

Animal Assisted Therapy

Animal Assisted Therapy: the inclusion of an animal within a treatment plan to realize a specific goal.¹ These animals undergo specialized therapy training, testing, and certification to insure interactions are not only positive and safe but also non-disruptive to a patient's well-being.²

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) has received a great deal of attention in recent years for its impact on health outcomes such as Cardiovascular Disease, Fibromyalgia, pain management, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Schizophrenia, Alzheimer's Disease, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and others. In most cases, this approach which utilizes animals such as dogs, cats, horses, and dolphins, is not a stand-alone therapy, but rather used to enhance current interventions. In a review of current literature, studies indicate positive and significant effects on health outcomes of patients across various settings, species of animal used, and health condition.³

Research indicates that the use of animals provides “*stress-reducing or stress-buffering social supports*” resulting in lowered blood pressure, reduced anxiety, and increased communication efforts.⁴ Additionally, studies examining the impact of AAT on children have found that the inclusion of animals during therapy serves as a catalyst in getting them to talk and bond with the therapist.⁵

Study Outcomes

- Decreased stress levels
- Decreased anxiety
- Decreased depression
- Decreased pain levels
- Decreased blood pressure
- Improvement in ability to communicate and socialize
- Improvement in mood
- Increase in the level of independent living skills

In a review of empirical research that examined 14 studies that used animals to assist individuals with autism spectrum disorder, the researchers found that overall, studies reported positive outcomes

¹ Chandler, *Animal-assisted Therapy in Counseling* (New York: Routledge 2005).

² Marcus, Bernstein, and Constantin, *Animal Assisted Therapy at an Outpatient Pain Management Clinic*, 13 Pub Med 45 (2012).

³ See, e.g., O'Haire, *Companion animals and human health: Benefits, Challenges, and the Road Ahead*, 5 Journal of Veterinary Behavior: Clinical Applications and Research, 226 (2010); Lefkowitz, Prout, Bleiberg, Paharia, and Debiak., *Animal-Assisted Prolonged Exposure: A Treatment to Survivors of Sexual Assault Suffering Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*, 13 Society and Animal, 49 (2005); Stoffel and Braun, *Animal-Assisted Therapy: Analysis of Patient Testimonials*, Journal of Undergrad Nursing Scholarship, (2006); Barker and Dawson, *The Effects Of Animal-Assisted Therapy On Anxiety Ratings Of Hospitalized Psychiatric Patients*, 49 Journal of Psychiatr Serv, 797 (1998); O'Haire, *Companion Animals And Human Health: Benefits, Challenges, And The Road Ahead*, 5 Journal of Veterinary Behavior: Clinical Applications and Research, 226 (2010); Antonioli and Riveley, *Randomized Controlled Trial Of Animal Facilitated Therapy With Dolphins In The Treatment Of Depression*, BMJ 1231 (2005); Sobo, Eng, and Kassity-Krich, *Canine visitation therapy*, 24 Journal of Holistic Nursing, 51 (2006); Marcus, *The Science behind Animal-Assisted Therapy*, 17 Journal of Curr Pain Headache Rep, 322 (2013); Friedmann, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch JJ, and Messent, *Social Interaction And Blood Pressure: Influence Of Animal Companions*, 171(8) Journal of Nerv Ment Dis., 461 (1983); Kovacs, Rosa, and Rosa, *Animal-Assisted Therapy For Middle-Aged Schizophrenic Patients Living In A Social Institution, A Pilot Study*, 18 Clinical Rehabilitation, 483 (2004); Friedmann and Son, *The Human-Companion Animal Bond: How Humans Benefit*, 39(2) Veterinary Clinics of North America: Small Animal Practice, 293 (2009); Kern, Fletcher, Garver, Mehta, Grannemann, and Knox *Prospective Trial Of Equine-Assisted Activities In Autism Spectrum Disorder*, 17(3) Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine, 14 (2011); Consoli, Maraziti, and Ciapparelli, *The Impact On Mood, Anxiety, And Sleep Disorders On Fibromyalgia*, 53 Journal of Compr Psychiatry, 962 (2012).

⁴ Serpell, *Animal Companions And Human Well-Being: A Historical Explanation Of The Value Of Human-Animal Relationships* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press 2000); O'Haire, *supra*, note 3; Barker, *supra*, note 3; Hoffman et al., *Dog-Assisted Intervention Significantly Reduces Anxiety In Hospitalized Patients With Major Depression*, 1(30) European Journal of Integrative Medicine, 145 (2009).

⁵ Mallon, *Cow As Co-Therapist: Utilization Of Farm Animals As Therapeutic Aids With Children In Residential Treatment*, 11 Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 455 (1994); Martin and Farnum, *Animal-Assisted Therapy For Children With Pervasive Developmental Disorders*, 24(6) Western Journal of Nursing Research, 657 (2002); Hanselman, *Coping Skills Intervention With Adolescents In Anger Management Using Animals In Therapy*, 11(4) Journal of Child and Adolescent Group Therapy, 159 (2001).

including increased social interaction and communication. Additionally, studies showed decreased problem behaviors, autistic severity, and stress.⁶

In a meta-analysis that reviewed 49 AAT studies focused on autism spectrum symptoms, medical difficulties, behavioral problems, and emotional well-being, researchers found that animals impact the *healing process*, noting that the characteristics of the studies and the type of participant included did not result in differential outcomes.⁷ In fact, the findings revealed positive and moderately strong effect sizes.

Considerations

There a number of positive findings from the impact of AAT on health outcomes, however, it is important to consider the methodological problems that need to be addressed to better inform the field. The implementation of AAT varies across studies including the use of animal type, the health outcome focus, the frequency of interaction, what therapy type it's used in combination with, the participant demographic, and the setting. Additionally, a lack of consistency across assessment instruments used becomes problematic when comparing findings and examining the evidence.

The lack of a formalized treatment protocol for AAT is also a concern. Across the studies reviewed, there was no consistency in the implementation of AAT, nor the therapy type it was used in conjunction with. This inconsistency makes any chance of replication near impossible as well as the ability to generalize the findings.

Mode of therapy

In-patient and out-patient

Setting types: physical therapy clinics, mental health clinics, nursing homes, camps, private practice, hospitals, residential facilities, courts, correctional facilities, and others

Animal types: dog, cat, rabbit, aquatic animals, horse, and other farm animals

Across lifespan: children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly

Length variations: some as little as 10 minutes others for several hours; some weekly while others monthly

⁶ O'Haire, *Animal-Assisted Intervention for Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Systematic Literature Review*, 43 Journal of Autism Developmental Disorder, 1606 (2013).

⁷ Nimer and Lundahl, *Animal-Assisted Therapy: A Meta-Analysis*, 20(3) Anthrozoos, 225 (2007).