

Therapy Goats: From Hoof to The Heart

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It's a sight to make anyone do a double-take: A goat, hooves clicking smartly on tile or linoleum, trotting down the hallway of a nursing home or hospital. What is a four-footed creature doing inside a medical or rehabilitative facility?

Meet a special type of caprine: Therapy goats. They're on an important mission: To bring love, affection, laughter, and calmness to people ailing in mind, body, or spirit.

Therapy goats are a unique fusion between farm and hospital, between agrarian roots and ultra-modern medical care. The goal of any animal therapy is third-party improvement: Helping a patient's social, emotional, or cognitive functioning. Bringing along an animal can make a therapist seem less threatening, particularly for traumatized children or those afflicted by mental disorders. There's nothing like hugging an animal to increase rapport between patient and counselor.

History

[Animal therapy in care homes](#) has a long history, dating back to certain (more enlightened) 18th-century mental institutions where inmates were allowed to interact with some domestic animals. As modern therapeutic techniques developed, the positive effect of animals on people suffering from anxiety and depression was noted. The famous psychotherapist, Sigmund Freud, observed patients (particularly children or teens) were likely to relax and confide if dogs were present, since dogs are not shocked or judgmental at what a patient said. Florence Nightingale observed the benefits of pets in the treatment of individuals with illness. She wrote: "A small pet animal is often an excellent companion for the sick."

Therapy animals aren't just feel-good rhetoric; they're backed by solid research. Therapy animals can positively affect brain chemistry, including dopamine (linked with reward-motivation behavior), oxytocin (bonding), and cortisol levels (stress). For those individuals

struggling with issues ranging from rejection to sexual abuse to PTSD to mental illness to end-of-life care to depression to stress, having a furry, friendly creature willing to bond can be a huge asset.

Over the years, different types of therapy animals have been used, primarily dogs and horses (and even dolphins). The unifying qualifications include an appropriate size, age, aptitude, behavior, and training.

Into this honorable history, goats are making an increasingly impressive mark.

Non-Judgmental

For patients undergoing rehabilitative therapy, especially those associated with some sort of stigma such as alcohol or drug addiction, therapy goats offer non-judgmental affection and attention. One former alcoholic who hit “rock bottom” started working with therapy goats. She told a news station, “You can be yourself, you can cry, you can work through emotions ... you can be happy, you can be sad ... and they’re just going to be there.”

This unconditional acceptance and support is the key factor for animal-assisted therapy. Lainey Morse, founder and CEO of Goat Yoga (www.goatyoga.net), explains how the unique bond between caprine and human works. “It’s not really the training that makes a good therapy goat. It’s the love,” she says. “They will just always look at humans as a source of attention and love and want to give it back. It’s extremely helpful for people suffering from mental illness, autism, stress, or fighting a disease. Some of these people don’t do great with ‘talking therapy.’ When you get them around goats, they forget about their issues and just connect with the goats. This makes them calm, and it also makes them laugh and feel loved.”



Photo by Lainey Morse

Cracking the Shell

Some physical or mental conditions make it difficult for people to express themselves verbally. Therapy goats offer opportunities to communicate non-verbally, a chance many affected patients seize wholeheartedly — and which, happily, often lead to increased verbal communication. Children with autism, for example, are often so enthused by their new four-hooved friends that they're motivated to tell others (teachers, parents, counselors) about their new passion.

The entertaining nature of goats is among the qualities that make them excellent therapy animals. Their playfulness can bring people out of their shell, lift their spirits, and even lower blood pressure.

But the benefits go deeper than spirited antics. They offer companionship and unconditional love which can serve as a lifeline for those with little else to live for, such as those in prison, people fighting terminal illnesses, or anyone feeling hopeless.

“Therapy goats don't need a bond with a human,” says Morse, “so when they walk right up to a person and start to snuggle, or climb on their laps, or lay on their mat — it makes that person feel so special. Their calm demeanor is helpful too. Even when they chew their cud, it's something like a meditative state that's oddly relaxing to be around. Goats are calm and in the present moment, and the humans can't help but take on that energy. They're also very funny and happy animals, so they make you laugh as well. The combination is a very therapeutic.”



Getting Good with Goats

Caprines are becoming more popular as therapy animals for a variety of reasons: they are easily trained, highly sociable, non-violent, and extremely entertaining. “The reaction from people when they meet a therapy goat for the first time is pure bliss,” says Morse. “I’ve never seen anything like it. You can have horses, dogs or cats, but when you present them with a therapy goat, their faces just light up.”

Therapy goats must be friendly and well-socialized, well-behaved in public, and respond well to loud noises. “Most goats don’t even need a bond with a human to love them,” says Morse. “If they’ve been socialized correctly, they will just walk right up to you and want love and attention. They are not given treats by humans and so they don’t mob people for food. Instead, they look at people as the giver of love.”

For obvious reasons, most advocates recommend either a polled or disbudded animal. Wethers and does are preferred over intact bucks, which have too strong of an odor. But beyond this, “I don’t believe there is any one breed that is better for therapy over others,” notes Morse. “I have a lot of Nigerian Dwarf goats which are small enough to sit in someone’s lap, but I also have several Boer and Nubian goat rescues — bigger goats — and they are the biggest lover-goats. I think both genders are great, but I prefer wethers because females seem more focused on food and eating where the boys seem more focused on giving and getting love.”

Training often starts when the goats are babies, and the most important part of that training is affection. “Being around humans and getting used to human interaction makes them grow up to be the most loving therapy goats,” says Morse. “Mine start as babies, but any goat that has been socialized can be a therapy goat.”

The most obvious advantage of therapy goats is the cuteness factor, but they offer deeper and more serious benefits. “Goats are naturally in the present moment, happy and calm,” notes Morse. “Humans have a hard time with all of those things, but it’s easier to connect to those feelings when around the goats. The world seems to be filled with chaos; but when you’re in my barn with the goats, I promise you will not be thinking of anything else other than the goats.”

Despite the proven advantages of therapy goats, Morse is taking matters one step further to legitimize their benefits. “I’ve recently partnered with Oregon State University research scientists to start doing studies on my goats and why goats and humans connect so well together,” she says. “There are not many studies (if any) that are done on goats and the human interaction, so I’m really excited for the scientific research. Animals have long been touted as helping lower blood pressure and release the feel-good chemicals in people, so this should be really interesting!”

Therapy vs. Service

What is the difference between a therapy animal and a service animal?

Service animals are working animals, not pets. They are trained to perform tasks for people with disabilities, and their work must be directly related to the individual's disability (in other words, no third-party assistance). These animals are legally protected at the federal level by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and have a legal right to accompany their owners into almost every public sphere.

Therapy animals do not have the same legal rights and are not protected under the ADA, the Air Carriers Act, or the Fair Housing Act. While they are often allowed access to public locations as a courtesy, they cannot travel in the cabin of an airline for free, and are not exempt from pet-restricted housing. It is important to recognize these legal distinctions.

Happy Hour

When asked whether she's ever had a therapy goat misbehave, Morse demurs. "I've had over 2,000 people come through my Goat Yoga classes and I've never had anyone get hurt," she says. "I call the portion after the yoga class Goat Happy Hour — because everyone leaves happy! This is the time when everyone can snuggle the goats and take fun pictures and just lose themselves in the goats."

As the benefits of therapy animals are becoming better understood and more widely used, therapy goats are poised to become important contenders in improving mental and physical health. After all, any animal that can bring a smile to the face of a child sexual abuse survivor or an elderly man dying in hospice is an animal worth promoting.



Photo by Lainey Morse

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