

THE LAYMAN'S GUIDE TO ANIMAL ASSISTED THERAPY



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Introduction

A dog truly can be a man (or woman's) best friend.

Undoubtedly, you are a beloved pet owner if you are reading this book. Or, you might be someone interested in AAT and interested in adopting a pet. Either way, you can benefit from the information provided in this informative and easy-to-read guidebook.

Animal Assisted Therapy, or AAT as some call it (also known as pet therapy) involves the use of animals including dogs to assist people with disabilities or special needs. Many pet owners refer to AAT informally when they describe how their "pets" provide them with comfort, support or physical assistance when needed.

Pets are very common in modern homes, and for good reason. Historically human beings have used pets for centuries for various purposes, including as friends, family members and helpful hands in times of need.

If you own a pet, then chances are you are already familiar with the many benefits of owning a pet. Pets are wonderful for soothing a sad spirit, for getting you up and going in the morning, for "talking" with you when you feel lonely, and for supporting you when no one is available to visit. If you don't own a pet but have an interest in one, or an interest in AAT, you are about to learn just how helpful having a pet can be for your wellness and quality of life.

Most pets provide companionship, love and can even provide assistance to those in need.

In recent years many healthcare providers, veterinarians and other health professionals are adopting an approach to therapy that involves the use of

animals to guide, heal, aid and assist where applicable and necessary. While this may seem unusual to those uninitiated in the world of pet therapy, the use of animals as therapeutic beings is quite common.

AAT is now being used to treat everything from weight loss to eating disorders to social phobias and physical disabilities. If you aren't sure what pet therapy can do for you, dial up an AAT specialist and find out for yourself just how useful pet therapy can be. While simple in its basic form, AAT can be quite complex when viewed from a larger vantage point.

Why Pets?

Pets serve many purposes other than providing companionship. Companionship is not something a pet owner should disregard however, as most people have much to gain from the love of a beloved pet. Kal Kan pet, a provider of pet foods, conducted a study exploring how often healthcare providers, including family physicians and psychologists, prescribe "pets" for patientsⁱ.

Their findings suggest many times healthcare professionals prescribed the use of pets to help patients overcome problems including anxiety, depression and stress. This "prescription" may be as simple as asking a patient to buy a fish, since often a fish is the least "demanding" of pets to own, yet still summons a world of healthful benefits.

One of the reasons pets are so helpful for emotional conditions is that unlike humans, pets can provide unconditional love and affection.

Many patients report they find pets not only warm and comforting, but also amusing at times. Much like a child, owning a pet can prove emotionally rewarding.

The American Veterinary Medical Association reports that each year over 120 million dogs and cats find their way to homes of needy citizens. Most people who own pets will admit they consider their pet “part of their family.” As part of your family, you will find a pet not only companionable, but also possibly an instrument of healing. That is after all, the ultimate goal of all pet therapy, to provide patients with a tool for healing that is natural, secure and loving.

What You Will Learn

Whether you are a pet owner interested in using your pet as part of a volunteer pet therapy program, a parent interested in introducing a pet into your home to inspire an improved quality of life, or someone interested in becoming an animal assisted therapist, or someone interested in taking advantage of AAT, this book will help you by teaching you the ins and outs of animal assisted therapy and animal assisted activities.

We will provide comprehensive information about what AAT is, how it works, and how it benefits populations including children, adults, the elderly, the mentally and physically handicapped and much, much more. So hold onto your hats and get your thinking caps on.

Don't forget to check out our resources section which provides even more information and links to resources and organizations that can help you in your journey of learning.

Welcome to the world of Animal Assisted Therapy! We hope you benefit from all you learn while visiting.

Chapter 1 - Mental & Psychological Benefits of Owning Pets

“Animals are such agreeable friends – they ask no questions, they pass no criticisms.” – George Eliot

One of the most obvious benefits of owning a pet is psychological and emotional wellness. Many psychologists and psychiatrists admit they often “prescribe” a pet much like they would a medication, to alleviate loneliness or to help an individual overcome depression.

For others owning a pet represents a sense of safety and security. Consider for example, the single mother living at home with her two children. Imagine what comfort a large and companionable dog would offer in the wee hours of the night when most people feel vulnerable.

For many, pets also provide some daily routine, much like the way children do.

Dogs for example, need to be walked, fed and groomed on a regular basis. For individuals struggling to maintain some control of their life and better organization, a good dog may be the simplest and best solution.

Pets are also wonderful for inducing a sense of play.

Children will adore your dog for entertaining them, but you may find your dog or other pet also increases your psychological well-being by reminding you to take time out to play on occasion. Many people report that pets help boost their self-confidence and self-esteem, allowing them to exchange affection more freely and with liberty. A pet may induce self-confidence in a woman who ventures out

alone at night to jog, pick up groceries or fetch her children from a friend or neighbor's house. The list of possibilities is endless.

There are also proven physical effects owning a pet may have on humans.

According to some studies, owning a pet may reduce patients complaints of anxiety by as much as 16%; others show that owning a pet may help reduce blood pressure and heart rate.ⁱⁱ It is easy to see *why* this might happen. Imagine how comforting it would be sitting back in your easy chair, stroking the soft, warm fur of your favorite furry friend, relaxing, enjoying life ... simply being.

All of this leads to the reason pets are more commonly being used as part of "formal" animal-assisted therapy sessions. What is key here is an innate understanding that pets are truly our best friends, willing to offer care, support, guidance, aid, and unconditional love when needed.

Summary of Mental & Psychological Benefits of Pet Therapy

There are many benefits associated with owning pets, or using pets as part of an official AAT program.

Among the most commonly recorded include:

1. Pets may improve self-confidence and self-esteem in patients or caregivers.
2. Pets may increase socialization in environments that are stressed or tense.
3. Pets may create a sense of trust between doctor or therapist and patient.
4. Pets often encourage greater communication between humans.

5. Pets naturally bring out an individual's inner sense of "play" improving the quality of life and the experience a patient has when undergoing therapy.
6. Pets can reduce anxiety, stress, depression and serve as an invaluable tool for alleviating loneliness.
7. Pets often offer unconditional love, nurturance, protection and support for those in need.
8. Many pets create a long-lasting improved quality of life for pet owners.
9. Pets encourage patients to become more involved and active participants in their therapy.
10. Pets introduce something "new" in an otherwise dreary or commonplace setting, which in turn sets the stage for better outcomes.

As you can see, pets and pet therapy has many benefits therapists and owners alike can enjoy.

Pets are perhaps, one of the more effective tools one can use to improve their outlook on life, and their quality of living. And don't think for a minute that pets don't benefit from the process. Most pets love more than anything to be "loved" by others. So by using a pet or animal to improve your own health, you may actually improve the health and wellness of your pet as well! What more can anyone ask for?

What We Learned

In the next chapter, we will explain in much more detail how AAT can improve the mental and psychological wellness of patients. Because pets play such a significant role on one's mental health however, we felt it important to dedicate

this small chapter to reinforcing the many benefits pets have on psychological wellness, in children, adults, the elderly and ailing alike.

Pets are very capable of creating an environment that is loving, supportive, trusting and nurturing. They help patients and therapists forge bonds that might otherwise seem strained or unnatural. They help children open up and communicate, learn to interact with others and react gently in stressful environments. These emotional benefits are demonstrated in physical terms, evidenced by decreased blood pressure for example, in patients undergoing therapy involving animals.

Now let's take a more detailed look at AAT and its many uses. We will again cover some of the more important mental and psychological uses for pets in AAT, but also provide a much broader context in which AAT can be used to help with physical disabilities as much as they can with mental illness.

Chapter 2 - AAT In Practice

There is much we can learn from the pets, as clearly demonstrated by the quotes of many pet owners who interact with their animals daily.

"... I have learned more from my dog than from all the great books I have read... he puts his head on my lap, wags his tail and looks up at me with kind eyes..."

– G. Spence, How to Argue and Win Every Time

Now that you know how beneficial it is to own a pet, it's time to take a closer look at animal assisted therapy in practice. Remember, you don't have to actually "own" a pet to benefit from pet therapy. Many pet therapists volunteer or use their pets as a formal or informal part of their traditional therapy sessions with patients.

First, let's develop a working definition of what AAT is, and how it works.

AAT Defined

AAT is an "untraditional" approach to therapy that stimulates rehabilitation in ailing patients and can provide physical support to patients with physical disabilities. It involves the use of animals to facilitate hearing in some patients, to facilitate greater mobility, to establish greater socialization and interaction, and to enable faster recovery and less pain in some instances for patients with chronic diseases. These are just a FEW of the benefits associated with animal assisted therapy.

AAA Defined

AAT and AAA are two separate but related concepts. AAA stands for “animal assisted activities” and involves any activities delivered to individuals through trained professionals or centers that encourage education, recreation and work to enhance the quality of life for patients working with animals as part of their therapy goalsⁱⁱⁱ. AAA is worthy of mention because some practitioners use the two words interchangeably to describe the process of “pet therapy.”

Studies Involving The Use Of Animals For Therapy

Most people want proof something works before they try it. The good news is there is plenty of evidence supporting the use of animals in therapy. The use of animals as part of our lives is not anything new. For centuries people have used pets as companions, as aids in labor and as instruments that often contribute to a person’s perception of the quality of their life.

Psychologists realized early on that introducing dogs into therapy sessions often resulted in a friendlier, more relaxed and trusting environment.

Obviously this environment is much more conducive to psychological counseling than an aggressive or tension filled session. Researchers now define “pet therapy” as an official tool therapists and other healthcare providers can use in the “human services” field.^{iv} This field includes any type of therapeutic environment that addresses physical or psychological symptoms in patients.

Pet therapy did not start out as a formal form of therapy. Typically pet owners or other volunteers would visit healthcare facilities, like long-term health care centers routinely to meet with patients or residents. The purpose of informal

therapeutic sessions like this is merely to improve a patient or resident's outlook on life or feelings for the day.

Anyone can acknowledge the benefits a scruffy, friendly and loving dog can introduce into an otherwise bleak setting.

With time, researchers began realizing that pet visits could assist patients, young and old alike, in various ways, whether they suffered from emotional problems, physical disabilities, chronic health problems or whether they lived in an isolated environment or assisted living facility. Because of this, they gradually began to formalize the method of delivery used when introducing pets into therapy sessions.

Much of early pet therapy also focused on improving the quality of life for elderly patients that felt lonely. A visit by a child might prove just as endearing and life-promoting as a visit by an unconditionally loving dog or other pet.

Some therapists use dogs or other animals not as much to improve the quality of life, but to stimulate interest in patients who might not otherwise engage in therapeutic activities that would improve the quality of their lives. By their very nature for example, dogs are social creatures, and have a natural ability to bring out our own social ability and interest. **By stimulating a patient's interest, therapists and other healthcare providers were more likely to see a reduction in stress among patients, but also among therapists who were entering a stressful environment to begin with.**

Consider a dog as a "stress mediator" if you like, a companion that acts to introduce two people who can, when working together, create and forge a mutually beneficial relationship. Do not however, rely on an animal alone to conquer your stress. Pets, like humans, experience feelings, including anxiety, anger and fear.

It is important to note that animals like people are subject to stress, and not all animals are ideally suited for pet therapy.

There are now stringent testing and training centers available for people or practitioners interested in evaluating their pet for use in official AAT programs. While you do not have to “formally” train your pet if you want to consider your pet your own personal therapist, you will have to certify your pet by an acknowledged program if you plan to use your pet as an official part of an AAT program.

Now, lets talk some more about stress, because this is an important topic to consider when evaluating pet therapy. Some studies have shown that animals participating in AAT programs may experience unusually high levels of stress. This may result from programs that are very intense and where animals must engage in vigorous interaction with non-compliant or otherwise stressed individuals. It is very important in these situations that pet owners or animal assisted therapists consider not only the patient or recipients needs, but also that of the animal.

If an animal is consistently exposed to an overwhelmingly stressful environment, they too might “act out” or require therapy to help alleviate the stress they may be feeling.

Exposing a mild-tempered animal for example to an aggressive child might induce stress in the animal, so it is important animals and their owners or therapists are prepared to handle adverse events as this. While not all animals will qualify as good “pet therapists” the good news is it is relatively easy to prescreen animals and test them to assess whether they will handle stressful

situations with ease, or whether they are best left as simply “pets” and not “therapists.”

Even in these cases pet owners will likely reap many of the benefits associated with pet therapy, because beloved animals are the most likely creatures on earth to reciprocate love and affection.

How It Works

For the most part dogs and other animals love their caretakers unconditionally. They are glad when we come home, they offer love and companionship when we are sad, and they display a devotion unparalleled to any other. This is true of horses, dogs and many animals involved in pet therapy.

Therapists are using AAT with great success to enhance the lives of those assisted by pet therapy. There are many ways pets are used to help patients, and in many settings, including in hospital rehab programs, through physical therapy programs, in nursing homes where they most often serve as companions and even in mental health facilities.

Animal therapists use animals in various ways to help patients heal. Some therapists use animals to assist patients with mobility, balance and strength. AAT is not the same as a visitation program, though the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Typically visitation is a process whereby a pet owner visits patients accompanied by their pet. The primary reason a care provider would do this is to promote greater socialization between the patient and caregiver.

When used as AAT, a therapist will use animals in specific, directed treatment sessions with an objective and goal in mind. Animals can be used many ways, including as a modality or tool to improve a patient’s outcome^v.

Here are just a few ways therapists use animals as a modality or treatment tool:

- ➡ Pets may help improve a patient's range-of-motion. Often equine programs involve skills training for patients who need to regain balance or self-confidence.
- ➡ Pets can help patients regain strength and often endurance. Here again, equine programs or dogs can offer patients support in this area.
- ➡ Pets, especially dogs, can assist with mobility problems and balance when acting as "guide" dogs, in the case of individuals with visual impairments.
- ➡ Pets often reduce anxiety and stress in the healthcare setting and improve socialization between the patient and therapist.

It is almost as if pets have a natural or magical ability to create peace in an otherwise chaotic or misunderstood environment.

Not all animals are suitable for therapy programs. Most therapists will have to train animals and test their temperament before using them as part of a successful therapy session. Some dogs for example, have much milder or sound tempers than others. When horses are used as part of animal assisted therapy programs, their temperament must also be evaluated. A trainer must be sure a horse will not react unexpectedly in a negative manner under a stressful encounter. Such a reaction may prove devastating for patient and pet alike!

A dog used for AAT must engage in obedience training so they know how to react when asked to perform a specific function, or when faced with a stressful event.

Many trainers will also work with dogs to help them cope with stressful situations because most dogs when first working with a patient are entering an anxiety-filled

and unusual situation. While it is important to work with an animal with a sound temperament, it is also important an animal is trained to expect the unexpected, and offered loving support and nurturance following a session to ensure they remain happy and ideally suited for future therapy sessions. Animals, like people, can burn out.

What therapists look for are dogs or other animals that react in predictable ways in multiple settings, so they can count on their help when called on. The same is true of horses. **Some animals, including dogs or horses are used in more aggressive therapy programs than others.** A cat for example, may be used simply as a tool in acute care environments or in nursing homes as a friend or companion to someone who is lonely. Think of how comforting it would be for someone to sit and stroke a mild-mannered cat for hours on end. A cat purrs, warms the person they sit with and often falls asleep quite contentedly.

The good news with cats is when they are bothered, they are likely to simply jump off the lap of their owner or the person they work with, rather than react in a frightening manner. Still, as with any animal, most pet therapists recommend full evaluation of a pet before introducing a pet to a therapeutic-type environment.

Types of AAT Programs

There are several types of AAT programs available today. The earliest programs began in the early 1900s when animals were used as part of mental health programs to promote calmness and relieve anxiety. Examples of the types of animals often used for therapy include dogs, horses, cats, birds and even fish.

Consider for example, the number of times you associate a large aquarium of fish at a doctor's office or even more so, at a dentist's office. Why is this?

Fish don't purr, they don't demonstrate "unconditional" affection. What they do however, is promote an atmosphere that is calm and inviting. Having patients

observe a beautiful aquarium may prove very relaxing in an anxiety provoking situation (as in when a child goes to the doctor for a shot, or a patient visits the dentist for a root canal). Even if the individual does not directly realize the influence a pet may have on their emotional health, multiple studies show indirect benefits associated with their very presence.

Not bad for a tiny animal that swims about in a tank all day.

Targeted AAT Programs

Most programs are targeted in their approach, working to heal either physical, emotional or a combination of both health problems. Some animals, including horses and dogs, are used more stringently to assist with physical problems and healing, helping patients walk better for example or inducing more confidence in a patient attempting to regain mobility and balance.

Anyone can use any “type” of pet therapy depending on what physical or emotional symptoms they are exhibiting. Targeted programs are those that focus on healing or improving outcomes in patients with specific diseases or problems. For example, pet therapy used by psychologists may focus on reducing anxiety and stress, building trust or reducing loneliness in cases where the psychologist recommends a patient “adopt” an easy to care for pet.

Programs are found in many places:

- Hospitals
- Nursing Homes
- Rehab facilities
- Hospices
- Schools
- Animal shelters
- Prisons

- Mental health facilities, and
- Private homes

There is virtually no end to where and how AAT can be used. Scientists have long documented that humans benefit from interaction with animals especially when they experience high levels of stress or anxiety.

Other types of AAT include “visiting therapy” or “therapy pets” as some refer to them, which involve less formal programs where animals visit with people just to hang out and help them relax. These programs typically are less vigorous and do not require stringent goal setting. Imagine for example a cat visiting an elderly patient in a hospital, serving as a temporary companion and friend. Stroking a pet can be very calming.

Consider a dog introduced into a children’s play facility or educational center. A dog with a mild-temperament may enable a teacher to engage in new and interesting educational or teaching sessions, encouraging children to be more attentive and socially interactive while the dog is present. The simple act of introducing a dog into a classroom may be all that is necessary to inspire greater attention and build a sense of inclusion among children.

Scientists have long known that “playing” is a stimulus for learning. Why not introduce an animal into class? Many preschool programs and daycares have fish tanks located in their toddler rooms and classes. Mini teaching sessions can be centered around caring for fish and learning to appreciate the gentle, calm and delicate nature of such pets.

AAT Applied

A typical AAT program (a formal one, where a therapist who owns a pet visits with a patient) goes something like this. First, a therapist decides whether AAT

would be helpful for a patient. Next, patients are introduced to healing animals through what many refer to as “meet and greet” activities or AAA. The therapist and patient set goals specific to their desired treatment outcomes, which may include reduction of blood pressure, increased mobility or even depression relief.

Most of the time a patient will engage in long-term or continuous therapy with the animal and a supervisor or therapist. That is of course, as long as the patient and therapist mutually agree using an animal is advantageous to both during therapy sessions. Often, patients may exhibit some resistance at first, but lighten up after the first session, while others immediately embrace the concept of “pet” therapy and actively engage their new friend to help with healing.

Often, once a patient demonstrates significant improvement, they may seek their own pet to sustain long term improvements including a reduction in stress, anxiety or loneliness. For others, a pet adoption may be necessary to assist an individual with long-term mobility needs or balance requirements. If someone suffers a physical disability for example, a large dog may prove valuable for encouraging calmness and promoting greater stability during activities requiring movement or walking.

Some dogs are specifically trained to help patients with permanent disabilities. Consider for example, “seeing eye” guides, dogs trained to work with patients that are blind or have very limited vision. These dogs are specially trained to work only with patients with visual handicaps.

You may discover other animals trained for specific tasks. Many horses are trained to enhance strength, endurance and balance for patients with mobility problems. Riding a horse is not as easy as it seems. There are also programs that use horses to encourage communication and calmness, in much the same way a dog might.

Pet Therapy and Children

More commonly research has focused on using AAT and AAA to help counsel young children or individuals in educational settings struggling with disabilities or emotional turbulence. Boris Levinson was among the first child psychologists to introduce the concept of AAT, by publishing a document titled “Mental Hygiene, The dog as a Co-therapist.”^{vi}

Children are naturally drawn to animals, and often communicate with animals far more positively than they might the average adult in a therapy session.

AAT and animal assisted activities are becoming increasingly commonplace in educational facilities throughout the U.S. Some studies show dogs can help children overcome traumas including shootings or deaths.

A study conducted on Animal-Assisted Therapy and severely disabled children reported in The Journal of Rehabilitation suggested that measuring true “cognitive” gain in patients with mental handicaps is difficult, but there is promising research suggesting animal assisted therapy programs can be particularly useful producing immediate results and positive behaviors among children and others.^{vii} The same can be said of other programs, and given this, pet therapy is worthy of formal consideration.

Many times parents hear of the benefits of AAT and decide they should buy a pet for their family. If a parent decides to buy a dog or pet as a member of the family to introduce a new playmate and produce greater self-esteem and confidence in their child, it is important they do their homework first.

Parents have to assess (1) whether children are old enough to care for an animal, or whether doing so would result in greater stress for the child, dog and parent alike and (2) what type of animal is most appropriate for their household. A highly energetic dog for example may prove beneficial in a household with multiple children, or may induce more chaos if the animal is high-strung and easily becomes aggressive in stressful situations.

Remember children are likely to tug on an animal's hair, move or react suddenly, or engage in roughhousing that can startle a highly-reactive pet.

Check out the resources section for more information on organizations that can help you decide what type of dog or other animal might be best suited for your family. As a pet owner, you owe it to your family and pet to perform due diligence. Research the animal you want to buy, its breed and its temperament. You will save yourself a lot of time and hassle if you follow this simple and easy step.

More animals end up in a pound because a family bought a pet hoping the pet would become a mutual family friend, only to find the dog or other animal they adopted was too “high strung” or “high maintenance” to coexist within the confines of their family environment.

Why Does AAT Work?

As with any therapy, there are many theories and reasons why pet therapy seems to work well for patients.

Researchers agree that animals are wonderful creatures for lowering anxiety and tension. They can also sometimes motivate patients to achieve therapy goals when a therapist alone struggles to accomplish this. Typically a therapist will engage in a formal style of therapy, but incorporate the use of an animal while doing so, whether to put the client at ease or to facilitate a greater response from

therapy. This works because using an animal can introduce an informal but friendly presence into an otherwise formal and often intimidating environment.

The presence of a dog or other obedient and calm animal often engages the client and puts them more at ease. A patient for example, may end up stroking an animal to calm their own anxiety or fears when meeting a therapist for the first time. This in turn allows for a more trusting relationship, such that the therapist is able to interact more openly with the client or patient when they are feeling calm.

Pet therapy also works well with children, especially when used in educational environments or classroom.

Here are some examples of how AAT benefits children in educational settings:

- Encourages students and children to learn about nurturing and loving others in a non-threatening environment.
- Stimulates and engages children in play.
- Helps students learn to care compassionately for the animal, which may translate into more compassion for other students.
- Helps children learn how humans and animals can bond with each other.
- Teaches children about responsibility and loyalty to their animals.
- May help reduce violent activities in school by encouraging humane attitudes and gentle feelings toward animals and humans alike.

But WHY does AAT work? Researchers have differing opinions about this. The most logical answers are that most animals used in AAT are social creatures. They are loyal and attentive. They are eager to help and create a sense of community. They bring out an individual's playfulness, whether the individual in question is a child, adult or elderly citizen.

Consider for example, a playful pup in the hands of an elderly person living in an assisted living facility. The simple presence of the pup might induce happiness, joy and remind the patient of their inner child and their natural tendency to want to play. Playing is one of the best methods of healing, because it is simple, easy, and naturally stress-reducing.

Playing makes people laugh.

In other environments, animals are the sole providers of emotional support, capable of building self-esteem. They do not judge. They do not criticize. You may make a mistake, and often an animal will love you unconditionally, regardless of your own perceived ineptitude or inability. These are just a few reasons researchers hypothesize AAT works.

How can one doubt their efficacy? Human beings have relied on animals for support since the dawn of time. They are in fact, members of our family, even if members of a different species.

Many are highly intelligent, capable of learning, capable of showing feelings, including love, sadness, fear or anxiety. Look at primates as a primary example. Many primates demonstrate relationships very similar to human relationships. Mother primates for example, care for their children with the same love and affection a human being might. Some studies show that elephant mothers actually demonstrate sadness or grief at the loss of one of their children, whether from sickness, fatigue or capture by more aggressive animals.

In a world that is full of creatures of many different shapes, sizes and forms, it is remarkable how many similarities exist among all creatures.

Human beings are animals after all, in their own right, so why wouldn't animals have a naturally capacity to heal, love, protect, nurture and defend?

Animal therapy is not something new, it is something "newly labeled." Now that it is becoming more mainstream, more people are likely to look at animals or pets in a new light, and offer them greater support, kindness and understanding.

AAT And Counseling

One of the more common uses of pet therapy are in psychological or mental health settings, where patients may experience a vast array of symptoms ranging from fear, anxiety, loneliness, depression or even experience socialization and trust inabilities.

When used in these environments, a therapist will often work with a patient to outline very specific, measurable and attainable objectives or goals for animal assisted therapy. It may take a bit of coaxing to encourage a patient to be open to the idea of using an animal as part of therapy. But as AAT becomes more commonplace, therapists are likely to experience less resistance at the idea of animal assisted therapy.

Here are some examples of goals counseling professionals have when using AAT for psychological or mental health therapy:

- Can help patient develop better socialization skills so they can communicate well with others.
- May help reduce feelings of isolation and depression.
- Brightens many patients outlook or encourages feelings of optimism.
- Helps some patients improve memory.
- May help patients suffering from loss or grief.
- May help curb abusive behavior by teaching compassion and humane activity.
- Can help improve trust between therapist and client, and among client and others.

Animals used in these settings may provoke greater trust, which in turn will improve patient outcomes and enable the therapist to do what he or she does best when it comes to counseling.

What We Learned

AAT is now used throughout the world. Historically, pets have been used as “therapeutic” animals for centuries. Animal assisted therapy or AAT and AAA or animal assisted activities are interrelated. They involve the use of pets to provide physical, psychological, emotional or other types of support to children, adults and the elderly.

Many studies support the use of animals in “pet therapy.” As we mentioned multiple times, psychologists are one example of therapists that often use animals to reduce depression or anxiety or to initiate a trusting bond between

their patient and the psychotherapist. This can allow for greater socialization and more productive and positive patient outcomes.

Physical therapists may use animals including dogs or horses to help patients build greater self-confidence or self-esteem, gain control of their mobility or help patients become more mobile generally. Many educators use animals in the classroom to facilitate more attentive learning and to initiate greater socialization in the classroom setting.

Pets can also be used to improve the quality of life for individuals living in a hospice or in assisted living facilities, by introducing playfulness, love and affection in an otherwise dull environment.

The type of AAT program one utilizes will depend on many factors, including their goals, expectations and objectives. While anyone can use AAT to improve or enhance their quality of life, it is important one realize that not all animals are appropriate for “pet therapy.”

As pets are often introduced into anxiety-filled or stressful situations, it is important animals are carefully screened to ensure they are not overly stressed or worse, react negatively when placed in a high-stress or demanding environment. The good news is therapists and pet owners in general have a wide selection of animals readily available to them they can use to enhance the quality of their life, whether through formal AAT programs or informally, as in the case of a dog introduced into a family of children or into a home where a widow requires a loving companion.

Chapter 3 - How to Become an AAT Specialist

Now that you understand how beneficial AAT is, you may have an interest in starting your own program or becoming an AA therapist. Fortunately, since the practice is now more commonplace than ever before, there are established guidelines that dictate who can offer AAT and how therapy should be conducted.

Standards Of Care

The American Kennel Club and Canine Good Citizen tests are often used to assess whether an animal meets the appropriate behavioral guidelines and socialization guidelines needed to provide supportive care.

Anyone participating in AAT must recognize that all care is very objective or goal-oriented, thus a licensed professional should supervise all therapy sessions. Typically, an animal therapist engages with a team of experts to ensure successful outcomes.

Before commencing a session, the therapist will discuss the goals and objectives of therapy with patients before practicing any treatment. Here are some strategic steps you can implement to get started with AAT:

1. **First, find out if there is a local organization near you that offers training.** Try to find a group that is nationally certified. Often you can find a group simply by conducting research on the Web, a local healthcare center, or veterinarian may be able to point you in the right direction.
2. **Next, find out if your dog or other animal will qualify for participation.** Most programs require dogs be at least one year before evaluation. Evaluations will include health evaluations, obedience and behavioral evaluations and temperament. Of these the temperament test is often the most telling, as it places the dog or animal purposely in a stressful or

emotional environment then encourages a response. What most trainers look for is a dog that will remain neutral in a setting where chaos, crowding or other stressors may be present.

As an example, a dog may be exposed to a sudden loud noise. The evaluator will assess how much this stresses the animal and how the animal responds. Since the environments an animal will enter as a therapy dog are so diverse, it is important to assess how an animal will react. The goal here is to ensure the animal does not act in a violent or aggressive manner. Animal therapy sessions are truly enjoyable when you have an animal with a mild-mannered temperament.

Some dogs are more amicable than others. For example, some of the more popular breed of dog used in AAT include: Labradors, German Shepherds, Sheepdogs and Golden Retrievers.

- 3. Next, you will probably be assigned an evaluator to accompany you on observation visits, which is a time when you and your animal are objectively observed to see how comfortable you are and how you react in stressful situations.** This step is a very important part of the process. We are often subjective about our own reactions to others, and about our pet's abilities around others. An evaluator provides an objective review of your pet's readiness to help others.

If you feel comfortable and your dog or other animal does as well, often you can proceed with certification. Keep in mind AAT typically refers to very formal treatment programs, where a handler works one-on-one with clients.

Good therapy pets are usually those that are calm and enjoy socializing with others. If you own an attack dog, a herder, or other boisterous animal chances are they are not a good choice or option as an animal assisted therapy pet.

What We Learned

Not every animal is ideally suited for pet therapy, nor is every pet owner a proper candidate to act as a volunteer or paid animal assisted pet therapist. Fortunately, with the increasing popularity of AAT, new standards have been established that outline the exact procedures one should follow if they want to become an animal therapist or if they want to train a pet as “pet” therapist.

If you have more questions about becoming an animal assisted therapist, there are many organizations that now offer training programs for people and pets alike.

Try:

The Latham Foundation for the Promotion of Human Education

www.latham.org

Here you will find more information about the bond between animals and humans. You can also find out whether there is an animal assisted therapy training program near you.

Another great source is entitled: “Jackie’s List” located at: www.therapypets.com

Conclusions

Since the dawn of time human beings have used pets in various ways. Pet therapy is not something new, though it is something attracting more and more attention.

By nature, most pets are nurturing, caring and supportive. Many therapists are now using pets as part of routine practice. They are very capable of helping patients overcome disabilities, emotional barriers to communication and positive therapy and beneficial for patients suffering from isolation, depression or loneliness.

Not all pets are suitable for pet therapy. But, if you have an interest in training your dog or other pet as a “pet therapist” there are AAT training and certification programs throughout the nation that can assist you. Many of them are listed in our resources section. Pets truly are mans best friend.

Keep in mind you don't have to own a pet to benefit from Animal Assisted Therapy. Many therapists have their own animals they bring to therapy sessions. Volunteers often bring their own pets to assisted living facilities or hospice, to act as companions or playful friends to those in need of comfort. This form of therapy can dramatically improve the quality of life of anyone, in a simple, easy and unique manner.

If you think you may benefit from AAT, talk with your healthcare provider and find out what types of therapy may be available near you. And don't be surprised if the next time you visit your doctor, you find a dog sitting by his or her side. Tell your kids the same, because more and more animals are being introduced into ordinary classrooms to foster greater socialization and active learning.

Pets, like humans, have amazing potential to heal and nurture. It's time we take advantage of the opportunity to improve the quality of our lives by taking advantage of our good friends.

Resources

In this section, you will find a host of resources whether you want to become an animal assisted therapist, whether you need evaluators to certify your AAT program, facilities where you can get more information on AAT and national organizations offering certification and group forums for people who participate in and offer AAT.

You can also try checking in with your doctor to find out whether your healthcare provider knows of any local AAT programs you can participate in. Your healthcare provider is the best person to determine whether you may benefit from AAT if you are interested in the healing powers of pets.

National Organizations

Foundation for Pet Provided Therapy

www.loveonaleash.org

This nonprofit organization aims to promote greater awareness of animal assisted therapy, including providing educational materials to consumers and potential therapists about training, therapy and more.

Latham Foundation for the Promotion of Human Education

www.latham.org

This site was created to help people develop a deeper connection with animals and learn to understand how to communicate with animals in a loving and mutually beneficial way. Information on AAT is one focus on the site, but the site also offers information on other important facts about working with animals.

North American Riding for the Handicapped Association

www.narha.org

This organization works to promote rehabilitation for people experiencing physical and emotional disabilities. The program focuses on equine assistance

and therapy. The site provides information on a global network of therapeutic centers offering animal assisted therapy.

LOCATIONS

Here are some places you can find AAT assistance, and locations of practitioners in your community.

PAL

peopleanimalslove.com/Pet_Visiting.php

Offers a pet therapy visiting program with certified volunteers that work with more than 16,000 patients annually. PAL will introduce you to the concept of the “human animal bond” and teach you how you can use a pet to light up your life and that of a child, close friend or loved one.

Hand in Paw

www.handinpaw.org

Located in Alabama, this organization offers programs focusing specifically on children and youth. The organization also offers volunteer opportunities to the general public. Hand in Paw has a tremendous following and large community of supporters and followers.

Pets and People

www.petandpeople.org

Offers information on AAT, service dogs and care for families in need.

Prescription Pet Program at Children’s Hospital

www.thechildrenshospital.org/

Look for a link to the Prescription Pet Program, and organization located in Denver that works in conjunction with The Children’s Hospital and local veterinary medical societies.

Jackie's List

www.therappets.com/

Click on the link to Jackie's list, where you will find dozens more resources on Animal Assisted Therapy. Most resources provided include an Internet address and offer a nationwide listing of practitioners, treatment centers and more.

Delta Society

www.deltasociety.org/AnimalsResourcesEducation.htm

The Delta Society is a nonprofit organization offering information on AAT therapy and information for individuals who want to work as therapists. You'll find information on training and certification programs and general information, including information on service animals and pet loss or bereavement.

American Veterinary Medical Association

www.avma.org/issues/policy/animal_assisted_activity.asp

Here you will find guidelines for animals participating in AAA (animal assisted activities) and information on residential programs.

American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA)

www.avma.org/issues/policy/animal_assisted_guidelines.asp

Provides comprehensive information about AAT, guidelines for implementing programs and definitions pertaining to the field of AAT.

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