

Healing our heroes

Animal-assisted therapy can help

Almost any domesticated animal can become a therapy animal, but the therapy animals at the VA MidSouth Healthcare Network (VISN 9) are a special breed indeed. When these dogs come a-calling at VISN 9's VA Medical Centers, patients' faces just light up.

Patient-focused care

The animal-assisted therapy (AAT) programs at VA Medical Centers continue to reveal that animals can aid in the healing process. The well-trained, certified handler-dog teams work with the therapy staff to assist goal-directed treatment plans for patients. These treatment plans, designed to meet specific criteria in each individual's care plan, are an integral part of the patient's treatment process. AAT teams are used to help patients with ambulation, wheelchair mobility and fine motor skills. The focus is on positive interaction as Veterans engage with the dog and handler, which diverts their attention away from issues such as chronic pain, feelings of depression or a reluctance to socialize with others. For example, a Veteran who willingly walks with a therapy dog doesn't realize he is working on his endurance in ambulation or his balance. Upper extremity exercising is accomplished through ball-tossing activities. Veterans are often surprised at how quickly their therapy time passes and how much they accomplish when exercising with the AAT team. Smiles are abundant and often leads patients to reminisce about experiences with their own pets.

Building positive experiences

Stroking and talking to one of the therapy dogs often leads patients to reminisce about experiences with their own pets. Smiles are abundant and long-lasting as the AAT team works its magic. Research shows that interacting with animals can lead to lowered blood pressure, reduced stress and increased motivation in therapy, just to mention a few benefits. And Veterans aren't the only ones who reap the benefits. The staff appreciates an opportunity to break from the intensity of their day for some interaction with the handler-dog teams.

AAT has applications in a variety of therapeutic settings, from helping newly injured returning soldiers in the rehabilitation environment to World War II Veterans in long-term care settings. The health benefits are far-reaching and include improved physical, cognitive and social skills. The roles that animals play can range from just spreading a little love among patients to actively participating in physical rehabilitation. Whether it's a soldier returning from recent service or a Veteran of a past war, the results are very similar. One returning soldier summarizes it this way: "There's a unique bond of love, comfort and support that you receive from the animal, and you don't feel judged." So the next time you're walking down a VA hallway and see an AAT team, stop and thank them for the difference they're making in the lives of our Veterans.



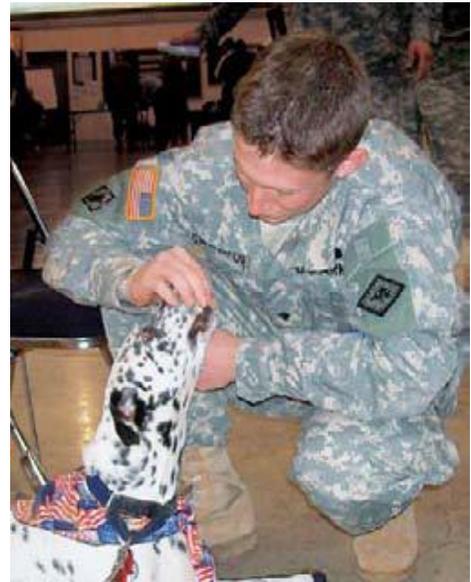
A Tennessee Valley Healthcare System patient enjoys some time with Wally, a therapy dog.



Lexington VA Medical Center therapy dog, Skeeter, comforts a patient

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Therapy dog, Lottie Dot captures the attention of a returning soldier during a Welcome Home Event sponsored by the Memphis VA Medical Center