

It's a Dog's Life: Understanding Dog-Assisted Therapy
By Michelle J. S. Richards, Ph.D.

To understand Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT), specifically dog-assisted therapy, it is important to clarify the difference between Companion Dogs, Service Dogs, "Social/Therapy" Dogs, and Therapy Dogs. It will also be useful to understand the types of services working dogs may provide. The benefits and risks will be identified. Research on animal-assisted counseling will be discussed. Finally, you will learn about therapy goals for which a therapy dog may be able to help you?

Types of Working Dogs

Companion Dogs is an alternate term for "pet." They are not technically working dogs. However, they are sometimes confused with other types of working dogs. There are no federal or state laws defining or allowing access to Companion Dogs.

A *Service Dog* is defined by the American with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) as a dog that has been "individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of a person with a disability... [This disability may be a] "mental or physical condition which substantially limits a major life activity." According to the Delta Society, the organization that registers Pet Partners, a service dog can help one care for one's self, perform manual tasks, walk, see, hear, speak, learn, work, epilepsy, and psychiatric conditions. For example, a soldier who is easily startled due to PTSD can benefit from the calm, reassuring presence of a service dog trained to respond when the veteran is triggered. Federal and state laws protect the rights of individuals with disabilities to be accompanied by their trained service animals in taxis, buses, trains, stores, restaurants, doctors' offices, schools, parks, hotels and other public places.

Social/Therapy Dogs are dogs who did not complete the service dog training for variety of reasons (e.g., health, disposition, trainability, or other factors) and are provided to persons with disabilities. Under certain circumstances, they may be designated as a service dog.

Therapy Dogs are not defined by federal laws; however, some states define what qualifies as a therapy dog. The therapy "pet serves the...basic purpose, ... of working in partnership with a professional human therapist to provide compassion and stimulating therapy designed to facilitate human client recovery" (Chandler, 2005; p. 2). Therapy dogs provide services to all people and are not limited to people with disabilities. These dogs are typically the personal pets of their human. There are no laws allowing therapy dogs access to venues where they would typically have been prohibited.

Therapy Dog Services

Therapy dogs can provide two types of services: 1) animal-assisted activities or 2) animal-assisted therapy. *Animal-assisted activities* are when an animal, in this case a dog, makes casual visits to an individual or group of people for a casual "play" date. Typically, there is an informal "meet and greet" between the dog and the human(s). This visit can be repeated. However, it

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should not be construed as "therapy" because there are not treatment goals or plan to assist a person with a particular medical or mental health condition. For example, Rover visits the nursing home on each weekend and allows the residents to spend time with him.

On the other hand, in *animal-assisted therapy* there is an identified client who has a symptom or complaint. The complainant has specific goals in which the therapy dog intervenes, under the direction of the behavioral health service professional who has specialized expertise and for whom animal-assisted therapy is in the scope of practice for his or her profession. The interventions are goal-oriented. Success of the animal-assisted interventions is measured by improvement in the client's physical, social, emotional, cognitive functioning, or some combination of these. For example, Gayle is depressed and has difficulty functioning, her therapy dog helped her achieve her goal to be motivated.

Benefits and Risks

The *benefits* to incorporating a dog into your therapy are that it facilitates the development of the therapeutic bond, personal, social, and skills, relaxation, strengthen self-concept and self-esteem, enhance attention to task, and integration of therapeutic experiences. There is also a "tactile, auditory, visual and olfactory" dimension that may help clients integrate information on a "deeper more meaningful level" (Chandler, 2005, p 8).

There are some potential *risks* to clients using a pet practitioner. These risks can be prevented by the precautions taken and procedures used by the human therapist. These precautions and procedures are addressed in part by the screening and training of the dog "cotherapist" to make sure it has the proper temperament. Therefore, risks to a client would typically be accidental yet possible. These risks may include injury to a client (e.g., due to a scratch or fall). There is also a risk that the therapy client may become attached to the therapy dog. Grief and loss issues may arise and need to be addressed (especially, when the services are terminated). Although, hypoallergenic breeds are chosen, some clients may still be allergic to the therapy animals. A few, clients may be afraid of the therapy pet and may have limited if any experience with pets. They may not want to have a dog around.

Research in Dog-Assisted Therapy

Research on positive human-animal interaction reveals an increase in neurochemicals (endorphin, oxytocin, prolactin, phenylectic acid, and dopamine) associated with a decreased blood pressure in humans and dogs; the stress-related hormone, cortisol decreased in humans (Odendaal, 2000). According to Chandler (2005), "Barker and Dawson (1998) reported a successful use of a single AAT session in the reduction of anxiety with hospitalized psychiatric patients with psychotic disorders, mood disorders, and other disorders. Decreases in depression were demonstrated with AAT only treatment (Mcvarish, 1995; Folsie, Minder, Aycock, & Santana,

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1994). Animal-assisted occupational therapy motivated more inpatient psychiatric patients to participate in group. Of the various groups offered, AAT was the most effective.

Common Dog-Assisted Therapy Goals

Typical goals that therapy may assist you: improve social skills, enhance pleasure, address grief and loss and learn appropriate touch; decrease manipulative behaviors, general anxiety, and abusive behaviors; improve affect, mood, self-esteem, self-worth, reality orientation, cooperation, problems-solving ability, concentration and attention, ability to express feelings, and ability to trust. Ask your therapist if dog-assisted therapy can help you with your goals.

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