

Many years ago an experienced recreation therapist/psychologist said that his clients were like anyone's neighbors or family members, but that they needed an occasional mental or emotional "tune-up." People who have psychological challenges are often marginalized or feared because others don't understand that they have diseases that, just like physical ones, can be treated.

Respecting Boundaries:

Like any mix of people, clients in mental health care can be withdrawn or outgoing. Try to meet people in their "comfort zone" by being calm and relaxed. Allow people to determine how they want to interact with your canine, but always reinforce safe, appropriate boundaries.

Positive Social Interaction:

Canines not only can help clients relax, but can build a bond between the patients and give them a reason to be cooperative, caring and helpful to one another as well.



Canine-Assisted Therapy for Adults in Mental Health

Self-Healing in a Safe Environment

Educate clients about your breed of dog or about how dogs assist as therapists. You can encourage discussions about clients'

pets, but don't be surprised by the issues that might come up, such as loss, death, friendship, returning home, childhood experiences with animals, love or parenting. Those are all helpful subjects to discuss that can provide clinicians, therapists and doctors with new insights about their patients.

Sensory Stimulation:

Encourage gentle play activities, such as hiding a treat or ball, throwing soft toys or walking outdoors. Also allow clients to give treats, water or to pet and groom the canine. You may also ask clients how the dog or pets make them feel.

What Else?

Safety Considerations for Canines & Volunteers:

1. Be clear on how you want your canine treated and encourage only gentle play between clients and dog. Bring soft toys or grooming tools to encourage kind and positive behavior.
2. Always have a staff member with you during all activities.
3. Do not disclose personal information.

Staff Follow-Up:

1. Encourage clients to discuss their own pets or to draw pictures of a pet or their canine visitor. Others may like to write poetry or keep diaries.

2. Talk about the canine visits beforehand and schedule CAT for group sessions. Put canine therapy visits on the unit's month/week/day calendars.
3. Have books or magazines about pets, and DVDs or videos about animals for clients to watch.
4. Topics for group discussions might include whether or not animals have feelings; can they become depressed; do they know if they're rescued or abandoned?

Other discussions might center on how the dogs make clients feel and how the dogs affect them.

5. Give volunteers feedback on how the canine visit affected clients and staff.

"The increased social interaction [with animals] has been associated with increased verbal response by the patient and even with autistic children (Redefer & Goodman, 1989) or severely withdrawn patients with Alzheimer's disease (Corson & Corson, 1977). The results have been comparable with a wide variety of organic and functional mental disorders (Beck, Seradarian, & Hunter, 1986; Levinson, 1969; McCulloch, 1981) across a broad spectrum of ages."

A. Katcher and G Wilkins in *The Environment and Mental Health: A Guide for Clinicians*.
Edited by Ante Lundberg Washington, DC Commission on Mental Health Services, 1998

Biophilia asserts that humans have inborn responses to animals and natural settings in which they have evolved. This theory also brings to light to human dependence on the few remaining links between urban populations and the natural world - primarily companion animals and scenic greenery.

Canine-Assisted Therapy for Memory Care/Alzheimer's

Increased Social Contact: *Inexplicably, some patients begin to speak coherently with canines; others listen to conversations with interest and many are motivated join in group activities. Higher functioning adults can play games, such as hiding treats or gently playing with toys.*

Lower Stress Levels: *Canines can help clients relax, especially through gentle stroking or brushing, or simply with their quiet companionship.*



Mental Stimulation: *Have clients talk about their pets or have them guess what the visiting canine weighs. Talk about how much a dog eats, how fast they can run, what kinds of foods or exercise the canine most enjoy. Then make comparison's with the clients' activities, foods, and preferences. Ask if clients can calculate a dog's age.*

Sensory Stimulation: *Encourage giving treats, petting, and if patient wants, kisses or licks. Have clients describe the dog, how it feels to their touch, how it smells to them, or what is the dog's nicest characteristic (physical, social or emotional).*

What Else?

Safety Considerations for Canines:

1. Watch for over-enthusiastic touching or hugging that can frighten or injure a dog, especially small breeds.
2. Distract a client if s/he grasps collar too tightly and won't let go.

Staff Follow-Up:

1. Talk about last visit and mention canine's name often.
2. Boost client's moral by talking about how well s/he handled the dog and that the canine liked the client.

3. Have handler-approved treats on hand for patients to give to their four-footed visitors.
4. Have pictures of visiting dogs in the unit.
5. Find CD's with nature sounds.

Family Participation: Ask family to

1. Participate during pet therapy.
2. Supply a stuffed dog, cat or other animal.
3. Bring in pictures of past pets.
4. Take a walk with the therapy canine (and handler) down the hall, or if possible, outside for fresh air.
5. Take photos of canine and family members.

In "A Life Worth Living," William Thomas, MD, speaks to the need of the elderly, including those with memory impairment, dementia or Alzheimer's Disease, for regular socialization with animals. In skilled nursing homes or units, he has seen reclusive clients become active and sociable when a dog or puppy came to visit. A resident cat helped decrease depression, thereby decreasing the need for medication as well.

Our own volunteers and staff have witnessed Alzheimer's patients speak after months of silence in a dog's presence, sometimes with family members in a rare moment of recognition and coherence.