



ADULT & CHILD HEALTH School Based Services



Mental Health Moment: Animal Assisted Therapy

As we continue to navigate in a world that is our “new normal” the need for self-care has never been higher. Some of us are beginning the transition back into the office, while others continue to work from home. The isolation of working from home for countless months and now the fears of working alongside co-workers in the office again have changed our perceptions and desires of social interactions. Some companies and schools have turned to animal assisted therapy as a resource for students, staff members, and co-workers.

What is animal assisted therapy?

Animal Assisted Therapy is an alternative approach used in mental health and health care treatment with the assistance of animals. Animal assisted therapy is used as a treatment model to aid, heal, and rehabilitate people as they recover from various health concerns and mental health disorders.

Who can benefit from animal assisted therapy?

- Children while having dental procedures
- People receiving cancer treatment
- People in long-term care facilities
- People with cardiovascular diseases
- People with Dementia and Alzheimer's
- Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- People with anxiety and depression
- People in courtrooms
- Children and staff in the school setting
- Children receiving care in the hospital
- Family and friends visiting patients in hospitals

Types of therapy animals:

While the most common animals used in animal assisted therapies are dogs, cats, horses, mini-horses, rabbits, and birds. The list of animals is not restricted to only those animals. Animals such as, reptiles, guinea pigs, rats, mini pigs, llamas, alpacas, and donkeys have been used in animal assisted therapies, as well.

The animal must be well trained, have a good temperament, and be people friendly.

Risks of animal assisted therapy

The biggest concern is safety and sanitation. Most hospitals and facilities using animal assisted therapies maintain strict rules to ensure that the animals are clean, vaccinated, well-trained, and screened for appropriate behaviors.

Benefits of daily interactions with animals

Emotional and Mental Health:

- Decreased anxiety, stress, and depression
- Reduces feelings of fear, loneliness, and worry
- Increases feelings of social support
- Provides motivation, stimulation, and focus to tasks
- Releases endorphins that produce a calming effect
- Provides an escape and happy distraction

Physical Health:

- Lowers blood pressure
- Improves cardiovascular health
- Slows our breathing patterns
- Decreases/ alleviates perceptions of pain
- Releases the “feel good” hormones- serotonin, prolactin, and oxytocin

Choosing the right pet for you

What to consider before choosing a pet...

- How much outdoor space you have
- How active you are
- How much time you have to dedicate to your pet
- How much money you have to care for your pet: vet bills, food, toys, etc.

What if you can't own your own pet

If owning your own pet is not a realistic option for you right now, don't get discouraged you have options. You can spend time with friends' pets, by walking their dogs, petting their cats, or feeding their rabbits. Volunteering at animal shelters, as dog walkers, playing with the animals, cleaning up, and feeding times. If short term animal care is something you could do online pet sitting or fostering short term animal placements could be for.

Sources:

- Mayo Clinic: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/consumer-health/in-depth/pet-therapy/art-20046342>
- Mental Health Foundation: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/p/pets-and-mental-health>
- UCLA Health: <https://www.uclahealth.org/pac/animal-assisted-therapy>