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# Animal Assisted Therapy and Trauma Survivors

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**ABSTRACT**

Animal therapy is making strides in the treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For years, animals have been used with great benefit in the treatment of the aged and the terminally ill. Now animal assisted therapy is benefitting sufferers of PTSD. The results of animal assisted therapy in the treatment of PTSD patients have seen significant results. In one study of the effect of dogs with patients, psychologists noted an 82% reduction in symptoms. One particular case noted that interacting with the dog for as little as one week, enabled a patient to decrease the amount of anxiety and sleep medications by half.

**KEYWORDS**

Animal assisted therapy; trauma; PTSD

## Introduction

The goal of Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is to provide long term group or individual therapy for survivors of trauma that incorporate AAT in conjunction with exposure therapy, cognitive behavior therapy, or empowerment therapy. Animal-assisted intervention that occurs when trauma victims seek health related services has the potential to reduce the distressing symptoms by reducing re-traumatization and discomfort (Center of Violence Against Women and Children, n.d.). Specifically, the goals of AAT are to assist in normalizing the trauma experience, providing a calming agent, establishing rapport, and helping to develop a therapeutic alliance with the health care provider (Anderson & Scott, n.d.). AAT is a goal-directed intervention that includes reducing isolation, brightening moods and affects, addressing grieving and loss, and improving self-esteem and socialization, while decreasing overall anxiety (Hamama et al., 2011).

Animal Assisted Activities (AAA) provides motivation, education, recreation, and/or therapeutic benefits that enhance the quality of life for victims of trauma (Anderson & Scott, n.d.). AAA is delivered by a variety of specialty trained professionals, para-professionals, and/or volunteers in association with animals that meet specific criteria (Anderson & Scott, n.d.). AAT incorporates existing trauma treatment with animals to encourage survivors to complete the treatment by making the task less daunting (Lefkowitz, Paharia, Prout, Debiak & Bleiberg, 2005).

## History of AAT

Animals with their unique ability to adapt to their human counterparts, in particular dogs, have played an integral part in the lives of humans for the past 12,000 years. Throughout history this powerful connection that humans have with animals has been credited with numerous psychological and physiological benefits (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Friedman et al., 1980; Sussman, 1985). The healing attributes of domesticated animals have been recognized for thousands of years. In 1792, rabbits, chickens, and other farm animals were used by The York Retreat in England to "enhance the humanity of the emotionally ill" (Beck & Katcher, 1996, p. 132). The utilization of domesticated canines in the

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concept of therapy can be traced back to the late 18th century, where animals were used in mental institutions to help patients with socialization and cognitive disabilities (Serpell, 2006). Florence Nightingale (1860) found that that use of small companion animals brought solace and comfort to chronically ill patients.

In 1940 during World War II, a tiny Yorkshire Terrier named Smokey was found in a foxhole by a member of MacArthur's 5th Air Force. Corporal Bill Wynne, also in MacArthur's 5th Air Force Unit, saw Smokey and purchased him for four pounds. Throughout the next 18 months Smokey and Corporal Wynne were inseparable completing 12 combat missions and being awarded eight battle stars. When Corporal Wynne became ill and needed hospitalization, Smokey was brought to his bedside. Smokey was such a hit with recuperating soldiers that he was allowed to stay and sleep with Corporal Wynne. During the next 12 years Smokey continued to lift spirits and bring comfort to many physically injured and suffering soldiers (Wynne, 2007).

Since that day in 1940, the many psychological and physiological benefits of animals have been researched. Human-animal interaction (HAI) research has documented cases of lowered blood pressure, improved cardiopulmonary pressures, decreased use of medicine, and the psychological benefits of reduced anxiety and stress (Kruger & Serpell, 2010; Sussman, 1985). In addition to the many health benefits associated with HAI, the human-animal bond has been credited with reducing depression and loneliness while increasing a sense of self-worth, empathy, psychological well-being and sense of purpose (O'Haire, 2012). Reasons for these psychological and physiological effects can be attributed to an animal's unconditional love, constant availability, and non-judgmental nature that transcends into trust, warmth, and acceptance (Horvath & Symonds, 1991).

## AAA, animal assisted interactions, and AAT

Today the supportive effects of the human–animal bond can be seen in numerous venues including schools, hospitals, mental health facilities, nursing homes, prisons, courtrooms, businesses, and physicians' offices. As the human–animal bond progresses forward into other areas of study and the various benefits have become more widely known, it has become necessary to quantify and describe the various components of the human–animal bond in the realm of AAA. AAA is a broad category that has many different labels and descriptions. When using animals in various activities ranging from interacting with individuals at nursing homes, hospitals, and school reading programs, this spontaneous interaction can also be referred to as animal-assisted interactions (AAI). The formal definition of AAI when utilized as AAA is described as:

> Activities that involve animals visiting people. The same activity can be repeated with different people, unlike a therapy program that is tailored to a particular person or medical condition. AAA provides opportunities for motivational, educational, and/or recreational benefits to enhance the quality of life. AAA are delivered in a variety of environments by a specially trained professional, paraprofessional, and/or volunteer in association with animals that meet specific criteria. (Delta Society, 2012, p. 79)

Regardless of which acronym is utilized, AAAs are an excellent approach to helping improve and enrich the quality of life and independence of many adults and children (Risley-Curtis, Zilney & Hornung, 2010).

The first professional clinician in the United States to formally document the use of companion animals in a therapeutic setting, Levinson (1997) described in his book *Pet-Oriented Child Psychotherapy*, how the inclusion of animals helped develop communication, rapport, and the relationship between the patient and therapist. When incorporating AAI as a goal-oriented therapeutic intervention, the definition takes on a different meaning. AAT can be described as:

> [involving] a health or human service professional who uses an animal as part of his/her job. Specific goals for each client have been identified by the professional, and progress is measured and recorded. AAT is a goal-directed intervention in which an animal meeting specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process. AAT is delivered and/or directed by a health or human service provider working within the scope of

> his/her profession. 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. The process is documented and evaluated. (Delta Society, 2012, p. 79)

When utilized as a therapeutic intervention, clinicians should ensure the AAT process is used to augment the existing therapy session rather than create a distraction, making sure to direct focus on the objectives of the treatment and the healing process of the client (Lefkowitz, et al., 2005).

## AAT and veterans

Since 2010, as many as 40,000 troops have been reported to have been returned home from the Middle East physically wounded (Thompson, 2010). Unfortunately, that number is only a drop in the bucket compared to the estimated number of returning servicemen and women who exhibit the psychological symptoms of depression, combat flashbacks, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Often, coming home from battle can mean returning to another, more perilous war at home—a war inside the mind and one that cannot be won without the help of outside sources. With over 6,000 veterans committing suicide each year—the number one cause of death for our veterans today—we must consider all possible alternatives, including therapy dogs.

The number of service men and women returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan with significant psychological and physiological conditions has identified the need for AAT in individuals suffering from traumatic brain injuries (TBI). Interest in the benefits of AAT has recently been recognized as a significant modality in the treatment of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse in psychologically impaired combat veterans. Recognizing that many returning veterans may suffer from flashbacks, panic attacks, and guilt and grief issues, many organizations around the country have adopted AAT programs in order to address these issues. Working to help discover more effective coping mechanisms for returning veterans in need of post-deployment therapeutic care, the U.S. government in 2010 elected to study the efficacy of AAT. Congress took a significant step by allotting the U.S. Army $300,000 to create a pilot program in which to study the impact of paring psychiatric service dogs with returning veterans in need of post-deployment therapeutic care (Arkow, 2011; Kershaw, 2009). Such a pilot would lay the groundwork for a large-scale program that could benefit the hundreds of thousands of veterans suffering from PTSD. Rather than prescribing more pills, this legislation provides veterans with alternative care that can be integral to their recovery. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) amended the regulations affecting service dogs in 2011, qualifying PTSD as meeting the criteria within the definition of service dogs.

## Service dogs versus therapy dogs

People often confuse “therapy dog” with “service dog” but these are two distinct terms. Oftentimes these two distinctions have caused occasional controversies when individuals with therapy dogs have attempted to misrepresent their pets as service animals. Service animals are not considered pets and sometimes are referred to as assistance or guide dogs (Arkow, 2011). Service dogs are legally classified and defined in the United States by the 1990 Americans with Disability Act which defines a disability as a “mental or physical condition which substantially limits a major life activity” (ADA, 1990). These requirements were revised on September 15, 2010 by the United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, and Disability Rights Section to be defined as follows:

> Service animals are defined as dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities. Examples of such work or tasks include guiding people who are blind, alerting people who are deaf, pulling a wheelchair, alerting and protecting a person who is having a seizure, reminding a person with mental illness to take prescribed medications, calming a person with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) during an anxiety attack, or performing other duties. Service animals are working animals, not pets. The work or task a dog has been trained to provide must be directly related to the person’s disability. Dogs whose

> sole function is to provide comfort or emotional support do not qualify as service animals under the ADA. (Title II, "State and Local Government Services"; Title III, "Public Accommodations and Commercial Facilities")

The amended changes defined only dogs as recognized service animals (Arkow, 2011). Therapy dogs, animal assistance, animal intervention, emotional support, comfort or companionship dogs are not covered under provisions of the ADA. However, both therapy and service dogs offer significant socializing opportunities that improve loneliness and depression, encourage independence, self-esteem, psychological well-being, empathy, and trust (Guest, Collis & McNichols, 2006; Rintala, Mathmoros & Seitz, 2008).

## AAT in the mental health profession

Therapists have implemented the use of animal-assisted psychotherapy to help their clients relax, destress, build rapport, cultivate communication skills, and encourage positive interpersonal relationships. Psychiatrist Michael McCulloch (1983) stressed that "Pets can be a positive influence by decreasing the preoccupation with self, promoting humor, and providing unconditional acceptance and regard" (p. 25). Chandler (2005), Fine and Beck (2010), and Iannuzzi and Rowan (1990) all concur with McCulloch (1983), and while they espouse the intrinsic attributes of AAT they also stress the importance of ethical behavior when using animals in therapeutic settings. Good judgment and thoughtful preparation is essential when implementing AAT into a professional setting. Iannuzzi and Rowan (1990) believe "Reconciling the rehabilitation value of the animals versus the risks to the animals is neither simple nor easy unless one follows the philosophy that animals should not be used as a means to an end" (p. 159). Dr. Weil (2015) believes the most essential and advantageous benefit to AAT over other forms of therapeutic modalities is the reciprocity that AAT provides affording the patient the much desired chance to give love and affection as well as receive it, thus providing a direction and pathway to recovery and healing.

## AAT and "The Link" between trauma survivors

A correlation between AAT and family violence and other forms of trauma has been established by researchers. Child and animal protection professionals have recognized The Link®, noting that abuse of both children and animals is connected in a self-perpetuating cycle of trauma related instances (American Humane Association, 2013). Children in group therapy with therapy dogs showed significant decrease in trauma symptoms as well as significantly more change than those in groups without therapy dogs (Dietz, Davis & Pennings, 2012). Hamama et al. (2011) studied the effects of canine therapy on female adolescents who experienced physical or sexual trauma but were not cooperative with individual interventions. The study found that trauma victims felt more control and mastery due to the canine assistance in the group.

In many cases where children have been exposed to trauma and have been privy to witnessing spousal abuse, animal abuse, or were a victim of abuse themselves, he/she may act out against what he perceives to be the next most vulnerable target and may harm a family pet, or a stray or wild animal (Adams, 1992). Schoolchildren are guided toward participation in service learning and community service projects to bring awareness to how family related trauma affects their future lives. According to Carolin Behrend (2005) in her Master's presentation to humane education expert and animal activist Zoe Weil, animal welfare, including abuse and neglect, is one of the top three concerns of teens and 'tweens. Weil (2004) is well known as an animal and human advocate that demonstrates that humane education and community service are effective tools in the fight against human trauma and animal cruelty. Link coalitions and partnerships have created numerous programs to address and prevent violence. These include but are not limited to: at-risk youth and prisoner dog training

programs, service dogs in classrooms, mandatory cross reporting between child protective service, animal control officers and veterinarians' collaborations, and dogs in courtrooms (The National Link Coalition, n.d.).

## Conclusion: Impacts and considerations

AAT has significantly impacted survivors of trauma by helping to lower their anxiety and increase trust building by the unconditional acceptance and support provided by trained animals and their handlers (Hamama et al., 2011). A benefit of AAIs has been demonstrated that petting a therapy animal releases endorphins making people feel better, diminishing feeling of pain, depression, and loneliness. Odendaal and Meintjes (2003) have also discovered that petting a dog or cat for just one minute stimulated the production of oxytocin. Oxytocin is the hormone that enhances trust, cooperation, and love between a parent and their child. Research in animal companionship has shown reduction in physiological stress responses such as elevated heart rate and blood pressure (Friedman, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch & Messent, 1983). One study found patients' fear of medical treatment reduced 37% after a brief session of AAT (Banks & Banks, 2002). Lefkowitz et al. (2005) found that pet ownership for trauma survivors helped to establish loving relationships, regain control of their lives, and provided them a sense of safety.

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