

When to Retire Your Therapy Dog



Sometimes it's hard to retire a therapy dog – after all, the visits are satisfying and they make lots of people happy.

Don't wait until an incident occurs, someone complains about your dog or speaks to the media. An error may ruin not only your team's good reputation but could jeopardize all therapy dog teams.

Be alert to signs and signals as your dog's well being may be affected. If necessary, get a second opinion. Love can be blind when it comes to your own dog.

Keep in mind the following signs that it may be time to retire:

1. Your dog starts to act old

You know the markers: grey hairs appear; the coat becomes dull or thin; teeth decay; stiffness or soreness becomes apparent. Dogs deserve the right to enjoy their geriatric years work-free, without pain or needless stress and in the comfort of home. Besides, a dog in pain can be unpredictable or even aggressive. Mistakes can happen.

2.. Your dog signals an exit strategy

You know your dog best. Look for signs of stress: your dog doesn't get excited about putting on the OTD collar and badge for therapy dog work; halts or pulls to go back to the car when you approach the facility; pulls to leave during a visit. These are telltale signs that something is wrong.

3. Your dog gets grouchy

Therapy dogs are good-natured, cheerful and approachable. If your dog starts to avoid people, hides behind you or goes so far as to nip or growl, it's time to retire.

4. Your dog is no longer having fun

When the tail no longer wags during visits, or if your dog looks sad or depressed, then consider replacing therapy work with other activity that you and your dog can enjoy together.

5. Your dog is sick

Call your vet if your dog isn't well. If the condition is treatable, deal with it. If the condition is chronic, progressive or in any way hinders your dog's ability to be a good therapy dog, then stop your visits – at least while your dog is ill. Wounds, surgeries, infections and injuries require time-out, or maybe retirement. Dogs on drugs or other substances that affect performance in all likelihood should be retired.

6. Your dog loses its appetite

Most dogs love to chow down - no wonder that food is such a big motivator in training. When a dog loses interest in food or loses weight without being on a diet, something is likely wrong. Please look into it.

7. Your dog starts to act "weird"

OTD member guidelines state that a dog needs to be retired when it shows signs of physical or mental distress during visits. Signs of mental stress include pacing, excessive shedding, licking the lips, trembling, shaking, yawning or whining. As dogs age, they can also show cognitive decline- call it doggy dementia.

8. Your dog becomes disabled or less able

OTD therapy dogs come in many shapes, including dogs with disabilities. For example, a three-legged dog can be a real inspiration for an amputee patient. However, if a therapy dog develops a disability during its career, it may need to be retested. The animal may develop chronic pain or have hearing, visual or other disabilities that could pose a safety concern.

9. Your dog needs a diaper

When bowel and bladder accidents happen, there is a problem. Dogs that are incontinent or accidentally urinate or defecate inside need to be retired as therapy dogs. It is unsanitary and unacceptable canine behavior. Also, this can be a health and safety risk, especially in public institutions such as hospitals and nursing homes.

10. Your dog no longer wants to be cuddled

Who wants a visit with therapy dog that doesn't want a pat, hug or cuddle?

Retirement Options

If you find yourself in a position where it is best for your dog that visits stop, there may be other ways that you can use your skills to help Ottawa Therapy Dogs. Talk to a Board member or our Volunteer Co-ordinator to see how you can help.

References

Therapy Dogs Incorporated Rules and Regulations, Part 1, 2011 Governing Member Guidelines
Coren, Stanley. How to Speak Dog, Mastering the Art of Dog-Human Communication. The Free Press. 2000

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OTD Toolbox Infosheet #11

Design donated by www.gummediator.com

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