

Ethical Issues in Animal Assisted Therapy

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ABSTRACT

The influential outcomes of Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) have been greatly acknowledged worldwide. AAT is found to have a broad scope in diverse fields of practice. The complex human-animal relationship which is central to the practice of AAT, however, can throw multiple challenges in the implementation of AAT. Ethics in any therapeutic setting is crucial as it is a way of protecting both the client and the therapist. In AAT, it is more complex since it is not just about the client and the therapist but also about the co-therapist animal. Considering this intricate relationship in AAT, this paper discusses the various ethical issues relevant to the practice of AAT. This knowledge will be important for both health care providers and AAT practitioners for further developing the field in a decent way by offering quality intervention services and valued outcomes.

Keywords: animal-assisted therapy; animal-assisted interventions; human-animal interactions; ethics; animal welfare.

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is a structured intervention directed at meeting the clients' therapeutic needs by incorporating trained therapy animals. AAT has been practiced for years and gaining popularity as an alternative treatment approach. However, most often, owing to the lack of awareness surrounding the practice of AAT many ethical concerns have been raised. The intricate relationship of the triad "client-therapist-animal" also poses several challenges while implementing the therapy. Apart from the process of AAT that affects the clients, ethics that help conduct the moral practice of therapy are also crucial. Therefore, such ethical issues relevant to the AAT are essential to discuss for encouraging the ethical application of animal-assisted therapy worldwide.

The first concern about practicing animal-assisted therapy is the use of the right terminology. Various expressions that are been utilized for working with therapy animals are pet therapy, animal-assisted interventions, animal-assisted activities, animal-assisted education, canine-assisted therapy, and so on. If the practitioner is not aware of the basic difference in these terminologies, then it's quite possible to use the language "AAT" for something which in reality might not reflect the therapy [1]. Appropriate use of the terms is the first prerequisite of this field. Questions are being raised about the credentials of the professionals practicing AAT today. Several times, it has been observed that animals are being incorporated by the practitioners in therapy without adequate training and certification. Even though the practitioner has a degree in healthcare, he/she needs to have at least basic knowledge about human-animal interactions and theories for proceeding with practicing AAT [2]. Training in handling animals is also a

requirement that cannot be overlooked even if the practitioner of AAT himself/herself is not the handler.

Since it is the therapy animal that is the medium for therapeutic change in AAT, selection of the animal is another important prerequisite. Behavioral evaluation as well as physical evaluation by a licensed veterinarian is a must step before considering the animal as a suitable candidate for being a therapy animal [3]. Training is mandatory and crucial for the therapy animal. Paying attention to the training methods is important because any harm done to the animal while training them is unethical as well as detrimental to the therapeutic process. Positive training methods are usually utilized nowadays to protect the well-being of the animal [4]. Socialization and habituation to human interactions are essential aspects of the training for effective communication in therapy [5].

Another significant ethical concern is related to the safety of the clients in AAT. It is a must that informed consent is being taken before the therapy begins. The clients should be well aware of the potential benefits and harms of availing the therapy for their therapeutic needs. Screening for potential fears or phobias of animals, allergies, any traumatic experiences is also essential because these are factors that are important to take an informed decision about whether or not the client is suitable for AAT [6]. Religious and cultural concerns must also be taken into account.

Once the therapy begins, one of the crucial elements is to teach the client the appropriate ways of approaching the animals. This includes how to touch the animal, where not to touch, pet the animal, observe for signs of distress that the animal shows, and so on. This is significant for the protection of both the animal and the client. Many times, it becomes difficult for the client to end the therapy session owing to the attachment one develops with the therapy animal. Providing enough time to process the absence or termination should be considered for the easy transition of the clients [7].

In a therapy session, it might be natural for the therapist to center attention on the client more than on the animal. It is the duty of the therapist to split the attention equally so that well-being and safety are ensured equally for the client and the therapy animal. The instrumentalization of the therapy animal is another aspect that needs serious thought [8]. Looking at the animal like a tool for the therapy session will affect the natural human-animal interactions as well as the safety of the animal will be compromised in the therapeutic environment.

Animal wellbeing is very important for an effective therapy session affecting the therapeutic outcomes [9]. Hence it is imperative to continuously look for symptoms of distress, fatigue, or burnout in the animal before, during, and after the session [10]. Consistent breaks should be provided to reduce stress and fatigue. Availability of water, enough space to rest, access to toileting facilities are the things to be taken care of during therapeutic sessions [2]. Grooming is also an essential component to safeguard the safety of the client and the animal. The “Five Freedoms” of the animal - freedom from hunger and thirst; freedom from discomfort; freedom from pain; freedom from fear; and freedom to express natural behaviour has to be protected throughout [11].

There will still be more ethical concerns to discuss but these are the basics that practitioners should be aware of. Adherence to the moral conduct of the AAT will not only enhance the therapeutic outcomes but will also prove beneficial for the animal’s wellbeing. Recent research also suggests that human contact positively affect animal by improving their endocrine functions [12]. An ideal and ethical animal-assisted therapy environment would be the one where not only the client benefits the most but even the co-therapist is at the peace. The authors urge the practitioners to adhere to the ethics for the sound conduct of AAT which will promote the field at a faster pace.

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