



## Human Expectations Placed on Therapy Dogs During Volunteer Work By Maureen Ross, MA

The majority of companion animals that test to become registered teams at New England Pet Partners, Inc. 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.

Search and rescue dogs often work in chaotic environments, but not with the prolonged physical contact of pet therapy dogs. Service dogs work reliably in public settings, but the public is actively discouraged from interactions, for good reason. The dog's job is to care for their human. We have developed a role for visiting/therapy dogs unlike any other in existence. In doing so, we must be aware of our stress levels and the stress the dogs can tolerate.

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 actually 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 pet therapy dogs 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.

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 and/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).

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.

For therapy dogs, the effects of human emotion and having several unfamiliar humans touching / hugging them, contact with strange/toxic surfaces, smells and sensory stimuli are not simple training issues. We need to desensitize the dog through daily encounters, *slowly - not flooding*. Dogs will persevere in spite of distractions and sensory overload.

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 (dog or human). Integrating socialization and manners (SAM) naturally, into daily living and learning, is joyful and easy. It is our responsibility to use the mantra - YAYABA (you are your dog's best advocate)!