



*Session #3:  
Building Connection through  
Sentient Relationships:*

Enhancing Safety and Autonomic Regulation  
Through Choice



# *Learning Objectives:*

- 1) Evaluate the role of animal sentience and choice in fostering safety, connection, and autonomic regulation in animal-assisted practices.
- 2) Analyze current practices to determine how animal sentience is aligned with current standards of treatment.



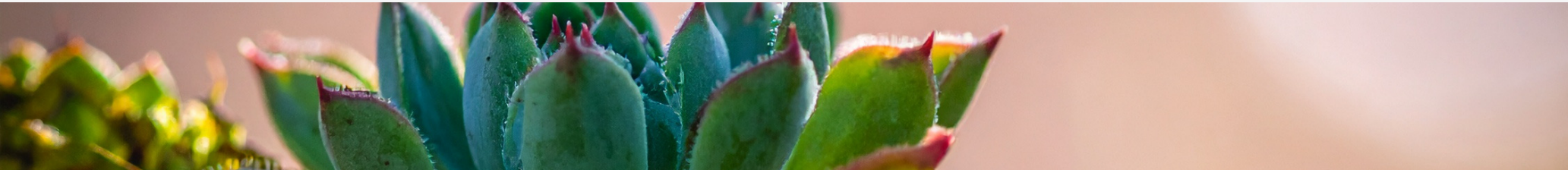
# *Review*

Explored Polyvagal Theory and the current theory behind how the body responds to safety, threat, and danger.

Defined sentience and the role this plays in Animal Assisted Services

Created a neuroceptive menu of safety to support nervous system-based regulation through sentient-based interactions with animals.

Reviewed the Capabilities Approach to analyze what all living beings are entitled to and how to explore this within the context of our work



# *Current Standards in AAS*

Currently, there is very little research on how sentience is at the forefront of animal-assisted services.

In 2020, a position statement was released that discussed the importance of welfare standards and honoring that our therapy animals are sentient beings

Currently, the welfare standards that are upheld in this field are the 5 freedoms and the 6 domains



# Current Standards in AAS

## 5 Freedoms

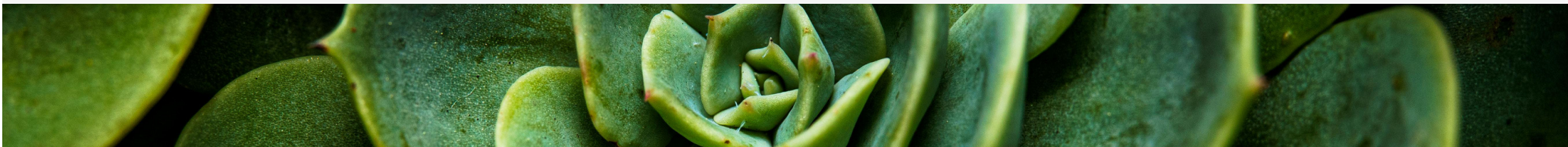
Freedom from:

- hunger/thirst
- discomfort
- pain/injury/disease
- fear/distress
- freedom to express normal behavior



## 5 Domains + 1

- nutrition
- environment
- health
- behavioral interactions
- mental State
- + Human - Animal Interaction



# *Holding Curiosity about Welfare vs. Sentience*



Does welfare look at the bare minimum of what living beings are entitled to?

Child Welfare Laws are not anchored through entitlements and can create long-term toxic stress in a child's life, leading to mental health and physical health challenges later in life (ACES study)

Animal Welfare Laws are insufficient based on current scientific wisdom when viewed through the lens of flourishing rather than just satisfaction during interactions.

Flourishing = sustained well-being + dignity + purpose + agency



# *Sentience Equals Safety*

In this series, we explored why therapy animals must be able to flourish in their work, centering on how their well-being helps clients find autonomic safety in the relationship and environment.

We noticed our own bodily discomfort when viewing uncertain child-animal interactions, and the shift that happens when those interactions reflect care, attunement, and enjoyment.

That same interoceptive awareness can help us sense when flourishing is missing in the moment between a therapy animal and client.





# *Movement towards Sentience*

- Growing shift across the globe in human attitudes and policies toward recognizing sentience of other animals
- Competent integration of robust scientific evidence of animal sentience, communication, and needs from across disciplines
- Responsible practice should operate under the assumption of animal sentience (NY Declaration on Animal Consciousness, 2024) - Taken from the IAHAIO conference slides

# *Sentience Centered Practice*

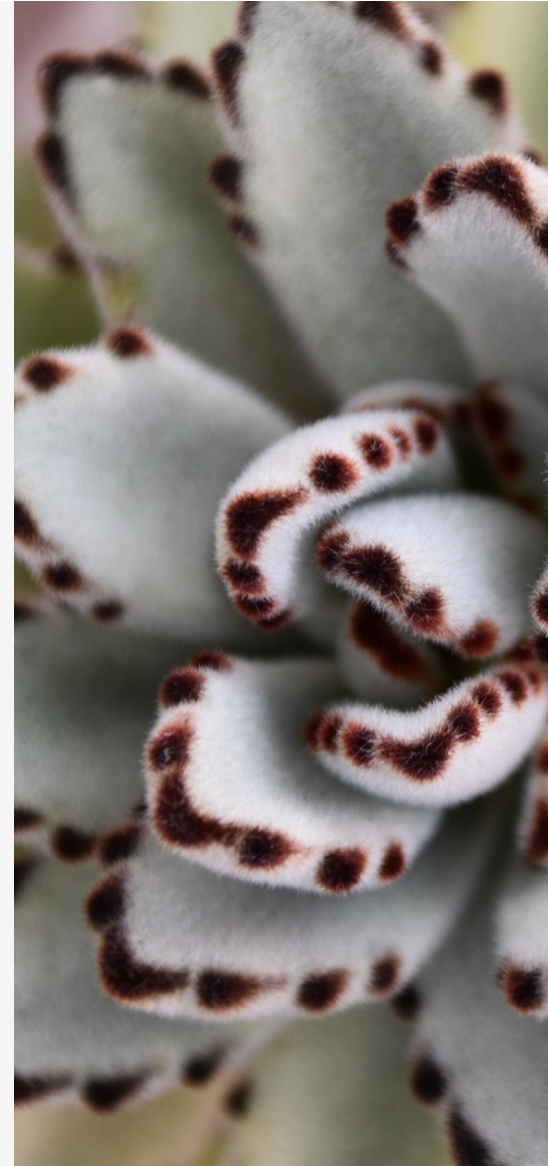
An inclusive relational framework for ethical and moral human-animal interactions (HAI) that recognizes nonhuman animals as sentient beings who experience the world as human animals do, not as tools or property, but whose lived experiences, preferences, and self-determination must be actively considered and respected in human-animal interaction contexts.

SCP progresses practitioners beyond utilitarian and welfare-only models toward a committed approach that fosters interspecies capacities for choice, connection, agency, joy, and flourishing.

As a core competency in ethical animal-assisted services (AAS) and HAI, SCP integrates humane education, trauma-informed practice, and reflexive self-awareness by centering sentience as both a moral foundation and a practical guide to co-created experiences that engage and support each living being.

# *The Declaration of Animal Sentience in AAS*

1. Recognition of Animal Sentience
2. Establishing a Framework for Ethical Relationships
3. Formal Recognition and Protection of Sentient Status
4. Human Responsibility to Ensure Interspecies Well-being
5. Recognition of Animal Agency
6. Beyond Welfare: Toward Flourishing
7. Humane Education and Awareness
8. Cultural and Regional Contexts
9. Commitment to Reflection and Growth



# *The Declaration of Animal Sentience in AAS*

## 1. Recognition of Sentience

Our increasing understanding of the science of sentience leads us to affirm that animals possess the capacity for cognition as well as emotional and perceptual awareness. Animals engaged in AAS are sentient beings with rich emotional and cognitive lives.

## 2. Establishing a Framework for Ethical Relationships

We acknowledge that the human-animal bond in AAS relies upon bi-directionality and the inclusion of animals in our moral considerations. Ethical AAS practice centers the well-being, agency, and capacity for sentience of all involved species.

# *The Declaration Continued....*

## 3. Formal Recognition and Protection of Sentient Status

Animals are not passive tools or merely property; they are active participants in AAS. Their preferences, moods, responses, and choices shape AAS interactions. Organizational policies should recognize the science of sentience and establish animals as living beings rather than non-sentient tools existing solely for the benefit and use of people.

## 4. Human Responsibility to Ensure Interspecies Well-being

True therapeutic partnership occurs when both humans and animals flourish, meaning living a good life with positive experiences, not solely the absence of suffering. In human-animal interactions (HAIs), we have an ethical responsibility to ensure that our work bi-directionally supports and mutually enhances the physical, emotional, and social well-being of animals in all HAI contexts.

# *The Declaration Continued...*

## 5. Recognition of Animal Agency

We advocate for practices that respect and acknowledge animal agency. This entails, amongst other things, providing animals with a safe place to rest, access to food and water, the ability to decline or withdraw from the work (e.g. in case of sickness, sudden onset anxiety, pregnancy, burnout, or repeated behavior that communicates they no longer wish to engage in this work), the ability to engage or assent to work, and continuous stewardship for the animal(s) before, during, and after sessions. Ongoing assessment of animal comfort and stress is essential, as is genuine listening to what they communicate about their willingness to collaborate. The AAS field should apply continuous education and knowledge-building of animal behavior, experience, and communications for sentience-centered practice.



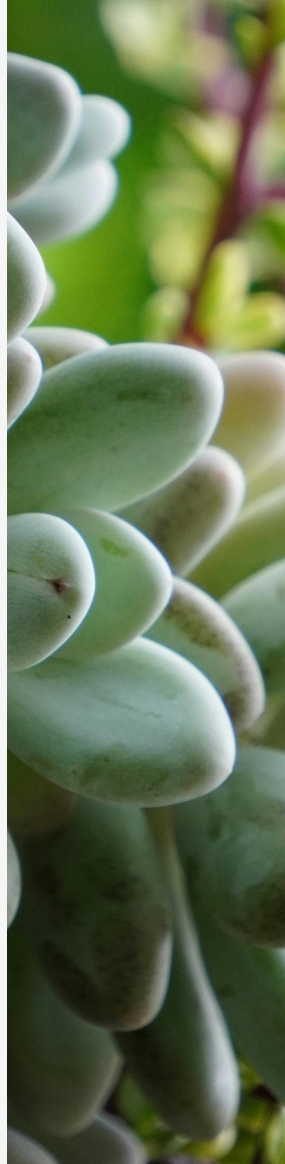
# *The Declaration Continued...*

## 6. Beyond Welfare: Toward Flourishing

We seek to move beyond minimum standards of welfare toward a model of capacity to thrive and flourish. A sentience-centered practice nurtures joy, engagement, and autonomy in the lives of animals. Protecting animals from harm is only the starting point.

## 7. Humane Education and Awareness

We believe in educating AAS clients, institutions, and the public about animal sentience. Ethical human-animal interaction requires shared understanding and transparent communication on how to support and advocate for animals.



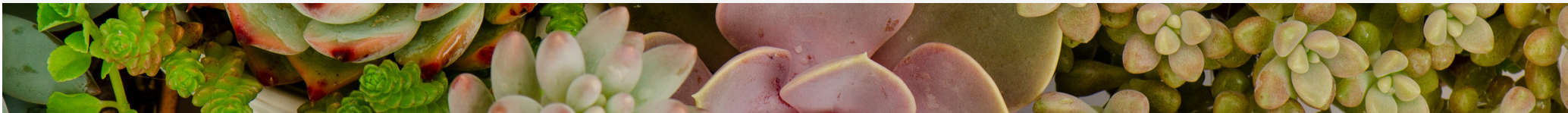
# *The Declaration Continued...*

## 8. Cultural and Regional Contexts

We recognize that understandings of sentience and human-animal relationships vary across cultures and regions. This declaration is offered not as a rigid mandate, but as a shared ethical compass that respects regional values and community needs while advancing animal standing and well-being.

## 9. Commitment to Reflection and Growth

We encourage ongoing reflection, self-assessment, and professional development related to animal sentience. As science and understanding evolve, so too must our practices.



# *Holding Curiosity before/after/ and during Interactions*



- How do I understand my animals' cues and advocate for their sentience moment to moment, before, after, and during interactions with others?
- How do I build consent and choice-based interactions into the work I do as a practitioner or volunteer? Am I creating opportunities for my animal to opt-in or out at any moment?
- How have I built this environment to ensure my animal is flourishing, not just existing in this space?
- What does my animal need/want/desire in this moment? How am I using this knowledge to co-create a meaningful bi-directional interaction?



This is a classic example of how sentience is not being honored and the human need over the non-human animals desires

If this were an interaction you witnessed in your work, how would you intervene?

What happens inside of you when you must be the advocate for this animal? Is that comfortable or uncomfortable?

How do we tell our clients that our animals are saying "No"?

Video from a Therapy Garden (Shelly Fisher)



What is different in this interaction?

What entitlements are present?

What do you notice in yourself as you observe these interactions?



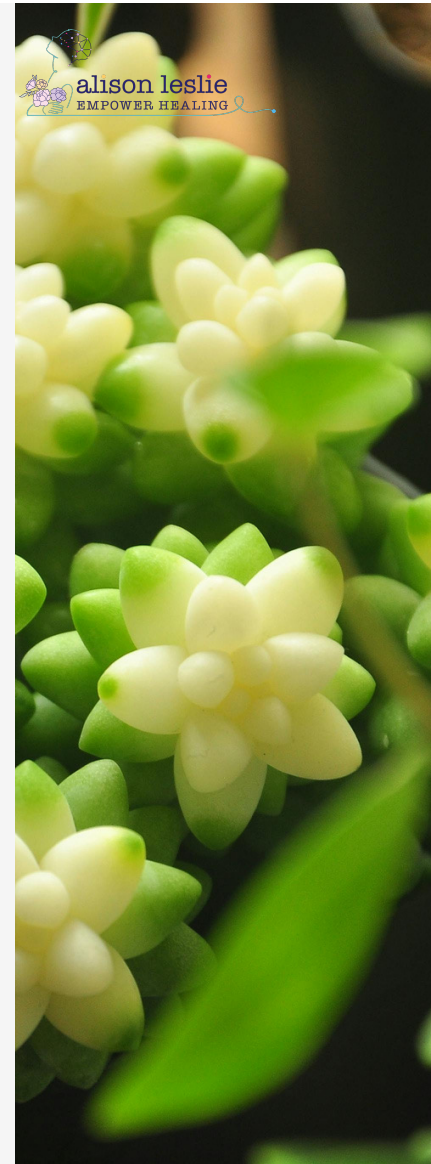
# *Implications for the Field*

Exploring the tension between welfare and sentience can create unease that some are unwilling, consciously or unconsciously, to look at

Challenges current standards to move beyond bare minimum experiences to ensure flourishing in the immediate moments of interaction

Pushes all agencies and programs to revisit existing models that may no longer align with the science of sentience today.

Creates an ongoing commitment to the experience of sentience vs. a noticing and moving on from welfare





## *Potential Outcomes For Clients*

Engaging in a sentient-centered practice supports fostering greater safety and a sense of connection in every interaction.

- This approach enables clients to examine their own behaviors in the presence of another living being, offering a glimpse into what a genuine bi-directional and reciprocal relationship entails, even if it requires a shift in perspective regarding the interaction.
- It generates a ripple effect, paving the way for fresh insights into how we engage with companion animals and our environment in a more ethical and moral manner.

# Collaborators

Philip Tedeschi - University of Denver/GSSW/Institute for Animal Sentience and Protection (Law School)

Shelly Fisher - Founder, Paws To Thrive; Researcher

Emi Parenti - Founder of Patae Academy, Brazil

Sarah Pellizzari - Founder of Southern Colorado Animal Assisted Therapy and Training

Kate Drescher - Humane Education at Vale Mountain School: Law degree in Animal Welfare and Protection

Angela Gizzi - Graduate Fellow at the Institute for Animal Sentience and Protection

Amy Johnson Binder - Researcher, Educator and Practitioner in animal-assisted services, Professional Development Expert, Licensed Professional Counselor, Non-Profit Owner, Dog Trainer

Michele Pich - Trauma-Informed Policing Researcher; Asst Director/Dept Head, Shreiber Family Pet Therapy Program in the Wellness Center; Host, The National Dog Show Therapy Dog Symposium at Rowan University; Former University Lecture

Stacy Mendell, - Founder of Animal Assisted Therapy of the Western Slope

## *Resources:*

- [Declaration Information:](#)



**Institute for Animal  
Sentience and  
Protection (IASP)**

- [Link to Panel discussion on Sentience by our Sentience Working Group](#)  
[youtube.com/watch?v=VcZPmLt\\_\\_FE&feature=youtu.be](https://youtube.com/watch?v=VcZPmLt__FE&feature=youtu.be)

# Thank You!



Stay in Touch for more trainings, consultation groups, and AAS

Insights:

Alison Leslie, LCSW, SEP

[alison@empower-healing.com](mailto:alison@empower-healing.com)

[www.empower-healing.com](http://www.empower-healing.com)



# *Resources*

- Position Statement on Animal Welfare in Animal-Assisted Interventions:  
<https://www.human-animal-interaction.org/human-animal-interaction/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Position-Statement-on-Animal-Welfare.pdf>
- New York Declaration of Animal Consciousness:  
<https://sites.google.com/nyu.edu/nydeclaration/declaration>
- IAHAIO Declaration on Animal Sentience in AAS:  
<https://iahaio.org/2025/12/14/declaration-on-animal-sentience-in-animal-assisted-services/>
- Declaraion on Animal Sentience in AAS:  
<https://instituteforanimalsentienceandprotection.org/>