There has been an increase in requests for emotional support animals (ESAs) in the college student population in general; student-athletes at Ole Miss and across the country continue to petition for this status to be applied to their animal for a variety of mental health concerns. While there is anecdotal support and individual testimonies of the efficacy of ESAs to treat mental illness, there is limited rigorous evidence to back up those claims.

In the state of Mississippi, ESAs are distinct from service animals trained to help those with documented physical disabilities. Under the Mississippi Support Animal Act, any blind, mobility-impaired, or hearing-impaired person who uses a dog or other animal specifically trained as a guide, leader, or listener or for any other assistance are entitled to full and equal privileges of all places of public accommodation and any other places to which the general public is invited. This would include those people disabled by psychiatric issues such as PTSD, DID, and other diagnoses. Only animals that assist with these disabilities are covered: psychiatric support or emotional support animals are not protected by Mississippi state law. The exceptions are service animals trained and provided to those with physical disabilities, severe PTSD or another psychiatric diagnosis in order to perform *specific* tasks for their owners and these animals are registered as service animals.

Neither the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) nor Mississippi’s service animal law include what many people call emotional support animals: those that provide a sense of safety, companionship, and comfort to those with psychiatric or emotional conditions. While these animals may have therapeutic benefits to an individual, they are not individually trained to perform specific tasks for their handlers.

Counseling and Sport Psychology will not provide any documentation for any reason (travel, housing, etc) for student-athletes regarding emotional support animals. Should a student-athlete have need for a service animal, this would be trained by and obtained through an outside agency and that agency would assist in registering the animal as a service animal.