

# accord extra

Association of Christian Counsellors and Pastoral Care UK

## Pets as therapy

By Su Bailey

Pets as Therapy (PAT) is a charity founded in 1983 and is the largest organisation of its kind in Europe. Thousands of people of all ages benefit every week from the visits provided by Volunteer PAT Teams, who visit residential homes, hospitals, hospices, schools, day care centres and prisons. The volunteers work with their own pets, to bring joy, comfort and companionship to many individuals who appreciate being able to touch and stroke a friendly animal.

The presence of a therapy pet will help take a person's mind off of their worries, physical or emotional pains, and anxieties. The simple act of patting a dog has been proven to provide a human with multiple mental and physical health benefits – elevating moods, lowering anxiety, assisting relaxation, reducing loneliness, increasing mental stimulation, and providing an escape or happy distraction.

I have been working with my dog Benji in this capacity for about two years, but it is probably best for him to tell you about his work.

My name is Benji and I have been asked to share with you my experience as a PAT dog.

My work started in a hospice, then in a hospital and last year I went into the local college to do a few pre exam



sessions with students. These seemed to go well with a few students saying that they could go into the exam room after spending time with me. I loved the attention and was invited back to do six morning sessions for students who were sitting GCSE exams this year.

Since February 2019, my career has taken another turn and I am proud to say that I am the first PAT dog in the UK to work in a long-term high security prison. I spend two days a week, accompanied by my assistant Su, working in three therapeutic units. I must admit, as a dog who loves attention, this is the best job! Sometimes I am so excited to be going in that I try to get through the barred metal gates before they're open but find that only my head fits through. Wherever I go in the prison, even walking along the corridors between wings, someone always shouts my name. Even prison officers stop me to say hello and stroke me.

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It's funny when big 'hard' men back away from me as if I'm scary! Problem with me is I want to be liked by everyone (must do more on my self-awareness) so I tend not to back off!!

Everyone in therapy sessions is friendly and even men who have only known or owned tough looking and tough acting dogs before turning sappy when I lean against them! I look more like their first teddy bear!! (You therapists will talk about the importance of transitional objects, but I think it is just my incredible charm that they relate to.)

The ones who are struggling the most seem to benefit from me paying them attention and being able to relate to me – a lot of them have asked for my photo.

Life is not always easy for us therapists. I had a horrible time one Saturday when I went to be in attendance at the prison visits. I was swamped by a posse of about 10 young children, all under seven. They all wanted to touch me and just when I was trying to hide, one of them grabbed my lead and they tried to run around and around the visits hall. That was halted thank goodness and I was able to leave for a walk round the gardens outside. I've put in a request not to do visits anymore.

So, what is my therapeutic model? Well quite simply based on the core condition of empathy. The writer Mitch Albom says this: 'Did you know that a dog will go to a crying human before a smiling one? Dogs get sad when people around them get sad. They're created that way, it is called empathy. Humans have it too, but it gets blocked by other things – ego, self-pity, thinking that your pain must be tended to first. Dog's don't have those issues.'

And now I will let my assistant (owner, as she likes to think of herself) say a few words.

Love Benji xx

On the wings

Benji demonstrates empathy everyday as he interacts in prison settings. When we go onto a wing, he checks on everyone, he won't stop to play until he has made sure

he has seen all of the prisoners. Then he will revisit the ones he has identified as being sad, he will sit quietly at, or lay across, their feet and wait or if he spots someone looking lost, he will go and lean against them until they start to interact with him. Once he can sense their mood change and a smile appear on their face, he will then visit someone else for play.

These are Benji's natural gifts, he becomes more perceptive each day.

There are 823 long-term high-risk prisoners and little Benji, but the Governor says that he has calmed the prison!!!!

Su Bailey worked as a probation officer with lifers and serious offenders for 15 years. When she retired Benji came into her life and she later took up a volunteer role with the Independent Monitoring Board. She took Benji along with her, as she did not want to leave him at home alone for so long. Benji proved to be valuable for the prisoners and so the governor invited Su and Benji to be the official PAT Team. She describes herself as Benji's sidekick!!

