



Emotional Support Animals:

THE BASICS

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What is an ESA?

An **Emotional Support Animal** (ESA) is an animal that provides therapeutic benefit (e.g., emotional support, comfort, companionship) to a person with a mental health or psychiatric disability (such as a serious mental health condition). An ESA is **not** considered a Service Animal, but under U.S. law, an emotional support animal is also not considered a pet and is generally not restricted by the type of animal.^{1,2} Any domesticated animal may be considered as an ESA (e.g., cats, dogs, mice, rabbits, birds, hedgehogs, rats, minipigs, ferrets, etc.) and they can be any age. However, an ESA must be able to be manageable in public and does not create a nuisance.

**EMOTIONAL
SUPPORT
ANIMAL**

ESA's do not perform specific tasks, instead it is the presence of the animal that relieves the symptoms associated with a person's serious mental health condition. For a person to legally have an emotional support animal (ESA), the owner must be considered to have a qualifying mental health or psychiatric disability by a licensed mental health professional (e.g., therapist, psychologist, psychiatrist, etc.), which is documented by a properly formatted prescription letter. The difference between a legitimate ESA and a pet is the letter from your **licensed mental health professional**.

How is an ESA different from a...

Service Animal



Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a service animal is defined as “a **dog** that has been individually trained to do work or perform tasks for an individual with a disability. The task(s) performed by the dog must be directly related to the person’s disability”.³ Only a dog can (or in very specific cases a miniature horse) be considered a Service Animal.

Some examples include:



A **Guide Dog** for persons who have severe visual impairments or are blind.



A **Seizure Response Dog** assists a person with a seizure disorder.



A **Hearing Dog** for persons who are deaf or hard-of-hearing.



A **Psychiatric Service Dog** that assists people living with disabilities detect the onset of Psychiatric episodes and lessen their effects.

- i** To qualify for a **Psychiatric Service Dog (PSD)**, you’ll need a prescription from a licensed mental health professional stating that you need a dog to assist you in a major life task (e.g., provide deep pressure therapy to minimize an anxiety or panic attack or wake you from a night terror).
- i** The cost of a PSD averages between \$20,000 - \$30,000). Non-profits such as *The Foundation for Service Dog Support* may reduce costs based on each individual and their service to the community.

Therapy Animal

Therapy Animals are used in clinical settings to bring comfort to individuals in need. Unlike ESAs and Service Animals that are trained to help a single person (their owner), Therapy Animals work in places such as hospitals, mental health institutions, hospices, and schools to bring comfort and affection to many different people.

Pet

Pets do not necessarily provide any therapeutic benefits to their owners and anyone can own a pet regardless of whether they have a disability or mental health condition. While pets absolutely can and do benefit their owners in a variety of ways, providing such benefits is not the “job” of a pet.



How do I figure out if an ESA is right for me?

There are no hard rules about who would and would not benefit from an ESA. The primary benefit is often the simple companionship that comes from spending time with an animal. Animals can be a great comfort during times of distress and a much-needed positive presence on a difficult day. Depending on the type of animal, taking care of an animal can be a lot of work. For some, this kind of responsibility can be useful motivation to do things like adhere to routines (e.g., feeding your animal at the same time(s) every day) or get outside and exercise regularly (e.g., walking a dog).

If you think that an ESA might be right for you, start a conversation with your mental health professionals about it. Tell them why you think having an ESA would be beneficial to you specifically. Your professional may already know about ESAs and be able to tell you if they would recommend one for you, or you might need to learn more about ESAs together before they make a recommendation.

Where do ESAs come from?

ESAs can come from any of the places that pets come from. Unlike Service Animals, ESAs do not need to be raised or trained in a specific way. Emotional Support Animals can be adopted from shelters, purchased from breeders or pet stores, or obtained from anywhere else that a pet could come from – maybe your neighbor’s cat had kittens!

Am I allowed to pet/interact with an ESA that I see in public?

Maybe. It is always best to ask the owner before interacting with any animal that isn't yours. Owners of Emotional Support Animals will make their own choices about who interacts with their animals and how. Some owners may be happy to share their animal with you, while others may prefer that their animal be left alone. This is somewhat different from Service Animals that are often "on duty" when they are in public places and should not be disturbed.

Do ESAs wear vests?

There is no requirement for Emotional Support Animals to wear a vest, harness, or any other type of clothing that indicates that they are an ESA. Some owners choose to purchase vests or other clothing that labels their animal as an ESA. However, not all ESAs wear vests, and you cannot assume that an animal without a vest is not an ESA.

Our Other Relevant Materials

- [Can I Bring My Emotional Support Animal to College with Me?](#) tip sheet
- [Our ESA webpage](#)
- [Having an Emotional Support Animal at College. Meet Anwyn and Yoda.](#)
- [Comeback TV \(CBTV\) Episode 3. Therapy Animals: The Types and Your Rights](#)

Finding a Psychiatric Service Dog

- [Canine Companions for Independence](https://www.cci.org) (<https://www.cci.org>)
- [Paws with a Cause](https://www.pawswithacause.org/) (<https://www.pawswithacause.org/>)
- [Service Dogs for America](https://www.servicedogsforamerica.org/) (<https://www.servicedogsforamerica.org/>)
- For more training programs and organizations, check out this [list of service dog trainers broken down by state](http://dogcapes.com/trainers.html). (<http://dogcapes.com/trainers.html>)

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