

Animal-Assisted Therapy in Psychotherapy: The Role of Dogs and Cats in Individual and Group Emotional Interventions at Anima Iris (Integrated Consultancy in Clinical Psychology)

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Abstract

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is a therapeutic practice that involves interaction between humans and animals, aimed at enhancing the psychophysical well-being of patients. Over recent decades, AAT has gained increasing popularity in psychotherapy, where the use of animals has been shown to promote relaxation, reduce anxiety, and facilitate the processing of emotional traumas. Dogs and cats, in particular, have become prominent in many psychotherapeutic interventions, as their different emotional and behavioral characteristics distinctly shape therapeutic approaches. This article explores the use of dogs and cats in both individual and group psychotherapy, focusing specifically on emotional aspects and treatment differences.

Keywords: Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT), Psychotherapy, Emotional Interventions, Dogs in Therapy, Cats in Therapy

Introduction

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is an emerging therapeutic approach that incorporates animals into clinical settings to enhance the psychophysical well-being of patients. Over recent years, the role of animals, particularly dogs and cats, has become more prominent in psychotherapy. These animals offer emotional support and serve as mediators, helping patients process complex emotions, especially in cases of trauma, anxiety, and disorders like autism.

This article presents a case study of AAT conducted at Anima Iris, involving dogs and cats in both individual and group therapeutic sessions. By discussing specific examples, such as the contributions of a 4-year-old Pinscher and several mixed-breed cats, the report explores how these animals facilitate emotional interventions. Dogs are shown to foster social interaction and group cohesion, while cats support deeper emotional reflection

and regulation. The article also draws attention to the differences between dogs and cats in therapy, noting that each offers distinct benefits depending on the therapeutic goals and patient needs.

Through the review of AAT's application, this case report contributes to a better understanding of the effectiveness of animals in therapeutic settings and their impact on emotional health.

Emotional Aspects of Pet Therapy

The efficacy of AAT stems from the animals' ability to serve as emotional mediators, fostering patients' openness and emotional processing. The human-animal bond relies on dynamics of trust, safety, and reciprocity, which can be crucial in the therapeutic process. Interaction with an animal can enhance emotional awareness and help patients form emotional connections, even in cases where building interpersonal relationships is challenging [1].

The Role of Dogs in Psychotherapy

Dogs are the most commonly used animals in pet therapy due to their empathetic, affectionate, and trainable nature. In group therapy, dogs act as social facilitators. Their presence encourages patients to interact with one another, breaking down communication barriers and improving group cohesion [2]. The dog's open and friendly behavior helps reduce emotional tension within the group, fostering mutual trust and collaboration. Interactions mediated by dogs are particularly helpful for patients with conditions like autism or schizophrenia, where difficulties in forming social relationships can be overcome through the animal's "mediation."

At Anima Iris, dogs have provided a sense of security and emotional support to individual psychotherapy patients, serving as a "transitional object," as theorized by D.W. Winnicott, which helps patients connect with the therapist and manage difficult emotions. For example, Emy, a 4-year-old spayed Pinscher, has been involved in both individual and group therapy sessions since early in her life [3]. In individual settings, she provided comfort and protection, while in group sessions, her ability to interact with multiple individuals simultaneously facilitated group cohesion and improved communication. Significant emotional improvements have been noted in patients with generalized anxiety disorders following the introduction of Emy into therapy sessions [4]. These improvements have been corroborated through clinical assessments and patient feedback, involving 80 patients over the past three years, particularly in addressing psychological issues linked to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic [5].

The Role of Cats in Psychotherapy

Over the past decade, cats have been frequently used in both individual and group therapeutic settings, with over 200 patients treated. These cats, mainly calm and sociable female mixed-breeds, have demonstrated beneficial effects in therapeutic contexts. In individual psychotherapy, cats can help patients develop trust and promote relaxation through physical contact (e.g., stroking). Cats' relaxed behavior can serve as a "mirror," helping patients reflect on themselves and explore their emotions with less anxiety [6]. The sound of purring has been associated with a calming effect, lowering blood pressure and inducing a sense of well-being, as reported by both patients and clinical assessments [7].

Cats' detached and non-intrusive nature facilitates deep emotional processing, making them ideal companions for patients with trauma or trust issues. Cats have proven particularly helpful for children and adolescents with eating disorders by aiding impulse control and emotional regulation [8].

In group therapy, cats provide a different dynamic from dogs. Their less intrusive presence allows patients to establish slower, more gradual connections, making them useful for groups dealing with trauma or attachment disorders [9]. Cats do not require constant interaction, yet their presence alone can have a calming and emotionally regulating effect. In groups with borderline personality disorder or autism spectrum disorder patients, cats help regulate emotions, allowing patients to identify and modulate their emotional responses more gradually [10].

Key Differences Between Dogs and Cats in Pet Therapy

The differences between dogs and cats play a crucial role in determining which animal is most appropriate for a particular patient or group. Dogs, with their sociable and trainable nature, foster an immediate sense of affection and trust, facilitating social interaction and emotional openness [11-14]. This makes them particularly effective in group therapy, where creating an environment of cohesion and mutual support is essential. Cats, on the other hand, offer a more gradual and subtle approach. Their independence and selective interactions encourage cautious, reflective emotional connections, making them suitable for patients who need more time to build secure emotional relationships [15-17]. Cats are particularly beneficial in trauma contexts, where intense emotional interactions with dogs might overwhelm the patient.

Conclusions

Pet Therapy represents a valuable integrative tool in psychotherapy, particularly in managing emotions and addressing psychological issues related to attachment and trauma. The use of dogs and cats offers complementary therapeutic options: dogs facilitate social openness and cohesion, while cats promote deeper, reflective emotional processing. The choice of animal depends on the specific characteristics of the patient and therapeutic goals, but in both cases, interaction with animals can be a valuable pathway for promoting psychological well-being and enhancing patients' quality of life.

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