for 15 minutes to an hour. Others accompany health care professionals to the facility for the day. They may have to endure strange sights, sounds, smells, as well as a variety of people, touches, reactions, equipment and environments. Basic manners, socialization and a trusting relationship with their parent / handler is essential.

Some dogs enjoy groups (children) while others prefer to interact one-on-one. 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 or visiting opportunities. Ask, "Does my dog enjoy this, or I am doing it for my own benefit because it feels good?" It needs to FEEL GOOD for the dog and people they visit too. You can tell with skilled observation of body language and recognizing stress signals (yawning, panting, zoning out, shaking, vocalizing).

Dr. Dawn Marcus, author of *The Power of the Wagging Tail*, shares that "We humans receive the benefit of reduced stress after a visit, but the dogs may retain the stress levels for hours." We (and the dogs) need time to relax, renew and rejuvenate.

Dogs that are trained, socialized and enjoy engaging with people make the best therapy dogs. In my book, [*Awareness Centered Training – ACT*](#), training and well-being creates a happy, healthy, confident and potential therapy dog. It is suitable for all ages (dogs or humans). Integrating life rewards, basic manners and socialization naturally into daily living and learning is joyful and easy.