

## Emotional support animals <sup>[1]</sup>

Hello!

I plan to study abroad in the next few years and, although I've never seen a psychiatrist or anything, I am fairly certain I have anxiety. I can tell through my daily interactions and I am a psychology major so I used the manual to kind of self diagnose myself. I wanted to go talk to my college counselors about getting an emotional support dog soon so we can build a bond and then he/she can come abroad with me. Many airlines will require a letter from a mental health professional saying that I am under their care and the dog is vital to my mental and emotional health. Do you know if a college counselor is a mental health professional? In the sample letters, it provides a license number and where the professional works. Would a college counselor qualify, or does it have to be a qualified psychiatrist? Would it depend on the counselor's qualifications? Thank you so much!

### Answer

Dear Reader,

Studying abroad is an exciting opportunity to explore a new surrounding and culture, but this big change could certainly impact your mental well-being. By thinking ahead about your mental health needs, you're on the right track to having an enriching experience abroad — and in your life in general. Whether the way you feel is because of this upcoming trip or an underlying mental health condition, it may help to keep in mind that a proper diagnosis requires an assessment from a certified mental health professional. From there, they can offer a variety of effective treatment plans that best fit your needs. While emotional support animals (ESAs — more on those in a bit) may provide support and comfort, more research is needed to definitively determine their effectiveness as part of treatment for mental health concerns (such as anxiety disorder). And, as with any set of treatment options, there are additional factors you may want to consider. If your mental health professional agrees that an ESA would be beneficial for you, they can then write a letter of support that allows your ESA to fly with you in the plane's cabin area. But, there's a lot more to know beyond what it would take to get clearance for a furry companion on a plane, so keep reading for a breakdown of the issues at hand.

First, though you may have done a bit of homework to start, in order to know for certain if you have anxiety (or something else) an actual diagnosis requires a proper assessment from a

licensed mental health professional. You may also want to find a mental health professional who has specialized training in working with human-animal bonds in counseling, as the American Counseling Association has recommended that mental health professionals who aren't specialized not write letters for their clients in order to maintain the safety of the client, animal, and the public. To find a certified mental health professional, they can typically be found at your school's health or counseling services. Many college campuses have licensed mental health providers on staff (psychologists, psychiatrist, social workers, etc.). You could also talk with your health care provider, who may be able to make a referral for you (for more tips, check out [How to find a therapist](#) <sup>[2]</sup> in the *Go Ask Alice!* archives). With a proper diagnosis, a mental health care provider can offer a treatment plan that works for you, as there are [many options available](#) <sup>[3]</sup>. It may even be the case that an ESA would help alleviate your mental health symptoms. But, again, a professional recommendation ensures that it's the best treatment option for your unique needs.

On to more about ESAs specifically: The benefit to humans is thought to be through the consistent presence and interaction with an ESA in order to enhance feelings of happiness, security, and self-worth. ESAs also help to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation, as well as alleviate symptoms of emotional disorders (including anxiety disorder). However, it's worth noting here that research on the therapeutic benefits specific to ESAs is still developing. And, though they live at home with their human partner and don't require special training, certification, or registration — they are not considered pets. As you explore the possibility of whether an ESA is right for you, there are additional factors you may want to consider. These include the risk of infection or injury from an animal, as well as financial, social, and emotional challenges to taking care of one.

When it comes to animals, their interactions with humans, and benefits to mental health, not all roles filled by these creatures are created equal. It's worth mentioning that ESAs are different than service animals and animals used in animal assisted therapy (AAT). Service animals go through special training to perform tasks that assist people with disabilities. As they're essential to daily living for people with disabilities, service animals are protected under the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) <sup>[4]</sup>. Through animal-assisted therapy (AAT), animals may help with emotional health needs; becoming a therapy animal does not require special training, though there are behavioral and health requirements that the animals need to meet. AAT involves regularly interacting with qualified animals for a set time over weeks or months in a therapeutic environment (with a mental health professional). This type of therapy may be beneficial for patients who have anxiety, depression, or schizophrenia when carried out correctly and as part of a comprehensive treatment plan.

As a side note: though there is no official certification program for ESAs, there has been a recent boom in companies that carry out their own. But, it's good to point out that these privately-run programs have come under scrutiny from mental health professionals for ethical and legal concerns.

More to your question about being allowed to take an ESA on the plane with you, a letter from a health care provider is necessary to gain permission from an airline to travel with the ESA in the cabin area [5] (or to bypass a “no pets allowed” housing rule [6]). It's required that the letter is written by a licensed mental health professional and contains the following components:

- Confirmation that the patient has a mental health diagnosis
- Explanation of how the ESA helps alleviate the condition
- Description of how the animal and patient interact and how long the professional has observed the interaction
- Explanation of the possible negative effects of not having the ESA present
- Mention of any training the animal received from a qualified trainer, if applicable

As you continue to investigate traveling with an ESA, also be sure to look beyond the airline concern and check into the rules of bringing an animal into the country in which you plan to study. Many countries have strong rules about animals entering and a number of countries have quarantine requirements that may range from weeks to months. The consular office or embassy of each country should be able to provide more details.

Reader, you're wise to prioritize your mental health, but you might consider widening the scope of potential strategies to cope with anxiety and to bring an expert on board to help. Although ESAs may provide emotional health benefits, they may not effectively treat a mental health condition alone. And, just like any treatment or therapy, there are more than just potential benefits to consider when determine the right fit for an individual person. Taking the time to establish a relationship with a counselor or therapist may help you determine the best way to address the feelings of anxiety you report as you move forward and get ready to set sail for study abroad.

Safe travels,

Alice!

Category:

Emotional Health [7]

Stress & Anxiety [8]

Miscellaneous [9]

## **Related questions**

Will a healthy dog's bite make me sick? [10]

Sleeping with the animals [11]

My partner is moving in, but they're allergic to my pets [12]

## **Resources**

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [13]

Alice! Health Promotion (Morningside) [14]

Mental Health Services (CUIMC) [15]

Center for Student Wellness (CUIMC) [16]

## Footer menu

- ▼ Contact Alice!
  - Content Use
  - Media Inquiries
  - Comments & Corrections
- ▼ Syndication & Licensing
  - Licensing Q&As
  - Get Alice! on Your Website
  - Full Site Syndication
  - Link to Go Ask Alice!

**Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.**

If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

---

**Source URL:** <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/emotional-support-animals>

### Links

- [1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/emotional-support-animals>
- [2] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/how-find-therapist-0>
- [3] <https://www.adaa.org/finding-help/treatment>
- [4] <https://www.ada.gov/>
- [5] <https://www.transportation.gov/airconsumer/passengers-disabilities>
- [6] <http://www.humanesociety.org/animals/resources/tips/assistance-animals-tenants-rights.html>
- [7] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/emotional-health>
- [8] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/stress-anxiety>
- [9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/miscellaneous-0>
- [10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/will-healthy-dogs-bite-make-me-sick-0>
- [11] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/sleeping-animals>
- [12] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/my-partner-moving-theyre-allergic-my-pets-0>
- [13] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/counseling-and-psychological-services-cps-morningside>
- [14] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/alice-health-promotion-morningside>
- [15] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/mental-health-services-cuimc>
- [16] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/center-student-wellness-cuimc>
- [17] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/disability-services>