

Animal Assisted Therapy

I. Definition

"AAT is a goal-directed intervention in which an animal that meets specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process. Working animals must be screened, trained and meet specific criteria. A credentialed therapist, working within the scope of practice of his/her profession sets therapeutic goals, guides the interaction between patient and animal, measures progress toward meeting therapy goals, and evaluates the process (AAT Therapeutic Interventions, The Delta Society, 1997, p. 1)." The animal partner is utilized to facilitate change through observation of the interactions between animal and client and planning of future interventions based on those observations.

AAT is designed to promote improvement in human physical, social, emotional, and/or cognitive functioning. AAT is provided in a variety of settings and may be group or individual in nature. This process is documented and evaluated." (Standards of Practice for Animal-Assisted Activities and Therapy, The Delta Society, 1996)

AAT is goal-directed. Specific goals and objectives for treatment must be developed utilizing the client/animal interaction. Clinicians may consider the addition of a service plan addendum and /or specific identification of the type of AAT intervention and the name of the therapy animal.

AAT is documented. The goals and objectives must be noted in the service plan and documentation in progress notes must reflect back to the specific goals and objectives of treatment.

In the field of mental health, AAT has been found to be a helpful treatment adjunct in the following areas:

Emotional safety--the therapist may be viewed as more approachable if there is an animal present. The power structure has shifted and the environment is less threatening.

Relationships--clients who have difficulty developing a relationship with other human beings are able to relate to an animal. The animal can be a source of love and companionship and the client can direct feelings of love and concern for an animal when he or she may have difficulty with the expression of emotions in a human relationship.

Limit setting and consequences--animals respond quickly to stimulus provided by a client. Learning that there are limits to the behavior that an animal will accept can help the client generalize the concept of limits and consequences to the human environment.

Attachment--an animal can offer the opportunity for uncomplicated attachment. Learning the skills of attachment from the relationship with an animal will help in developing a relationship with other human beings.

Grief and loss--many people have experienced the loss of a beloved animal. Processing that loss can assist the client in working through issues of loss and abandonment.

Reality orientation--the presence of an animal may help to ground a client in the present.

Pleasure, affection and appropriate touch--the client chooses whether or not to touch or hug an animal. Since he or she makes the choice, the interaction is safe, non-threatening and pleasant.

Socialization--the presence of animals provides the opportunity for social interaction and interpersonal connection.

Play and laughter--a client can learn how to play through interactions with an animal.

Anxiety--the ability to focus on the animal rather than the internal feelings of anxiety can help the client to learn distraction skills in a non-threatening environment.

II. Safety factors

No client or staff member should be forced to have contact with an animal. Clients must be screened for any contraindications including allergies before the animal is utilized in an individual or group session.

The right of an individual to refuse contact with an animal must always be respected.

No client should ever be left alone with an animal.

Animals utilized in AAT must be treated in a humane and respectful manner. (Delta Society, 1996)

III. Contraindications

"AAA/AAT may not be beneficial...in the following situations:

When animals are a source of rivalry and competition in a group.

When someone becomes possessive and attempts to "adopt" a visiting animal for him or herself.

Injury may occur from inappropriate handling, animal selection, or lack of supervision.

People with brain injury, development disabilities, or senility may provoke an animal without realizing it.

People with unrealistic expectations may think an animal is rejecting them. This may deepen their feelings of low self-esteem.

Allergies may create breathing problems, such as asthma, for the person.

Zoonotic diseases (diseases that can be passed between people and other animals) may be transmitted, particularly if precautions are not taken.

People with open wounds or low resistance to disease must be carefully monitored. Participation may need to be restricted.

Someone may be fearful of some animals.

People may view animals differently due to their cultural background.

(From [Standards of Practice for Animal-Assisted Activities and Therapy](http://www.deltasociety.org) The Delta Society, <http://www.deltasociety.org>).

Or, as identified by NARHA's Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association and similar to those of EAGALA, contraindications include:

- any client whom is actively dangerous to self or others (suicidal, homicidal, aggressive)
- is actively disassociative or psychotic, delusional
- is actively; and/or is actively substance abusing
- or medically unstable

IV. Training requirements/Standards

There are formal academic programs that include animal assisted therapy as a part of the curriculum. At a minimum, the mental health professional interested in animal assisted therapy should become certified through an agency such as the Delta Society Pet Partners Program, the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, or Therapy Dogs International.

EAP, or equine assisted psychotherapy as defined by the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association's model, requires a co-facilitating team including a licensed mental health professional and an equine specialist professional in all sessions. EAGALA has specific standards of practice for each team member, as well as guidelines for the care and well-being of the therapy horses. Much care and attention must be paid to the physical and psychological health of any therapy animal.

At a minimum, the clinician utilizing animal-assisted therapy must conduct

themselves consistent with their profession and ethical standards, comply with the chosen certifying organization's model and standards of practice, including but not limited to:

- Provide proof of a yearly health screening and proof of vaccinations of the animal on a schedule recommended by a DVM.
- Participated in continuing education through quarterly newsletters and other available resources.
- Provide yearly proof of membership in agency certifying the clinician/animal team to provide animal-assisted therapy.

Bibliography

Animal-Assisted Therapy: Therapeutic Interventions. The Delta Society, 1996.

(no longer available on the site)

Fine, A. H. (Editor), 2000 *Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy: Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice.* Academic Press: San Diego

(no longer available on the site.

(no longer available on the site.)

(no longer available on the website)

<http://www.deltasociety.org> Website with extensive information, resources related to improving human health through service and therapy animals. Articles, abstracts and bibliographies related to all age groups and specific health issues.

<http://www.eagala.org> website for the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association; standards of excellence in EAP/ethics, certification program, education, resources, links.

<http://narha.org> Website for the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, which includes the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association. Equine Facilitated Therapy (EFT) and Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL); workshops, certifications, resources, standards.

<http://pawsitivetherapy.com> Website for the Pets for Vets/PAWSitive Therapy

Troupe Animal Assisted Activities and Therapy program. Info on dog certification, benefits of AAA/AAT, education, resources

<http://www.pan-inc.org> Website for People, Animals and Nature, Inc. Info on Animals in Healing Environments: (AAI) Animal Assisted Intervention certification program. Resources, links, workshops.

<http://tdi-dog.org> Website of Therapy Dogs International. Volunteer organization dedicated to regulating, testing and registration of therapy dogs and their handlers for the purpose of visiting nursing homes, hospitals, other institutions or wherever therapy dogs might be needed.