



The Use of Animal-Assisted Therapy in College Counseling Centers

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If you can sit quietly after difficult news; if in financial downturns you remain perfectly calm;
if you can see your neighbors travel to fantastic places without a twinge of jealousy;
if you can happily eat whatever is put on your plate;
if you can fall asleep after a day of running around without a drink or a pill;
if you can always find contentment just where you are:
you are probably a dog.

ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY

A “goal-directed intervention in which an animal meets specific criteria as an integral part of the treatment process” (Delta Society)

- Also called: pet-facilitated therapy, pet therapy, pet-assisted therapy
- Must be delivered by a trained professional and screened animal
- The process should be documented and evaluated
- Considered an adjunct to existing therapy

Animal-assisted activity (AAA) - an opportunity for various benefits to arise which enhance quality of life and can be delivered by a variety of trained helpers

AAT/AAA is empirically supported to decrease depressive symptoms in clinical populations (Souter & Miller, 2007).

Legal and Ethical Considerations

- Therapy animals do not have federal recognition
- Certification through an established organization is important
 - Delta Society
 - Therapy Dogs International
- Institutional policy must be researched and followed
- Complete proper documentation: facility agreement, no bite statement, health/vaccination records, proof of training and registration as therapy team
- Rights and safety of humans and animals: the handler is responsible

AAT/AAA AT UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY COUNSELING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

Waiting room

- Decrease stigma
- Students walk in just to see the dogs
- Induce laughter
- Dogs do funny things
- Rapport building
- Staff appear friendlier
- Students talk to each other

Individual and group therapy

- Extension of the therapist
- Dogs provide safe physical touch
- Therapist appears nurturing
- Increase retention
- Clients return to see the dog
- Facilitate practicing skills
- Being assertive – saying “no”
- Being assertive – asking for help/attention
- Mindfulness practice – dogs are always in the present moment
- Social skills – dogs respond honestly to social cues

Outreach

- Advertisement
- Therapy dogs are identified with a vest and ID card – students love the dog ID cards
- Increase informal communication all over the campus
- Dogs invite people to approach and talk to the handler/staff



THEORIZED MECHANISMS

INTRINSIC QUALITIES

Reduction of anxiety and arousal

- Altered physiological state
- A focus for attention
- Evolutionary theory – biophilia: attraction to living organisms
- Learning theory – diversion allowing controlled exposure

Social mediation

- Stimulate conversation and unscripted behavior
- Enhances perception of handler’s social desirability
- Psychoanalytic theory – projection

Meeting of developmental needs

- Attachment theory – attachment figure or transitional object
- Social needs theory – reassurance of worth, reliable alliance, nurturance
- Humanistic theory – unconditional positive regard, nonevaluative empathy

EXTRINSIC USES

Instruments of cognitive and behavioral change

- Learning through observation, imitation, instruction, and association
- Social cognitive theory – self-efficacy, performance accomplishment, agency
- Role theory – modification of behavior to fit new role

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

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- Fine, A. (Ed.). (2006). *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Theoretical foundations and guidelines for practice (2nd Ed)*. San Diego, CA US: Academic Press.
- Souter, M. A., & Miller, M. D. (2007). Do animal assisted activities effectively treat depression: A meta-analysis. *Anthrozoös, 20*(2), 167-180.