



Our Mission:

Unleash the benefits of animal-assisted interventions and clinician-led support so that every person with an eating disorder can heal.

Our Why:

Of the thirty million Americans who are diagnosed with an eating disorder, [less than 20% receive treatment due to systemic and financial barriers](#). **One person dies as a direct result of their eating disorder every 52 minutes**, and this mental illness has the [second highest mortality rate of any psychiatric condition](#).

About SoulPaws:

Founded in 2016, SoulPaws is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit offering free, clinician-led support groups with licensed therapy animals, including dogs, miniature horses, guinea pigs, cats, rabbits, rats, and more. Our trained clinical facilitators invite participants to experience the three pillars of SoulPaws – **Calm, Connect, and Heal** – which are informed by the different parts and functions of the brain. SoulPaws support groups are designed to support different stages of eating disorder recovery and enable participants from all identities to come as they are and take what they need. Our evidence-based curriculum and pillars are inspired by Dr. Bruce Perry's Neurosequential Model and Dr. Patricia Flaherty-Fischette's research.

SoulPaws Provides

An Accessible Resource

Our support groups are free, open to everyone, and led by clinicians. Many of our facilitators have lived experience with eating disorders, and all are trained to serve from the lens of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Community and Connection

We utilize licensed therapy animals to cultivate a sense of safety and connection within our support groups. We aim to extend participants' therapy networks to include animals—those present at the workshops, and those in their own lives.



Evidence-Informed Approach

The three program pillars are inspired by Dr. Bruce Perry's Neurosequential Model and the role that emotion regulation plays in building connection and healing from mental health challenges.

Known and Potential Benefits of AAI

While many studies demonstrate the power of animal-assisted therapy, SoulPaws aims to build upon that work and further explore the powerful healing potential animals can contribute specifically to those recovering from eating disorders.

*While SoulPaws Workshops serve as a supportive tool in the process of recovering from an eating disorder, they are not meant to replace professional treatment. [A trained, professional treatment team with expertise in eating disorders is recommended.](#)

The 3 Pillars of SoulPaws

Obstacle:

Emotional dysregulation is a consistent feature of all eating disorder presentations.

(Monell & Birgegård, 2018; Prefit, Cândia, & Aurora Szentágotai-Tázar, 2019)

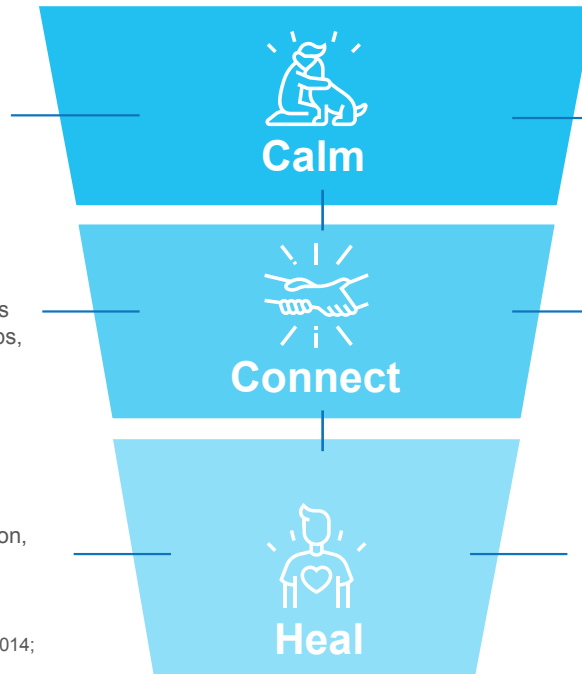
Obstacle:

Eating disorders extend beyond food and body image, and can be conceptualized as a fear of authentic connection, relationships, and people.

Obstacle:

Eating disorders block regular brain function, contributing to difficulties in relationships, identity formation, self-compassion, and overall recovery.

(Dakanalis et al., 2014; Malson, 1999; Petrucelli, 2014; Piran, 2001; Stein & Corte, 2007; Strober, 1991).



Remedy:

Research shows that interactions with therapy animals, like SoulPaws support groups, promote emotional regulation and calm the body and mind.

Remedy:

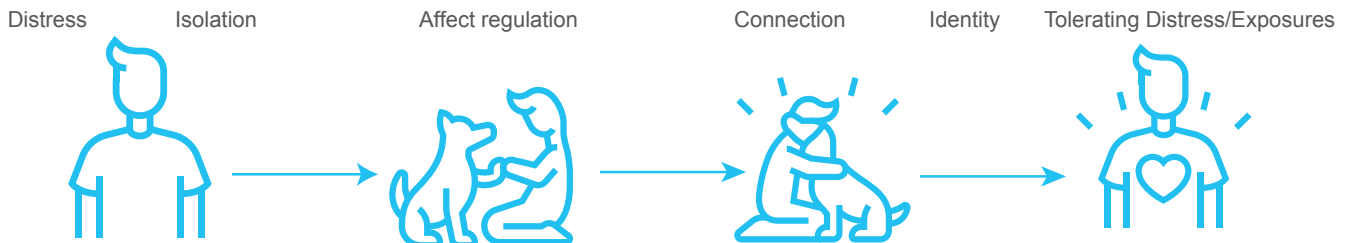
1:1 and group interactions with therapy animals provides SoulPaws participants with with nonjudgmental, unconditional, and safe connection.

Remedy:

SoulPaws' clinician-led discussions guide individuals toward a compassionate point of view, expand identity, and link various aspects of self-experience to promote healing from eating disorders.

Animals as a Bridge to Healing

The animal, through the experience of AAI, has the potential to become the “symbolic bridge” that is necessary for eating disorder patients to link various aspects of self-experience, rebuild connection, and build skills that regulate affect. (Petrocelli, 2014, p. 22).



The Importance of No-Cost and No-Diagnostic Requirements:

SoulPaws is breaking barriers by providing a no-cost alternative with no-diagnostic requirements for participation in our support groups. SoulPaws uses the emergent research on Animal-Assisted Interventions (AAI), neurobiology and affect regulation, while also acknowledging the diverse presentation of eating disorders and populations they impact.

Eating disorders affect people of every racial, gender, and cultural identity as well as all abilities and sexual orientations, but for decades the societal perception was that only young, cisgender, affluent, and white women developed the disorder (Schlossberg, 2021). Michael Strober, PhD, distinguished professor in the Department of Psychiatry at UCLA and director of the Eating Disorders Program at the Resnick Neuropsychiatric Hospital at UCLA, advocates for the recognition of the unique cultural forces that impact the development and treatment of eating disorders in communities of color (Schlossberg, 2021). The eating disorder treatment system is struggling because of the reverberations of the incorrect systemic beliefs that eating disorders did not exist in lower social classes or people of color (Schlossberg, 2021). Historically, diagnostic tools were developed for white female groups, and lack the comprehensive nature required to fully assess beyond body mass index (BMI) charts. If someone does not meet the BMI criteria, they cannot access eating disorder treatment. It is theorized that there is a generally lower treatment rate for eating disorders among certain demographics because there is a difference in the clinical presentation that is not adequately captured by traditional instruments that were initially developed for white populations. People of color with self-acknowledged eating and weight concerns were significantly less likely than white participants to have been asked by a doctor about eating disorder symptoms, despite similar rates of eating disorder symptoms across ethnic groups. (Becker, 2003). Data show that Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) are significantly less likely than white people to have been asked by a doctor about eating disorder symptoms (Schollossberg, 2021).

Diagnosis could bridge the difference for many patients of color, but nuances in classification have made it challenging, says Gail Wyatt, PhD, licensed clinical psychologist and professor-in-residence of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences at the Jane and Terry Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA (Schollossberg, 2021).

Beyond diagnostic problems, adequate access to treatment remains an additional barrier for individuals from marginalized communities with eating disorders (Becker et al., 2003). Compounding the roadblocks to care, individuals may lack the financial resources to access treatment (Deloitte Access Economics, 2020). Institutional racism has historically led Black women to have greater rates of poverty when compared to white women (Becker et al., 2003). This poverty makes it harder to access healthcare which can make obtaining an eating disorder diagnosis difficult and costly (Deloitte Access Economics, 2020).

Looking Ahead:

SoulPaws is launching its first Pilot Facilitator Training Program with the long-term goal of expanding access to SoulPaws Support Groups nationwide.

Calm. Connect. Heal.
www.soulpawsrecovery.org

