

The Therapy Dog

Managing Emotions

About the Therapy Dog:

The Therapy Dog is your brain's helper for your feelings. When things feel wobbly, too big, or a bit too much, they help you feel safe. They can tell when big feelings like worry, anger or sadness are starting. When that happens, they let you know, they try to comfort you, and help you to feel ok. They help you to pause before you react, take a deep breath when you're upset, and bounce back when something goes wrong. The Therapy Dog doesn't stop you having feelings (feelings are important!). But they do help you feel them in a safe way – like a gentle friend walking beside you. They always remind you: you're not alone.

When your Therapy Dog is hiding, barking, or overwhelmed

If your Therapy Dog needs some help, you might:

- Get upset really quickly, or more than other people seem to
- Feel stuck in a mood – like worry, anger, or sadness – and can't find a way out
- Cry, shout, or go quiet before you even realise it's happening
- Find it hard to talk when you're upset
- Even after something is over, you still don't feel safe
- Keep your feelings inside until they suddenly burst out later
- Stay away from things that feel scary or frustrating
- Feel out of control inside, even if you look fine on the outside
- Say or do something when you're upset that you didn't really mean, or wish you could take back
- Feel like your feelings are in charge, and it is hard to get back to calm

What you can do to help your Therapy Dog

- Practice calm things every day – even when you are not upset. This way, your Therapy Dog knows what to do when you need them. You could squeeze a stress toy, hug something soft, listen to music, draw, or write down your worries.
- Make a "calm kit". Fill it with things that help you feel better so you can use them when your Therapy Dog feels panicky
- Use your calm tools early. When feelings get really big, it's harder to feel better. Try using your calm tools before feelings get too big
- Give your therapy dog exercise! Going outside, moving your body, and playing helps keep them fit and ready to help you with tricky emotions.
- You can find more ideas for managing big emotions here: www.moodcafe.co.uk

Make sure the person is ready to learn these strategies. Remember, not every strategy works for everyone. When unsure, focus on what **you** can do to support the person

What other people can do to help your Therapy Dog

Before

- Make sure people know **how** they ask for help. Remember – this might not be with words
- Work out common triggers for big emotions. They might be ‘fast’ triggers like being told something isn’t happening. There might also be ‘slow’ triggers like not getting enough sleep last night.
- Good sleep, exercise, being outside, and eating well all help us to manage our emotions.
- Create safe, quiet spaces where the person can calm down. Make sure they can access this when they need to. This should never be used as a punishment.
- Practice ways of managing emotions together, before they are needed. You can find suggestions for adults, teenagers, and children at www.moodcafe.co.uk
- Look after your own therapy dog. It can be really hard to keep calm when someone is really upset, but it is also really important.
- Use stories and visuals to help them learn about their feelings, and work out signs of these emotions in their body
- Try to notice emotions before they get too big and scary. Often, strategies to manage emotions are most effective early on, before they get big.

During

- Help them name their feelings (“you look frustrated – is that right?”)
- We learn how to manage our emotions best those who help look after us. This is why children often come to parents when they are upset, angry, or scared - they are sharing the emotion with you. Keeping calm yourself and comforting them is you being their therapy dog. It helps their therapy dog learn what to do.
- Offer choices during tricky moments (“do you want to take a break here, or in the calm space?”). However, avoid asking too many questions emotions are getting too big.
- Let them know it is okay to have big feelings – and okay to need help with them
- When emotions get really big we stop thinking. Avoid reasoning, just help them feel safe
- If someone is really upset or angry, and you are concerned they might hurt themselves or others, make the space as safe as you can.

After

- Celebrate when they notice their emotions and use a strategy, not just when they stay calm
- Sometimes after big emotions people feel exhausted and need some time to recover.
- It can be helpful to learn the reason for big feelings. When someone is upset they might not be able to tell you. It is ok to go back later to ask what upset them. This needs to be when they are calm, recovered, and can think about it. This isn’t about blaming them for what they did when they were upset.
- You can get more advice on supporting people with their emotions at nait.scot/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/NAIT-Supporting-Conversation-Partners-with-Emotional-Regulation-2023.pdf
- If you are worried about someone’s mental health, advise them to contact their GP

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