

How Different Types of Pets Affect Clients in Various Counseling Environments

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Abstract:

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) has become a complementary approach in mental health care, gaining increasing attention for its ability to significantly improve mental health issues. Among them, animal-assisted therapy, a new and emerging therapeutic approach, is gradually gaining prominence in the field of mental health and has won widespread attention and recognition for its unique appeal. This article will delve into the essence, mechanism of action, practical examples, and the profound impact of AAT on mental health. The effectiveness of a counseling environment is greatly affected by the type of animal used and the treatment setting. This article provides a systematic review of the differential effects of different types of pets (e.g., dogs, cats, birds, and rabbits) on clients in individual and group counseling settings. Mental health counseling studies related to AAT were selected for this study through a literature search using PubMed, Web of Science, and ProQuest databases. This article aims to gain insight into how to use more appropriate pet types and treatment environments in clinical practice. Future research should continue to explore the specific effects of different pets and treatment environments to promote better clinical application of AAT further.

Keywords: Animal-assisted therapy, counseling environments, mental health treatments.

1. Introduction

The contemporary development and integration of therapeutic approaches are the results of increased attention to mental health matters. Among the variety of therapy types, animal-assisted therapy (AAT) has emerged as a valuable method for psychological distress alleviation, such as conditions like anxiety and depression.

Animals are core components of the therapeutic settings of AAT, where they enable emotional support, enhancement in communication, and stress reduction [1]. The growing recognition of AAT's benefits has prompted researchers and practitioners to explore its applications across different environments where different animals are involved.

While AAT's positive impact on mental health is well-documented, there is a lack of empirical re-

search regarding the effects brought about by animals of various kinds. Most studies focus on specific animals, like dogs [2-4], while other pet types, such as cats, rabbits, and birds, remain understudied. In addition, the effectiveness of AAT in different counseling settings, such as individual therapy and group therapy, requires further research. Moreover, different pets are used for different types of psychiatric disorders, and these studies were relatively lacking.

This article aims to explore the different effects of different pets on clients in different counseling environments in order to guide and optimize future AAT applications and provide guidance for counselors.

2. Method

This article employed a systematic review methodology, adhering strictly to the PRISMA guidelines. The literature search was conducted using databases such as PubMed, Web of Science, and ProQuest. Keywords include “Animal-Assisted Therapy,” “Pets in Counseling,” and “Counseling Environments.” The inclusion criteria are (1) studies involving AAT in mental health counseling, (2) studies exploring the effects of AAT across different therapeutic environments (such as individual therapy and group therapy), and (3) peer-reviewed journal articles. Exclusion criteria included: (1) non-peer-reviewed articles, conference abstracts, or book chapters; (2) studies focused primarily on the physical health or physiological effects of animals; (3) studies without full text.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Definition and Origin of Animal-Assisted Therapy

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is a treatment method that introduces animals into the treatment environment to improve the mental health of the client. Unlike Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA), AAT has a clear treatment goal, which is to help clients relieve psychological problems such as anxiety and depression through interaction with animals. Since AAA only provides emotional support and social interaction and has no clear treatment goals, it is not a treatment method [5]. The main goal of animal-assisted therapy is to help patients relieve psychological problems such as anxiety and depression through interaction between clients and animals, enhance emotional regulation ability, and promote psychological recovery as soon as possible. Animal-assisted therapy originated in the 19th century. It was first initiated by Florence Nightingale, who suggested that birds be used as a source of happiness

for long-term bedridden patients to help promote early recovery of patients. In the 1960s, child psychologist Boris Levinson first introduced pets into psychotherapy and found that the interaction between clients and pets helped them improve their communication skills. Since then, animal-assisted therapy has been officially introduced into the field of psychotherapy [5]. Today, AAT has expanded to many fields and is widely used in psychotherapy. Many studies have begun to explore how to better use animal-assisted therapy to help alleviate psychological problems.

AAT is based on multiple theoretical frameworks, the most important of which are the Human-Animal Relationship Theory (HART) and the Biophilia Hypothesis. The Human-Animal Relationship Theory emphasizes that moments of interaction between humans and animals during animal-assisted therapy have a better effect on the client’s mental health and treatment. These moments of interaction can reveal the client’s potential psychological problems. Reflecting on these psychological moments can help promote the client’s emotional growth and treatment progress [6]. In contrast, the Bioaffinity Hypothesis was first proposed by Wilson in 1984. It refers to the fact that humans will gain great satisfaction in the process of contacting and exploring life. Through contact with other creatures, humans can gain natural connections and affect mental health [7]. Therefore, based on the biophilia hypothesis, humans can use natural environments and animal therapy to reduce stress and anxiety, thereby maintaining contact with nature and reducing psychological problems. Based on these two theoretical frameworks, AAT was created and widely used.

3.2 The Impact of Different Pets on Mental Health

Regarding the therapeutic effects of existing AAT, different pets have different characteristics and different therapeutic effects. Animals used in animal-assisted therapy include horses, dogs, cats, donkeys, rabbits, hamsters, guinea pigs, birds, reptiles and amphibians. This article will discuss four of the main types of animals including dogs, cats, rabbits and birds.

Dogs are the most widely used animals in AAT. A large number of studies have shown that dogs can not only provide emotional support, but also improve mental health by promoting social interaction. Banks and Banks found that the presence of dogs can help long-term care facility (LTCF) residents with severe loneliness reduce loneliness. Especially in personal therapy, dogs can provide unconditional companionship and help visitors establish emotional connections, thereby alleviating emotional distress [8]. They can reduce people’s stress, anxiety, depression

and loneliness, thereby improving mental health [2]. A study of canine AAT on children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) found that AAT had a positive impact on emotion-related functions, motor endurance, balance and motor skills in ASD children [9]. Animal-assisted therapy has also achieved remarkable results in treating patients with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In a study on the impact of dogs on PTSD patients, AAT helped PTSD patients reduce their symptoms by 82% and significantly reduced the dosage of anti-anxiety and depression drugs [10]. This shows the effectiveness of dogs in AAT in treating mental illness. In animal-assisted therapy, researchers have found that pet dogs play a very positive role in promoting social interaction. Having a pet dog can increase the number of interactions between passers-by, not because the dog itself attracts the attention of passers-by [3, 8]. Therefore, this social catalytic effect shows that having a dog is very helpful for patients to increase social interactions. Although dogs have been shown to be very effective in AAT, the literature review also pointed out that current studies lack information about the general characteristics of dogs, such as the number of dogs involved in AAT, the age, sex and breed of each dog, data about the dog's temperament, and information about the dog trainer [4]. These data all affect the effectiveness of AAT treatment and need to be included in future studies.

Cats and rabbits have also been used in AAT, but there are relatively few related studies. Cats are mainly used to relieve stress and anxiety, in which case the therapeutic effect of cats is more significant. Cats can help patients relax and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression by providing quiet companionship. Cats can also improve the sensory abilities of children with autism, improve attention, and increase vocabulary in children with the disease and patients with Alzheimer's disease [11]. Cats can effectively act as sedatives and psychological stimulants in animal-assisted therapy, so the role of cats in the treatment of psychiatric patients cannot be ignored. Rabbits are less used in AAT, but they are also a very promising treatment option. In one study, rabbits were found to be a reassuring source of social support for some participants, and they were able to encourage social interaction. Because they are curious, emotional, and able to respond to visitors' attention and interaction, rabbits have also been shown to be very effective partners in animal-assisted therapy [12]. Birds, especially finches, also play an important role in helping patients relieve cognitive fatigue and improve mental health. A study confirmed that rooms with finches were willing to participate in group therapy for psychiatric patients, and attendance and treatment participation rates were significantly higher [13]. Human fascination with birds can serve as a beneficial therapeutic factor to help

people with orientation fatigue and attention-related disorders, helping them regain their attention. In addition, birds can also be very effective in making patients feel very relaxed because they do not require too many attention resources. Studies have confirmed that after 30 minutes of bird watching in the garden, people can feel a significant reduction in anxiety and an increase in happiness [14]. It can be seen that birds are also an effective tool for animal therapy that does not require attention resources, especially for the elderly and patients with attention disorders.

3.3 The role of the consultation environment

The effectiveness of AAT is also related to the treatment environment. Common AAT treatment environments include individual therapy and group therapy. Each treatment has unique dynamics that affect the treatment effect. Most AAT studies are conducted on individuals, and only a few have adopted group therapy [15]. Patient observation studies in inpatient psychiatric settings have found that AAT group activities can provide patients with effective assessment opportunities, and most patients, especially those lonely individuals, are willing to participate in AAT group therapy activities [16]. This finding suggests that the use of AAT in inpatients is not only helpful for psychotherapy, but also provides therapists with an effective patient assessment tool. In addition, research has found that animal-assisted therapy in group therapy is very effective in helping survivors of sexual abuse cope with trauma, especially when this group therapy is combined with story therapy, which has a more significant therapeutic effect on reducing children's anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder [15]. Therefore, group therapy is effective in trauma treatment, especially when combined with story therapy, but it is not applicable to all treatment goals. However, the therapeutic effects of AAT individual therapy are better than those of group therapy. Research has found that individual AAT is more effective in reducing loneliness among long-term care facility (LTCF) residents, whereas group therapy did not show the same effect [8]. These studies indicate that although group therapy is effective in the treatment of some mental illnesses, socialization is not a decisive factor in animal-assisted therapy. In the treatment of AAT, one-on-one contact and interaction with an animal may be more effective for patients.

3.4 Results of AAT

Existing literature shows that AAT has significant therapeutic effects on a variety of mental disorders and diseases. AAT can lead to more social interaction, verbal communication and more social relationships. Patients

can more easily achieve unconditional acceptance and positive emotions. They can have more opportunities for expression and gain greater sensory stimulation. During the treatment of ATT, they can also gain a stronger sense of belonging and identity, thereby relieving anxiety and feeling more relaxed [16].

AAT is very effective in treating anxiety symptoms. One study found that patients with psychosis, mood disorders, and other conditions had significantly lower anxiety scores after receiving animal-assisted therapy [17]. This demonstrates the effectiveness of AAT in treating anxiety symptoms, which may be attributed to the fact that AAT allows patients to feel more comfortable and happy through contact with animals, thereby relieving anxiety and improving mood problems [16].

AAT is also very effective in treating depressive symptoms. Dog-assisted therapy is effective in reducing depressive symptoms in institutionalized older adults. Research shows that patients have increased verbal interaction with dog owners during AAT treatment. During this process, the dog acts as a facilitator of social interaction, eliciting a positive emotional response from the patient. Dog-assisted therapy helps increase the patient's perception of therapeutic control and increases therapy-related feelings of empowerment [18]. This is consistent with previous research emphasizing the social nature of dogs. A meta-analysis also confirmed that AAT is very effective in reducing depressive symptoms [3, 8, 19].

AAT is also used in adjunctive treatment for people with addiction, particularly alcohol and drug abuse, to help them reduce anxiety and discomfort, thereby better facilitating drug and alcohol withdrawal. Not only that, AAT can also be used in cancer treatment to help people relieve their fear of cancer and the pain caused by cancer [16]. Overall, the sedative effects of AAT are very effective for both addiction recovery and pain management.

AAT is very effective in treating trauma. Animal-assisted therapy is very effective in helping survivors of sexual abuse cope with trauma [15]. A comprehensive systematic review and meta-analysis also reported that AAI has a small but insignificant advantage over standard PTSD psychotherapy in reducing PTSD symptom severity. Having a service dog outperforms the group waiting for a service dog [19].

Overall, AAT is highly effective in multiple therapeutic areas. It plays a huge role in relieving psychological stress, providing emotional support and promoting social interaction. Existing research supports AAT as a highly effective adjunct to the treatment of psychological and behavioral disorders, particularly anxiety, depression, addiction, and trauma.

4. Implications

This study shows that AAT has a very significant effect in improving mental health, especially in relieving anxiety, depression, addiction and trauma treatment. AAT can not only promote social interaction, but also provide emotional support, help improve quality of life and restore mental health. Future research should explore integrating various pet types into other treatments, such as cognitive behavioral therapy or medication. Understanding the specific roles different pets play in these conditions can increase the effectiveness of comprehensive treatment strategies.

Practitioners should tailor AAT to client preferences and the counseling setting. Application to clinical practice should be tailored to patient preferences and needs. One-on-one interaction in individual therapy may be more effective in reducing patients' loneliness and emotional distress. In group therapy, AAT may need to be combined with narrative therapy. Dogs are more suitable for individuals who need increased social interaction and emotional support, while cats are more suitable for quiet individual patients who are unwilling to interact too much. Birds are more suitable for older patients, as well as patients who need to improve their concentration and have cognitive impairments. Rabbits are more suitable for patients who need social support. By selecting suitable animals for animal-assisted therapy, the treatment effect can be effectively improved.

In addition, future research needs to pay more attention to the long-term effects of AAT, and the description of animals in different studies needs to be more specific, so as to more effectively guide clinical treatment. There is currently a lack of systems for different cultural age groups and different patients, and further improvement is needed to help AAT be more widely used in the field of mental health.

5. Conclusion

The differential impact of different pets in different counseling settings highlights the importance of selecting the appropriate pet and environment for AAT. The results of this systematic review indicate that AAT is highly effective in relieving anxiety, depression, addiction, and trauma, but that the effects vary among pets with different psychological problems and treatment settings. By understanding these nuances, therapists can better meet their clients' unique needs, thereby enhancing the overall therapy experience. Future research should continue to investigate the specific effects of different pets and environments to expand the application of AAT. Future research needs to conduct long-term follow-up to understand the

long-term effects and clarify the types, breeds, personalities and other factors of different pets, which can provide more valuable basis in the treatment process. At the same time, it is suitable for different people, different cultural backgrounds, ages Comprehensive research on groups and patients with psychological problems also needs to be continuously promoted to promote widespread application in the field of mental health.

Author contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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