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## **Animal-Assisted Therapy Brings Special Benefits**

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*"There is no psychiatrist in the world like a puppy licking your face."* ~ Ben Williams

Eleven years ago my husband gave me a birthday gift that keeps on giving, a Yorkshire terrier puppy that we named Sherwood. He likes to go for rides, loves bank and restaurant drive thrus, and is always up for a Sunday afternoon nap. A couple of years ago he started going to work with me and giving to many more individuals. Sherwood has become my assistant and companion in working with clients in counseling. One of the most amazing sights I have witnessed is the transformation of a client when Sherwood is in the room. A recent example is the angry, depressed, and completely disgusted with the world teenage boy who got down on his knees and slid across the floor in order to lovingly and gently stroke Sherwood's head while he slept.

Animal-assisted therapy is not a new concept. As early as the 1790s, the Quakers used animals at a retreat for the mentally ill in England. Animals bring a tremendous love and acceptance into any relationship. They don't care how we look or even how we act; they love us unconditionally. Animal assisted therapy may be of special benefit to people who are in difficult life situations. Petting a dog, for example, can bring about a wonderful change in a client. Animals can often reach people when human relationships may be difficult. Scientific research has shown that interaction with animals can significantly improve a person's physical and emotional health. Animals make people feel good and they facilitate the healing process.

Therapy animals may be treasured pals with whom children can share their thoughts, fears and concerns during lonely or stressful times. They can become non-threatening and non-judgmental companions who develop a bond that promotes positive self-esteem and self-confidence. Animal assisted therapy permits clients to be themselves so that they can risk self-disclosure and form attachments. Typically, interacting with an animal makes a person more sensitive in relationships with people.

Therapy dogs must be social. The interaction between the dog and the client is the key; the person needs to feel accepted by the dog. A dog's rejection could make the client's situation more hurtful. A good therapy dog is calm, tolerant and friendly. Therapy dogs must be polite. A polite dog does not touch a person unless invited. The balance between calmness and friendliness is a difficult one. Even an obedient dog may not be a good therapy dog if it is not interested being with people. Immanuel Kant once said "We can judge the heart of a man by his treatment of animals". Apparently, the teen that reached out to Sherwood has a gentle heart that needs to be reached. And the fact that Sherwood was comfortable

enough in his presence to sleep is also an indication of the gentle soul inside this boy. Sherwood and I have some work to do to break down the wall of defenses and move beyond the anger. But Sherwood is up to the task, just ask him.