



Paw Prints

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Columnist

Cats as therapy animals

With various studies documenting the positive effects pets can have on human health, it's no surprise that therapy animals have regular visits at children's hospitals and retirement communities around the nation. And while dogs might be the first therapy animals to come to mind, an increasing number of therapy cats have been making a difference helping people cope.

While the stereotypical aloofness might at first seem to prevent cats from becoming therapy animals, those felines who are outgoing and actively seek out human attention can make excellent therapy animals.

If you share your home with a cat or two, you'll probably agree that they're great companions and unknowingly offer therapy to us on many levels.

Cats seem to have an instinct to be there when you need comfort. Whether you are sick, worried about work, or mourning the loss of a loved one, a cat will

inevitably show up to make you feel better. Feeling a furry body cozy up into your lap, then give loving licks on your hand purring all the while, can be one of the most comforting feelings imaginable.

Scientists have discovered that the purring of cats is a natural healing mechanism. So snuggling up with a furry feline companion can be good for you. Because their purr vibrations are in the 20 to 140 Hz range, they can have therapeutic effects. When your cat purrs within this range, being nearby may be therapeutically beneficial to you. Purring has been linked to lowering stress, decreasing symptoms of dyspnoea (difficulty breathing) strengthening bones, and lessening the chances of having a heart attack.

Does your furry feline friend have what it takes?

There are several organizations that certify pet therapy teams. And Pet Partners' Therapy Animal Program is one of the largest in the U.S.

The first step in preparing your cat to be a therapy animal is to make sure that she meets basic requirements. These can vary by organization, but typically include being comfortable in a harness and up-to-date with shots. Don't worry if your furry friend hasn't worn a harness; cats can be trained to wear one and many don't mind once they get used to it.

Most organizations will also have a minimum age for participation. For example, Pet Partners' cats must be at least a year old and the handler must have known the animal for at least six months.

You need to determine whether your cat has the right temperament to work with people. Good socialization skills are important in a therapy cat, as they are exposed to many different environments and unpredictable situations. The ideal therapy cat is outgoing, laidback and friendly, and shows no aggression toward people or animals. But even though an extroverted and social cat is potentially suitable as a therapy cat, she also needs to be able to tolerate some unexpected or different handling experiences. For instance, is your kitty able to tolerate someone who may be clumsy when they are handling her or may be louder than expected?

The evaluation process for a potential therapy animal is different for various organizations. But all are similar in the fact that they require animals to be of a certain age, certified healthy by a veterinarian with up-to-date vaccinations and have no history of aggression. While dogs are often required to know basic obedience commands, cats should be comfortable wearing a harness and leash.

There's no mistaking the impact of an animal on



PHOTO BY JODI SCHNEIDER MCNAMEE

Ranger might be a therapy cat with his outgoing, laidback attitude.

a person's emotional well-being, and this is demonstrated with therapy animals as they do their jobs by comforting those in distress.

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