

Position Statement on Animal Welfare in Animal-Assisted Interventions

**American Psychological Association (APA),
Section 13 Human-Animal Interaction,
Division 17 (Society of Counseling Psychology)**

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"Some people talk to animals. Not many listen though. That's the problem." — A.A. Milne

This position statement was created to assist psychologists, mental health practitioners, and volunteer handlers who employ animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) in understanding and assuring that optimal safety and welfare standards for themselves, their clients, and their animal partners are met at all times. HAI Section members acknowledge that 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.

American Psychological Association (APA) Section 13 (Human-Animal Interaction) of Division 17 (Society of Counseling Psychology) is committed to safeguarding the welfare of therapy animals psychologists include in their clinical work. Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) Section members are dedicated to advancing the HAI field and to promoting the documented benefits of AAIs for human well-being including decreased anxiety, decreased feelings of loneliness, empowering self-efficacy (Hart & Yamamoto, 2015). Members of the HAI Section 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 our relationships with animals. We assert that part of acting in accord and harmony with these ethical principles means we value the needs and welfare of our animal partners as we remain committed to the ongoing development and implementation of best practices in animal-assisted intervention.

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 AAIs

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 AAIs (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 AAIs" below), and/or harm to the client (e.g., bitten or otherwise harmed). Therefore, it is critical for practitioners who implement AAIs to safeguard both animal well-being and the welfare of clients during sessions.

The Five Freedoms and AAIs

At a *minimum*, the welfare of therapy animals should be consistent with the Five Freedoms, which means that animals participating in AAIs 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, p. #). 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.

HAI Section members 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 AAIs. 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

HAI Section members 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, HAI Section members will take every possible measure to avoid any possibility of abuse and exploitation of therapy animals. We maintain that the exploitation of therapy animals contradicts our ethical prerogatives, responsibilities, and ultimate goals in conducting clinical work. To act in concordance with our ethical principles, and to support the therapeutic integrity of our work, psychologists must safeguard both client and animal welfare.

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