

Animal Welfare Considerations in Animal-Assisted Interventions

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Health and human service professionals around the world have been including animals in their practices to improve patient/client outcome attainment since as early as the 1600s with John Locke's assertion that child caregiving of animals nurture children's empathy and responsibility (Fine, 2000). Patients/clients who enjoy animals are having improved success within therapeutic gains when the practitioner incorporates animal assisted interventions as an adjunct modality to treatment (Kruger & Serpell, 2006). Documented benefits of AAIs for human well-being include decreased anxiety, decreased feelings of loneliness, empowering self-efficacy (Hart & Yamamoto, 2015; Hoffman et al, 2009). Mental health providers are also guided by the general ethical principles described in the APA's Code of Ethics, including but not limited to Beneficence and Nonmaleficence; Fidelity and Responsibility; Justice; Integrity; and Respect – all of which extend to the relationships with animals. To act in accordance and harmony with these ethical principles means valuing the needs and welfare of animal partners in AAI. AAIs have the potential to cause physical or psychological harm to therapy animals. By taking steps to safeguard therapy animal welfare, practitioners of AAIs can prevent the abuse or exploitation of participating animals.

Scientific evidence has shown that when a person pets a dog, the impact on the human includes improvements in physiological effects (e.g., stress relief and anxiety) as well as recorded changes in blood pressure, plasma cholesterol and plasma triglyceride (Friedmann, 1995; Odendaal, 2000). The benefits range from over reduction in symptoms of health issues, but implications for the human having reduced anxiety and stress in session can allow the client/patient to build rapport with the clinician or feel more comfortable in the session (cite).

Although partners in AAI, animals and humans do not hold equal privilege or power in this work. As such, we, as humans, must assess their physical and emotional well-being needs before, during, and after AAI participation, and ensure they are kept safe from intentional or accidental situations that may be dangerous or cause stress. This requires the handler to know their animal well – both as an individual and a member of his or her species. Overall, animal welfare within AAI must be of the highest priority to ensure the safety and efficacy of AAI intervention for the client, practitioner and the therapy animal (Tedeschi & Jenkins, 2019).

APA Code of Ethics and AAIs

APA's Code of Ethics Standard 2.01 states that psychologists should operate only within their boundaries of competence, including in the incorporation of new techniques and areas. Furthermore, in cases where standards do not yet exist, psychologists must take 'reasonable steps' to gain the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes for effective practice. Proficiency as a psychologist does not automatically mean proficiency in another modality; integrating another sentient being into the therapeutic process requires a specialized skill set that includes knowledge, skills, and attitudes specific to animal behavior, communication, and ethics (Stewart, et al, 2014; VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2017). While psychologists are not expected to be animal experts, practitioners of AAIs should have some knowledge about the breed/species with whom they work, as well as knowledge about their specific animal partner. Practitioners are also encouraged to

collaborate as needed with animal experts (e.g., veterinarians, animal behaviorists, therapy animal organizations) to best ensure their therapy animal's physical and physiological well-being.

One Welfare and AAI

AAI is grounded in the One Welfare concept (also known as "One Health"), which contends that the welfare and well-being of humans, animals, and the environment are interconnected (Pinillos, 2016; Bourque, 2017). One Welfare posits that human, animal, and environmental health cannot be separated from the well-being and welfare of any species. One example of this is the correlation (or "link") between animal abuse and human and community violence (American Humane Association, 2019). Additionally, in regions "where there are poor states of human welfare there commonly exist poor states of animal welfare" (Jordan & Lem, 2014, p1203). This same connectivity can be observed in AAI. For example, the failure to safeguard an animal's welfare during AAI (e.g., through ignoring or being unresponsive to an animal's signs and signals of distress), may result in harm to the animal, negative messages given to the client (for an example see "Modeling Positive Relationships and AAI" below), and/or harm to the client (e.g., bitten or otherwise harmed). Therefore, it is critical for practitioners who implement AAI to safeguard both animal well-being and the welfare of clients during sessions.

The Five Freedoms and AAI

At a *minimum*, the welfare of therapy animals should be consistent with the Five Freedoms, which means that animals participating in AAI should experience freedom 1) from hunger and thirst; 2) from discomfort; 3) from pain, injury, or disease; 4) from fear and distress; and 5) to express normal and natural behavior (Brambell Report, Farm Animal Welfare Council, 1979). While the Five Freedoms provide a minimum baseline for animal welfare, many scholars equate animal well-being with 'positive states' rather than solely the absence of the negative states associated with the Five Freedoms (Yeates & Main, 2008). Positive welfare suggests that animals are granted the freedom and ability to behave in adaptive ways to positive and negative stimuli (Ohl & van der Staay, 2012). For example, "positive affective engagement" may be when a therapy animal has the opportunity to engage willingly in an interaction with a person (Mellor, 2016). Before, during, and after a session, practitioners are responsible for continuously assessing the internal and external conditions that may impact the animals' affective and mental states (and thus, their welfare), thereby limiting animal distress and further facilitating the conditions in which animals will willingly seek to engage in interventions.

AAI providers need to recognize that animals are living, breathing, sentient beings with preferences and limitations. As such, competent AAI practitioners must align the animal's working role with his or her disposition and/or temperament and recognize that many animals may not demonstrate a goodness-of-fit for AAI. Furthermore, ongoing assessment of such alignment is necessary throughout the life of the therapy animal. Psychologists must also be mindful of, and take steps to address, personal biases (in accordance with the APA's Code of Ethics) related to

AAIs and/or their animals, and the impact that these biases may have on the intervention processes and their animal's well-being.

Modeling Positive Relationships and AAIs

Psychologists should model empathy, not only in their relationship with their clients, but also with their therapy animal (VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2017). This clinician-therapy animal relationship should also exemplify a healthy relationship, as multi-directional interactions between the clinician and therapy animal communicate important messages to the client. For example, by observing a gentle relationship between the clinician and the animal, clients may not only learn how to show affection to others, but may also feel safe in knowing that they, too, will receive kindness from the psychologist during therapy (Tedeschi & Jenkins, 2019). The client-practitioner relationship is the cornerstone for client growth, and modeling a nurturing, appropriate, safe, efficacious, and empathic relationship with the therapy animal can facilitate therapeutic rapport and trust (Tedeschi & Jenkins, 2019; VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2017).

Summary

Ethical and competent AAI providers recognize that, despite the best intentions for safeguarding therapy animal welfare when conducting AAIs, these interventions and their processes have the inherent potential to cause stress, physical injury, pain, distress, or psychological harm to participating animals. As such, it is essential for the psychologist to carefully consider whether the animal's participation is even appropriate; to exercise vigilance in supporting the animal's welfare; and to make every effort to anticipate, assess, and minimize all such risks, as well as risks to their clients and to themselves.

In summary, AAI providers will take every possible measure to avoid any possibility of abuse and exploitation of therapy animals. The exploitation of therapy animals contradicts the ethical prerogatives, responsibilities, and ultimate goals in conducting clinical work. To act in concordance with the ethical principles, and to support the therapeutic integrity of the work, psychologists must safeguard both client and animal welfare.

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