

## How an alligator became an emotional support animal: 'They said it was a midlife crisis'

**Level:** Advanced

### 1 Warmer

a. Talk with a partner and try to answer these questions together.

1. Why do people keep pets?
2. Which animals make the best pets for the following people and why?
  - a. A young family with two children under 10.
  - b. A pensioner living alone.
  - c. A middle-aged couple who both work full-time.

### 2 Key words

a. Write the correct words from the wordpool next to the definitions below. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context.

comfort	designation	evaluation	foster	hesitation
hogs	hug	ominated	register	reminisced
renewal	sanctuary	sense	slew	willing

1. male pigs \_\_\_\_\_
2. a lot of something \_\_\_\_\_
3. the process of deciding if the goals of a course of medical treatment have been achieved  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. to know about something through a natural ability or feeling, without being told  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. to make someone feel less sad, worried, or disappointed \_\_\_\_\_
6. the action of putting your arms around someone to show your love or friendship  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. to put information about someone or something on an official list \_\_\_\_\_
8. a name or title \_\_\_\_\_
9. an arrangement for something to continue for a longer period of time  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. to talk, think, or write about enjoyable experiences in your past \_\_\_\_\_

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11. a place for pets that are not wanted or that have not been treated well

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12. to look after an animal (or child) for a period of time in your home \_\_\_\_\_

13. a pause before doing something, or a feeling that you should not do it, especially because you are nervous, embarrassed, or worried \_\_\_\_\_

14. when someone or something is officially suggested to win an award or prize

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15. happy or prepared to do something \_\_\_\_\_

**b. Use some of the key words above to complete these sentences.**

1. They sat on the bench and \_\_\_\_\_ about the good old days.

2. It was likely that she'd be \_\_\_\_\_ for Best Actor for her role in the film.

3. He went upstairs to the nursery to \_\_\_\_\_ their crying baby.

4. After a brief \_\_\_\_\_ he answered 'Yes'.

5. My membership is up for \_\_\_\_\_ again next year.

6. We are looking for families who can \_\_\_\_\_ rescue dogs in their homes.

7. Dave opened his arms to give Julie a big \_\_\_\_\_.

8. I'm \_\_\_\_\_ to babysit whenever you need me to.

9. You need to \_\_\_\_\_ your change of address within 14 days.

10. The dog seemed to immediately \_\_\_\_\_ his fear.

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***Joseph Henney's main companion is not an ordinary alligator. 'He tries to comfort people and is famous for his hugs'***

Erum Salam

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- 1 Joseph Henney, 69, grew up on a farm in the same area of Dover, Pennsylvania he lives in now. From a young age, Henney was surrounded by a wide range of animals, such as cattle, coyotes, snakes and hogs, which makes owning a pet alligator perhaps the least surprising thing about him.
- 2 But Henney's gator companion Wally is not an ordinary pet – he's an official emotional support animal and one that is now somewhat famous after video of Henney and Wally walking together in Philadelphia's Love Park went viral and triggered a slew of news headlines.
- 3 The story of how the pair came together is a remarkable one.
- 4 Five years ago, Henney was depressed and lonely after some of his closest friends and family members died around the same time. A fellow animal-rescuer friend in Florida brought a baby alligator, then just 20in long, to Henney. Soon, he was the proud new owner of a pet alligator, lovingly named Wally.
- 5 "I lost three family members and four lifelong friends in two weeks. I shut down in a big, deep depression," Henney said. "My doctor wanted to give me anti-depression medicine and I wouldn't take it. So I went back in a month for another evaluation with my doctor. And he said, 'What are you doing, Joe? You're doing pretty good.'
- 6 "I said, 'I'm hanging out with my alligator.'"
- 7 Henney told stories about how he played hide-and-seek with Wally, and how Wally would often play with Henney by pulling his blanket off him or taking his pillow. He explained to his doctor that, "[Wally] does things alligators do not do."
- 8 "He is constantly with me, constantly keeping my attention, and making me laugh. We found that he does sense people's emotions, and he tries to comfort them. He is famous for his hugs. People come from all over the world to get a hug."
- 9 To Henney's surprise, his doctor was happy to help him register Wally as an emotional support animal – a designation he will have to request for renewal each year. (Wally is a 5.5ft-long alligator, after all.)
- 10 "I said, 'Doc, you've lost your marbles.'"
- 11 But so far, there has been no problem with the astonishing situation.
- 12 Before Wally, Henney made his living with animals, too. He proudly reminisced about his bull-riding days in his late-teens and early twenties that led him to travel across the country to places like Calgary, Canada and the Houston rodeo in Texas.
- 13 "I had bulls when I was like, 11 years old. I actually rode in professional rodeos when I was younger. My son was born in Houston."
- 14 In addition to building houses and furniture, Henney also worked at wildlife sanctuaries and as time went on, he fostered animals in his own home until a sanctuary, park or zoo was ready to care for them. And while most people might choose to foster cats or dogs, Henney fostered reptiles such as iguanas, rattlesnakes, cobras, komodo dragons and alligators – all within the comfort of his living room.
- 15 But Wally is different, he insists. He is no ordinary gator.
- 16 "He doesn't bite," he said. "He refuses to bite everything alive. We do not know why."
- 17 It's unclear if the "we" he is referring to is himself and other humans, or Wally.
- 18 At first, Henney said people he knew expressed hesitation about owning a pet alligator. Some tried to talk him out of the idea altogether.
- 19 "They told me it was a midlife crisis."

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- 20 But people in Henney's circle were quick to change their tune. Henney now introduces students in schools and kids in summer camps to Wally, educating them about reptiles. Henney's best friend, Mary Johnson, recently nominated Wally for the America's Favorite Pet award. He's hoping he wins.
- 21 But regardless of the competition's results, Henney has big plans for adventures with Wally. While he says alligators probably aren't suitable for traveling on planes, as many other emotional support animals do.
- 22 "We're willing to travel. I mean, there are ships, there are trains. We can drive. We can do it all," he said.

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### 3 Understanding the article

a. Are these statements True or False according to the article? Correct any that are false including as much detail as you can find in the article.

1. Joseph Henney has spent most of his life living with Wally the alligator.
2. Joseph had been suffering from depression after a rodeo accident.
3. His doctor prescribed him anti-depression medicine, but it didn't help.
4. As a child, growing up on a farm, Joseph often played hide-and-seek with the hogs.
5. Joseph was surprised when his doctor agreed to register Wally as an emotional-support animal.
6. Wally has only bitten Joseph once, but Joseph said it didn't really hurt.
7. People come from all over the place to get an alligator hug from Wally.
8. Joseph and Wally travel all over the US to schools and summer camps on all forms of transport.

### 4 Key language

a. Find multi-word phrases that fit with the meanings.

1. spread quickly on the internet and social media (paragraph 2)
2. spend time with (paragraph 6)
3. a children's game in which one player lets the other players hide, and then tries to find them (paragraph 7)
4. gone crazy (paragraph 10)
5. earnt his money (paragraph 12)
6. strong feelings of worry and doubt that some people have about their lives when they reach middle age (paragraph 19)
7. start saying or thinking something different about a subject or situation (paragraph 20)

b. Use them to talk about the article.

c. Then use each one in sentences or short anecdotes of your own that are not related to the article.

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### 5 Discussion

a. **Discuss these questions.**

- Which parts of the article do you find most interesting or surprising? Why?
- In which ways can animals improve someone's mental and/or physical health?
- What are the best and worst aspects of living with animals and keeping pets?
- Talk about pets you've lived with, or animals you have otherwise known. Would they have made good emotional-support animals?

### 6 In your own words

a. **Conduct the following research:**

Look up how to register an emotional-support animal in the US or in the UK.

b. **Write an email stating why you believe your pet should be registered as an emotional-support animal and how it helps you.**