

When Emotional Support Animals Cross the Line

As the business of certifying emotional support animals grows - whether it's a snake, dog, or pig - when are you abusing the system that's designed for people who truly need an animal for anxiety or depression? The tale of one large service dog who forced a plane to make an emergency landing.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Emotional support animals are untrained companion animals that provide comfort to someone with a disability such as anxiety or depression
- People with emotional support animals may live in housing that prohibits pets
- The Air Carrier Access Act also allows emotional support animals to fly at no extra cost
- Some people have abused the system, getting online "emotional support animal" certifications for their pets just for the perks

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Service animals, usually dogs but sometimes small horses and other species, are trained to perform specific tasks to assist a person with physical, intellectual, or mental disabilities.

For instance, seeing-eye dogs are trained to lead their visually impaired owners safely around obstacles. Hearing dogs are trained to alert their hearing-impaired owners to household noises that are necessary for day-to-day independence and safety. There are even diabetes service dogs, who alert their owners when their blood sugar is dropping dangerously low.

Service animals are officially recognized by the Americans with Disabilities Act and are afforded multiple benefits under the law. Service animals may accompany their owners into places where pets ordinarily would not be welcome, such as stores, restaurants, museums, and on airline flights and other forms of public transportation.

Really anywhere that a person can go, a service animal can accompany them. The IRS even classifies service animals as a tax-deductible medical expense.

Emotional support animals, on the other hand, are not specially trained. They are, rather, untrained companion animals that provide solace, comfort, and, as the name implies, emotional support to someone with a disability such as anxiety or depression.

Why Are Some People Upset About Emotional Support Animals?

While not provided the same level of rights and protection as service animals, people with emotional support animals do enjoy certain rights. For instance, according to the Fair Housing Act, people with emotional support animals may live in housing that prohibits pets.

The Air Carrier Access Act also allows emotional support animals to fly at no extra cost (typically on your lap or under your seat). The only stipulation is that you must have a letter from a health professional explaining that your emotional support animal is part of your treatment plan.

There are many bizarre stories circulating the Internet of people abusing these rights, bringing rabbits and snakes into restaurants, for instance, or pigs and large dogs into the passenger cabins of planes. In one story reported in *The New Yorker*:¹

"... a woman brought her large service dog, Truffles, on a US Airways flight from Los Angeles to Philadelphia. At thirty-five thousand feet, the dog squatted in the aisle and, according to Chris Law, a passenger who tweeted about the incident, 'did what dogs do.' After the second, ahem, installment, the crew ran out of detergent and paper towels.

'Plane is emergency landing cuz ppl are getting sick,' Law tweeted. 'Hazmat team needs to board.' The woman and Truffles disembarked, to applause, in Kansas City, and she offered her inconvenienced fellow-passengers Starbucks gift cards."

It's Easy to Make Virtually Any Animal an Emotional Support Animal

A number of websites have popped up offering to get your animal "emotional support certified" for \$200 or less. Some of these sites involve a phone consultation with a therapist while at others you can fill out an online questionnaire. And it's not only dogs that qualify — snakes, turtles, and many other species have qualified, too.

It's also possible to purchase support animal vests, badges, and so forth online, such that anyone can easily make it appear that their animal is required for emotional, or other, support.

Aside from potentially upsetting people in public areas, the major issue with using a "fake" service animal is that it can shed a negative light on true service dogs. As reported by *The New Yorker*:²

"Nancy Lagasse suffers from multiple sclerosis and owns a service dog that can do everything from turning lights on and off to emptying her clothes dryer.

I'm shocked by the number of people who go online and buy their pets vests meant for working dogs ... These dogs snarl and go after my dog. They set me up for failure, because people then assume my dog is going to act up."

Although actual statistics are hard to come by, it appears the number of both legitimate and potentially illegitimate therapy animals is rising. The National Service Animal Registry, which sells certificates, vests, and other supplies for therapy animals, registered 2,400 emotional support animals in 2011 ... and 11,000 in 2013.³

Animals DO Offer Stress and Anxiety Relief

There's no denying that companion animals can and do provide significant emotional support. Pets provide encouragement and motivation, and they have a positive effect on stress levels.

In a survey of 400 pet owners by research firm Catalyst Direct, 89% said their pets helped them deal with the stresses of life while 83% valued the steady presence their pets provided.⁴ One of the best ways to reduce stress and improve your outlook on life is to "get over yourself."

This can be difficult to do when you're faced with a debilitating physical or emotional condition, but caring for a pet takes your focus off yourself, and the love and attention you receive in return can be tremendously gratifying. Biologist Erika Friedmann, a professor at the University of Maryland School of Nursing describes the stress-reducing effect of animals this way:

"It's providing a focus of attention that's outside of someone's self. They're actually letting you focus on them rather than focusing inward on yourself all the time."

The human-animal bond is real and refers to the powerful, positive interaction that exists between people and animals. It's not just about companionship — it's about a deep connection that enhances the quality of life of both humans and animals.⁵ Benefits of the human-animal bond have been demonstrated in a wide range of circumstances, for example:

- Seniors who own pets visit doctors and use the healthcare system less often than older folks without a dog or cat.
- Having a pet in the family, especially a dog helps children cope with the serious illness or death of a parent.
- Caring for a pet helps children learn to nurture and develop feelings of empathy.
- People who own dogs have less fear of being victims of crime both when they're out with their dogs, and at home.
- Pet owners have fewer minor health problems and psychological problems than people without pets.
- Some residents of nursing homes have a decreased need for medication when pets are a part of the environment. Pets also increase social interaction among nursing home residents.
- Families report a significant increase in family activities, exercise and happiness after getting a pet.

The Benefits of Therapy Animals for Mental Problems Are Indisputable

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) was discovered by Boris Levinson, a psychologist who back in the 1950s discovered purely by accident that his dog Jingles was able to engage an autistic child in a way humans had not.

Since the late 1970s, the Delta Society has been the most recognized name in the field of AAT. Dogs are the most frequently used therapy animals, but the Society also trains cats, birds, rabbits, horses, donkeys, llamas, and even pigs and snakes in their program. According to Delta's research, when people hold and stroke an animal — or in some cases just see one — a number of beneficial physical and psychological transitions occur, including:

- Lowered blood pressure
- A feeling of calm

- The ability to be more extroverted and verbal
- Lessened feelings of hostility
- Decreased loneliness
- Increased self-esteem
- The ability to adjust more readily to life changes

The research is quite strong that animals can significantly help children and adults with psychiatric illness, mood disorders, developmental and learning disabilities, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with a wide range of causes, and other mental and emotional challenges. For instance, a study of anxiety ratings in hospitalized psychiatric patients concluded that animal-assisted therapy sessions significantly reduced anxiety levels for patients with psychotic, mood and other disorders.⁶

And according to Aaron Katcher, MD, a psychiatrist and emeritus professor of Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania, there is also clinical and anecdotal evidence that patients with dissociative disorders and agoraphobia are able to decrease anxiety and increase social skills when they have companion animals.

Pet-Friendly Establishments Are on the Rise

If you've ever considered certifying your dog as an emotional support animal just so you can bring him with you to dinner and the theater ... please reconsider. If your dog misbehaves or damages property, you could be held liable. Not to mention that you're casting a poor light on the real service- and emotional-support animals that people depend on to live their lives.

Plus, if you love to have your pet with you, there are a growing number of pet-friendly restaurants, hotels, and shopping centers that cater to pet lovers like you. There's no need to bring your pet where he's not welcome ... instead, check your local business directory for a list of pet-friendly establishments near you.

If you happen to live in California, this just got a whole lot easier. Effective January 1, it became legal for California's canine population to accompany their owners at all restaurants with outdoor seating. If you're not a Californian or just want to know more about other locations where your dog is welcome, there are a number of resources available to help you find pet-friendly accommodations no matter where you are. Some of these include:

- **[PetFriendlyTravel.com](#)**
- **[Bring Fido](#)**
- **[GoPetFriendly.com](#)**
- **[PetsWelcome.com](#)**
- Take Your Pet
- **[DogTrekker](#)**
- Pet Hotels of America
- **[Pet Friendly Travel on Facebook](#)**
- Pet-Friendly Outdoor Activities & Travel on Pinterest

Sources and References

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