

TOPIC

Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT)

ANIMALS HELPING PEOPLE HEAL

Sigmund Freud wrote, “time spent with cats is never wasted,” and the same could be said for dogs, horses, and other animals involved in Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT). This is more than a notion that people enjoy animal companionship. Research demonstrates the positive effects animals can have in a therapeutic environment. From improved mood and decreased stress to physical therapy benefits and pain reduction, Animal Assisted Therapy aids healing and improves quality of life for people facing a variety of challenges.

Benefits of incorporating Animal Assisted Therapy, also called Pet Therapy, into treatment plans include:

- Lower blood pressure
- Diminished overall physical pain
- Release of calming hormones, such as oxytocin and dopamine
- Reduced feelings of isolation
- Promotion of social skills
- Improved focus and concentration
- Increased movement and motor skills
- Motivation to work harder

“Beyond the simple joy of petting a dog or cat, Pet Therapy provides therapeutic benefits physically and psychologically for a wide range of patients.”

**Angela DiDolce, LCSW
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PROOF THAT ANIMAL ASSISTED THERAPY WORKS

Case studies have only recently begun to quantify the positive impacts Animal Assisted Therapy can have in promoting or improving good health. Among them, Ohio State University found improved symptoms in Alzheimer’s patients involved in equine therapy, which is AAT using horses. A study of nursing homes in three states found an average drop of 69% in the medication costs of patients exposed to pets. Hormone levels were found in another study involving therapy dogs to be significantly affected, with drops in stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, and increases in health-inducing oxytocin, dopamine, and endorphins. A study by Loyola University showed a 50% decrease in required pain medication for joint-replacement patients exposed to canine therapy. Additional studies have shown significant improvements in blood pressure, cognitive functioning, pain, self-care, mood, morale, language skills, and socialization.

But these case studies are only the beginning. Advocates are calling for more research to prove what they have long held to be true about AAT. People recover faster, need less medication, and are reachable with greater ease through animals. Animals improve motivation and happiness. They don’t judge progress or expect too much. They are interesting and interested and, for most people, non-threatening. Some of the people helped through AAT include those suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), autism, dementia, mental disorders, neurological disorders like epilepsy, and those undergoing physical rehabilitation after surgery or injury.

WHERE DO THERAPY ANIMALS “WORK”?

The ancient human-animal bond at work in AAT has been specifically utilized for years in healthcare settings. Florence Nightingale wrote, “a small pet is often an excellent companion for the sick, especially for the chronic cases.” As early as 1790, mentally ill people in England interacted with rabbits and chickens brought into the institution for their therapeutic effects on the population. Currently, animals are routinely used in settings like psychiatric facilities, children’s hospitals, hospice centers, nursing homes, schools and correctional facilities. The animals involved range from horses and llamas to dogs, guinea pigs, birds, and even spiders.

While not likely to function as an overall solution to the struggles people face through illness or distress, Animal Assisted Therapy is certainly a potent complement to other therapies. It can be a valuable tool for boosting health and quality of life in people young and old alike.