

*As a gentle, sensitive ball of fluff, some of the best work Wallace does is in helping children with phobias...*

Debbie and Wallace are working to leverage the power of this bond of empathy to do the most good they can for people suffering from anxiety, depression and behavioral disorders stemming from past traumas. "Wallace and I specialize in children who have problems that are resistant to other treatments," Debbie explains as Wallace gnaws gently on a tennis ball. "Wallace is here to help them feel more comfortable, to be relaxed, and to feel safe, especially if we are having a session where they are talking about difficult or even traumatic things. That little bit of help getting past any feelings of shame, or fear or hesitancy that they have can really accelerate the process of recovery and help them grow and heal faster."

As a gentle, sensitive ball of fluff, some of the best work Wallace does is in helping children with phobias of animals overcome their fears through extremely gentle exposure, or response therapy. An intuitive master of the procedure, Wallace seems to know just how close a client is comfortable with him being at any given time. "We wait for the client to be ready for Wallace to come into the room and then we let him in," Debbie says. "When he does, he goes to the other side of the room and waits for them to feel more comfortable around him and to want to interact with him more."



Not simply a lap dog by any means, Wallace also helps Debbie and her clients with more physical exercises too. "We incorporate yoga into our sessions for some children who are dealing with anxiety. It helps them mind their breathing and balance," Debbie says. "Wallace even joins in on it. He will hop on the floor and do his best to either drop to the ground, sit, or lie with us." Naturally, I asked to see pictures of his yoga practice, which Debbie readily provides; his sun salutations are lacking but his down dog is flawless.



Sympathy can go both ways, and before he joined the Kohlbrenner household, Wallace had a life that it is easy to feel sympathetic for. "One of the things that really helps the kids open up is when I tell them the story about how Wallace came into our family." Debbie gives Wallace a good pet before she continues with the story. "Wallace was left tied out in a yard without food, water or care for a long time. We don't know for sure, but there was a real possibility that he was physically abused as well. When we adopted him, he was underweight, sick, and had worms. We were able to help him though and he was able to recover into the extremely friendly, caring, helpful dog that he is today.

"It gives them an avenue to begin talking about how these traumas can happen in the world, it lets them know that they aren't alone and takes away some of the shame of what they've gone through," she continues. "It also lets them project onto Wallace and talk about how they feel about their own traumas by talking about how he must have felt. It helps them to talk about things that they otherwise might have just bottled up."

The connection between people and their canine companions can be a powerful tool for therapy, and Debbie and Wallace are showing how it can be used to help the people that need it most. "I'll always remember one of the first sessions I brought Wallace along for." Debbie begins as Wallace set his head in my lap. "The girl I was working with was very guarded and was hesitant to talk about her feelings and the things she had gone through. When I brought Wallace into the room, he just sat with his head in her lap and she just started to open up. It's been a great experience for me too just getting to see how animals work to build these connections, bring out these emotions and show us just how much more we can do to help these kids to grow and recover."

