



The Foundation for Pet Provided Therapy

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Cats as Therapy Pets

A frank and informative account from an experienced Love on a Leash, cat therapy pet owner:

So you think your cat wants to become a LOAL member...

1. Does your cat have a calm demeanor?
2. Does your cat LOVE humans and being petted by them?
3. Is your cat open to new experiences, like changes in his/her routine, and visiting other places?
4. Can your cat ride in your car without freaking out and/or throwing up?

If you answered “yes” to the above questions, then your cat is probably a good candidate to become a pet therapy volunteer.

Before a Visit:

As with our dog therapy members, cats must be on a leash at all times when making a visit. Yes, that means your cat, too. We trained our cat by only allowing her to go outside in the backyard if she was wearing her harness and leash. At first, she would barely walk, acting like she had a hundred pound weight on her back, but before long, she accepted the fact that she needs to wear her harness and leash. Now our cat regards her harness and leash as her “work clothes” and behaves differently when wearing them. For example, if we put our cat, without her work clothes, on someone’s lap, she may or may not stay there—but if she is wearing her harness and leash, she will stay on the lap or bed of the person she is visiting.

So, you and your cat need to get used to using a collar or harness with a leash. We must always have control of our cat by using a short leash when visiting. A sudden noise can spook a cat and the leash helps you to control or retrieve a frightened cat. (And cats are famous for their Houdini-like escapes from collars and harnesses, so keep your cat near you in case he or she slips out of the harness.)

Getting Ready for Visiting:

Many cats do not like water on their fur. If your cat can tolerate a bath, now and then, great. But you do, however, need to ensure that your cat is clean before each visit:

1. Brush your cat's fur. Yes, most cats shed all the time, but a brushing removes some of the fur, makes the cat look so much nice, and allows you to check for "trouble spots." "Trouble spots" are places your cat has trouble reaching during his or her self-grooming. The main spot to check is your cat's rear end.

Our cat has a very furry behind, where unpleasant surprises sometimes hide: cat litter, fecal matter, urine splatter...well, you get the idea. And, as you know, cats love to touch their tails on people and stick their back ends in the air. Dogs sniff, cats rub—that's just the way it is. So the rear end is important to check! Because my cat doesn't like baths, before a visit I use special cat-wipes (found at most pet stores) to freshen her up.

2. Clip your cat's claws—front and back. Even if your cat does not use its claws for defense, cats do use their back claws when jumping off things, like people's laps. We do not want our cats to accidentally puncture someone's laps if they decide to jump. (Putting a towel down first can also help protect against scratching as well as minimizing leaving fur behind.)

During a Visit:

Dogs need to be able to get along with other dogs; however, cats are not wired to be social like dogs. Our cat does not like dogs, so we just make sure we watch for her safety (and the safety of the dogs) by keeping distance between her and the dog teams—sometimes by going to another floor or different rooms when visiting in a hospital or nursing home setting.

Because some people are allergic or have an aversion to cats, it is important to always ask, "Would you like a visit from a cat? Always ask first before bringing your cat near anyone.

Your cat may accept wearing a collar or harness and a leash, but it doesn't mean he or she wants to walk with you as a dog would. People think it is the funniest thing in the world to see a cat on a leash, but you do not need to make your cat walk—in fact, you will probably need to carry your cat most of the time.

Unlike the Control Evaluation for dogs, your cat should be evaluated on its behavior by a veterinarian. Your ten practice hours are an important "test" for your cat. How you and your cat work together during these supervised visits will be the deciding factor on whether or not your cat is appropriate for pet therapy work.

Have fun. Does your cat seem to enjoy these visits? A stressed-out cat is not a good therapy pet and should not be forced to continue. If you are sure your cat is enjoying this added attention (once he or she gets used to what is expected at each visit), then welcome to the rewarding world of cat therapy!