



EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ANIMAL

What is an Emotional Support Animal (ESA)?

An **Emotional Support Animal (ESA)** is an animal that provides a 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.

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.

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

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

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

To qualify for a psychiatric service dog (PSD) you will 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).

The cost of a PSD averages between \$20-\$30K. 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.

Takeaways

- Emotional support animals can provide therapeutic benefit to individuals with serious mental health conditions.
- Emotional support animals ≠ service animals, therapy animals, or pets.
- ESAs can benefit individuals in a variety of ways.
- If you think an ESA would benefit you, talk with your mental health professional.
- You will need documentation to bring an ESA places with you.
- ESAs are allowed on college campuses with proper documentation and communication.
- It's always a good idea to communicate openly and ahead of time when bringing an ESA to a new place.

