Aging and Pet Therapy

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Faculty of the Adler Graduate School

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree of Master of Arts in

Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy

By:

Brianne Wolters

April 2014
Abstract

Pet Therapy is the use of animals for the human population for therapeutic purposes. It is specific action between a pet (usually a dog or a cat) and a person that is guided by the owner of the animal in most cases. Pet therapy is usually structured with the animal having a routine visiting time. The interactions can be used to help the person reach a specific goal, whether physically or mentally. Aging is considered to be all of the changes that occur over one’s life. Many things change in the aging process including one’s physical, mental, emotional, financial, and spiritual health. This project discusses how pet therapy can or will be used in the aging process. It also goes beyond the aging population and expands to other populations.
Aging and Pet Therapy

While most pet owners are clear about the immediate joys that come with sharing their lives with companion animals, many remain unaware of the physical and mental health benefits that can also accompany the pleasure of playing with or snuggling up to a furry friend. It is only recently that studies have begun to explore the benefits of the human-animal bond (Robinson, 2014). The American Heart Association linked the ownership of pets, especially dogs, with a reduced risk for heart disease and greater longevity. Robinson, (2014) found that instances of depression and blood pressure are lowered, as well as triglycerides and cholesterol (which indicate heart disease). Pet interaction benefits the elderly by raising their levels of serotonin and dopamine. Patients with a history of heart attacks have pets survive longer. Last but not least, pet owners age 65 and older make 30% fewer visits to their doctor than those without pets when other variables are controlled (Robinson, 2014).

With age, the heart rate becomes slightly slower and your heart might become bigger. Your blood vessels and your arteries also become stiffer, causing your heart to work harder to pump blood through them. This can lead to high blood pressure (hypertension) and other cardiovascular problems.

What is Pet therapy?

Pet therapy builds on the pre-existing human-animal bond. Thanks to this natural relationship, pet therapy can aid progress toward goals in human physical, social, emotional, and cognitive function (Catanzaro, 2003). Pet therapy can be used in many different ways (Giorgi, 2013). Goals of a pet therapy program can be to improve motor skills, independent movement, increasing self-esteem, decrease anxiety, develops social skills, increase activity involvement to
prevent seclusion, and to promote exercise: All these areas can be of concern at some point in time with people that may enter a nursing home or other care facilities.

**The Traditional Nursing Home Residents**

Aging is characterized by a progressive loss of the ability to cope with external challenges whether it is physical, mental or social areas that leads to a condition of frailty, which can precipitate age-associated pathologies (Berry, Alleva, Chiarotti, Ciralli & Terranova, 2012). Since life expectancy in the United States greatly increased in the 20th century, developing specific programs to foster healthy lifestyles in the elderly has become important. Health varies substantially across and within countries. For example, in 1998 life expectancy in Sierra Leone was 37 years and in Japan it was 80 years. Ninety percent of this range, however, is covered by variation across counties within the United States. The range in life expectancy between females born in Stearns County, Minnesota and males born in various counties in South Dakota is 22.5 years and extends to 41.3 years when race specific life expectancy is calculated. (World Health Organization, 1999). This is a significant variation and can impact the traditional nursing home resident. In the elderly, institutionalization has serious implications for an individual’s well-being because of the stress and loneliness caused by separation from the home environment (Berry et al, 2012).

Dementia is considered the most common cause for nursing home placement (NHP). Studies showed the risk increasing by the overwhelming impact of dementia on NHP, most likely caused by the decrease of an individual’s ability to live independently, which is again caused by increasing cognitive impairment and related disabilities in activities of daily living. Institutionalization rates among individuals suffering dementia considerably exceeded those rates
of community-based study (or research) samples (Luppa, Brahler, König, Luck & Riedel-Heller, 2008).

**Benefits**

The beneficial effect of animal company on persons at any age is well known. Increasing emphasis also been placed on the healthy role of animal company on persons affected by both somatic and mental disorders (Mayo Clinic, 2012). Pet therapy plays an important role in psychological, educational and physical rehabilitation, and aims to improve the well-being of patients as a whole and improve their quality of life. The idea of dogs or other animals as co-therapists, with the role of ‘emotional mediator’ and ‘catalyst’ of a social process, dates back to the 1960s and was introduced by the psychiatrist Boris Levinson (Moretti et al., 2011). In the late 1970s, the therapeutic use of pets had lost its experimental connotation and nowadays it follows specific operational protocols. The favorable role of pet therapy has been observed, particularly among elderly. The frequent co-occurrence of cognitive and mood disorders, psychotic and anxiety symptoms make elderly persons especially suitable for treatments based on affective–emotional motivation and psychological stimulation (Moretti et al., 2011).

Patients in pet therapy may experience reduced cardiovascular reactions to stress. This is attributed to a process called “contact comfort.” In this process, the unconditional human-animal bond that forms through touch is thought to induce relaxation (Halm, 2008). Evidence of the physiological effects of pet therapy was found in a study of adult patients hospitalized with heart failure. Researchers credited pet therapy with improving levels of cardiopulmonary function, neuro-hormone levels, and anxiety (Cole, Gawlinski, Kotlerman & Steers, 2007). In the health care setting, animals can facilitate communication (Giorgi, 2013). Their presence encourages interactions among patients, healthcare providers, staff, and visitors. Family members who watch
pet therapy sessions report feeling better after animal visits (Halm, 2008). Pet Therapy has evolved and is now used beyond the scope of the nursing home.

**Residents/Patients with Cancer**

Fewer studies have been done looking at pet therapy for people with cancer than with other conditions such as Alzheimer’s Disease, but those that focused specifically on patients with cancer demonstrated promising result. A study on persons undergoing radiation therapy found that those people who had dog visits rated their health as better than those who did not have dog visits as part of their therapy (Eldridge, 2013). Another study by Elderidge noted that pet therapy during chemotherapy improved depression as well as blood oxygenation (the amount of oxygen carried in the blood). People with Cancer have found that Pet Therapy:

- Decreased their pain and was helpful as a way to decrease the need for pain medication
- Decreased their psychological distress, and
- Decreased their fatigue (Eldridge, 2013)

**Children with Literacy Problems and Special Needs**

When studying the effects of the introduction of assistance dogs on the general welfare of families with children affected by Autism Spectrum Disorder, Burrows et al., (2008) and his colleagues observed that the contribution of these animals extended beyond children’s physical safety to therapeutic and communicative domains. In fact, the integration of assistance dogs resulted in beneficial effects on children’s behavior with decreased anxiety and anger, reduction in the number of emotional outbursts (tantrums), and more manageable bedtime routines. These authors also report an additional sense of security for the parents, especially at night, which improved their quality and quantity of sleep and their sense of independence. In addition, all the members of the family experienced an increase in the social acknowledgment, thanks to the
presence of the assistance dog. In fact, the dog became the focus of attention, alleviating some of the embarrassment and stress felt by the parents and the siblings of the child and helping the whole family to integrate into the community.

**Elderly Patients with Dementia and Other Aging Issues**

Approximately 36 million people worldwide have dementia, and this number is expected to double every 20 years (World Health Organization, 2012). By 2030, the number of people with dementia will rise to 66 million, and by 2050 it will be as high as 115 million (Thies & Bleiler, 2011). Dementia Alzheimer’s Type (DAT) often manifests first as behavioral and psychological symptoms (BPSD), such as verbal and physical aggression (Finkel, Cohen & Costa, 1996). Up to 80% of people with dementia exhibit agitation or aggressive behavior during the course of their illness (Cipriani, Nuti & Vedovello, 2011). These symptoms are usually treated with drugs such as antidepressants, mood stabilizers, anxiolytics, hypnotics, antipsychotics or cholinesterase inhibitors (Enmarker, Hellzen & Olse, 2011). However, these medications often have limited effects on agitation and aggression, harmful side effects and even increase mortality. Because of these risks, there is growing interest in developing non-pharmacological interventions for people with dementia (Ballard, Cummings, & Gauthier, 2009).

In dementia care, non-pharmacological interventions are often used as alternatives or complements to medication. According to the clinical guideline for dementia (National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health (NCCMH, 2007), non-pharmacological interventions should be considered for people with all types and severities of dementia with co-morbid agitation.

An effective non-pharmacological intervention can be as simple as redirecting and refocusing people with dementia. For example, when a caregiver uses distraction to redirect an
agitated patient’s attention to another activity this can decrease the agitation. In pet therapy, increasing their social interaction or initiating enjoyable activities, by ensuring that tasks are simple can lead to the patient enjoyment. In addition, tasks can be broken down into smaller steps (Sadowsky & Galvin, 2012). People with memory issues can take on tasks like caring for a small animal. The benefits of care giving are feelings of independence, security and a feeling of belonging.

Animal-assisted intervention (AAI) is one promising example of non-pharmacological intervention (Hulme, Crocke & Wright, 2010) which is used in several countries worldwide (Palley, O’ Rourke & Niemi, 2010). There are several definitions of Pet Therapy (Williams & Jenkins, 2008), which reflect a diversity of approaches. Dogs are the most commonly used animals. Dog-assisted activity (DAA) and dog-assisted intervention (DAI) are well suited to residents with dementia in nursing homes (Marx, Cohen-Mansfield & Regier, 2010). DAA can be promoted as a group activity for all residents, whereas DAI is an individually goal-oriented structured intervention involving a resident who needs to maintain a specific ability or function of daily living, for instance, brushing his or her hair (Richeson, 2003).

DAI is characterized by an interaction between a resident and a trained animal. It is important that an individual who is trained in this form of therapy handles the animal. To qualify for DAI, the resident person must have a clearly defined goal, such as training to achieve a specific ability (Fine, 2002). Training is always individually tailored to the resident various abilities such as memory, communication and language, and the ability to solve problems will be determined to train the individual. When DAI is used in dementia care, the human-animal bond is used to reduce symptoms and increase social engagement and communication.
Crisis Intervention

After the attack on September 11, 2001, pet-therapy was used to help with crisis intervention and still is today (Gordon, 2013). Animals can help calm down certain situations when people do not want to associate with the traditional therapist or police. Bringing in pets can help relax the situation and make people feel more at ease. Sometimes people under stress do not want to talk about things that have happened in their past, and when an animal can be present it can help them open up and not feel judged. Animals do not judge based on one past. Pet therapy is used in court-rooms as well. People that may be anxious to testify can use pet therapy to calm their nerves. More and more courtrooms are using pets to ease the tension that the whole judicial system can bring to individuals (Bowers, 2013). Sometimes children are also often called to testify and this can be a very scary time for them.

Why Does It Work?

There are several theories that have attempted to explain why pet therapy helps those with physical and mental conditions. Intuitively it seems that relaxation, resulting in buffering the stressors play a role.

Researchers have found a physiological basis for pet therapy and pets’ connections with humans. A study on healthcare professionals who were visited by a pet therapy dog found that those who had time with the dog had a significant decrease in Creatine Kinase (CK) levels in the blood. This "biological" stress reduction was noted with as little as 5 minutes of time spent with the dog. Another study found that AAT decreased catecholamines in the blood.

This is significant because, chemicals in our bodies such as cortisol and the catecholamine epinephrine (adrenaline) are known as stress hormones. These chemical messengers do have a place and a role in the functioning of our bodies. As instigators of the
“fight or flight” response, they are what make us alert if we hear a prowler in the middle of the night, or have to fight off a lion in the jungle. On the other hand, chronic increases in these stress hormones has been linked with heart disease and possibly even cancer, both newly diagnosed and recurrent (Elderidge, 2013).

Considerations

Some of the biggest risks of pet therapy involve safety and sanitation. Animals in pet therapy programs are typically screened for unwanted behavior and general health issues. The animal’s owners and handlers must also undergo training and evaluation to help ensure a positive experience. While uncommon, human injury can occur when unsuitable animals are used. In addition, animals may suffer injury or abuse when handled inappropriately. In some cases, patients may become attached over the animals helping them. This can result in problems with low self-esteem when unrealistic expectations aren’t met. When an animal dies patients may feel intense grief or even guilt since they have become close to the animal.

Though research found pet therapy to be safe even for hospitalized patients, it is important to note a few potential concerns (this is assuming that the pets are approved to provide pet therapy). Potential problems may include:

- **Behavior problems** – Animals – just like people – do not act perfectly all the time, even those who are carefully trained.
- **Allergies** – Some people have allergies to animals.
- **People who are immuno-suppressed** – People who have bone marrow suppression, for example due to chemotherapy, should talk to their oncologist before considering pet therapy.
• **Disease transmission** – There is a small risk that diseases carried by animals may be transmitted to humans. These are known as zoonotic diseases. With animals that are carefully screened, the risk of zoonotic diseases should be small.

• **Fear of animals** – It goes without saying that for people who are frightened by animals such as dogs – pet therapy is just not a good idea.

• **Respect for the animal** – As a final note it is important to think of the creature on the other side of therapy. Animals that are used for therapy should not be exploited or placed in situations that could be uncomfortable or harmful (Cole et al, 2007).

**Early Recollections**

Alfred Adler created a personality theory and approach to counseling so far ahead of his time that many contemporary approaches have "discovered" many of Adler’s fundamental conclusions, often without recognition of his vision and influence. At the same time, some practitioners may view the Adlerian approach as an antiquated model; that is, one having limited utility in contemporary practice. For the basis of this project, “Aging and Pet Therapy” using the theory of social interest in the emphasis of pet therapy and aging seems interlinked (Manaster & Corsini, 1982). Social interest through pet therapy can give individuals a reason to empathize again. They feel independent and give back to not only themselves but to their community.

Adlerian theory, also called Individual Psychology, is a relational psychology which provides an integrative base for cognitive, psychodynamic, systemic perspectives. According to H.L. Ansbacher, a premier Adlerian scholar, Individual Psychology is a holistic, phenomenological, teleological, field-theoretical, and socially oriented approach to human nature and human relationships. This approach is based upon the assumption of the uniqueness, self-consistency, activity, and creativity of the human individual (style of life); an open dynamic
system of motivation (striving for a subjectively conceived goal of belongings and completion); and an innate potentially for social interest (Manaster & Corsini, 1982).

The opportunity for one individual to help another is the one of the sole basis for social interest. Giving can be healthy for the human as the giver, and the animal as receiver. A socially conscientious and able to give person is a mentally healthy person. One of Alfred Adler's therapeutic tasks is for the client to contribute (Corsini, 1979). Just the act of giving can make a person feel better and more worthwhile. Giving can be threatening and difficult, however, for a person with low self-esteem; it is easier to give to an animal than to a person. The Adlerian goal of completion, of feeling a whole (and especially with dementia when one’s cognition and frequently related sense of worth) might be damaged/fragmented pet therapy or just pure animal contact can potentially restore that perceived/felt fragmentation by the feeling of overcoming their lack of inferiority by becoming the superior one over the animal. The feeling of inferiority can be traced by to one’s childhood, not just when a person is suffering from a loss. Early recollections are sought to find meaning in one’s current life by the association of their childhood into their reality at this point in their life.

**Prominence of Objects in Early Recollections.**

Any reference to an object in a person's first remembrance suggests some degree of attention to the object on the part of the observer (Speike, 1990). At the same time, in early recollections, particular objects appear to be more conspicuous than others and assume a function or a place that seems integral to thematic aspects of the memories. Consequently, in the absence of the salient object, an early memory may be incomprehensible or may signal of a life that lost its coherency and meaning. In a first memory, a person may also attend to or interact with an object as it elicits interest from a surrounding environment (Csikszentmihaiyi & Rochberg-
Halton, 1981). In this regard, a prominent object is perceptible to an individual through one or more of the senses and is something of a coherent unity distinguishable from a background (Smith, 1996). It is also possible for an object to be a focus of attention as a significant entity, even though it may not dominate interactions within an early memory. Understanding individual’s early recollections with pets or animals in general can help determine if pet therapy may work for them. If ER contains no memories of pets this would not rule out the correlation. The correlation is about feeling in control, or out of control, those feelings of inferiority. Pet therapy may be the key to overcoming that feeling.

After eliciting an early recollection from an individual, three follow-up questions contribute to understanding object meanings and other interpretive aspects of a memory (Clark, 2002):

1. Is there anything else that you can recall in the memory?
2. What part do you remember most in the memory?
3. How are you feeling at that point? Or what feelings do you remember having then?

Responses to the first question frequently augment or clarify narrative material in a memory. A person's reply to the second question, pertaining to the most vivid part of the remembrance, usually suggests the central or focal theme of the recollection. The third question relates to an individual's emotional reactions to the most vivid aspect of the memory (Clark, 2002).

Eden Alternative

Two dogs and four cats roam the halls at will. Three bunnies live on the units. Most residents have pet birds in their rooms. Plants are everywhere. A regularly scheduled daycare
program engages children of staff and others in the community. Home-schoolers, Cub Scouts, and Brownies stop by often to visit.

The Eden Alternative has grown in size, scope and complexity since its inception in 1992. What began as an effort to improve quality of life for residents in a single nursing home has emerged as a worldwide movement to reform the structures and practices of long-term care as a whole. The importance of the Eden Alternative can be found in three of its most enduring characteristics. First, the Eden Alternative is founded on 10 principles. These ideas are the purest expression of what Eden is. They do not change. The techniques available to those who wish to pursue these principles, on the other hand, continue to evolve (Brown University Long-Term Care Quality Letter, 1995).

**Ten principles of the Eden Alternative.**

1. Assume that loneliness, helplessness, and boredom account for the bulk of the suffering in the typical nursing home.

2. Surrender the institutional point of view and adopt the Human Habitat model, which makes pets, plants, and children integral to nursing home life.

3. Provide easy access to companionship by promoting close and continuing contact between the elements of the Human Habitat and nursing home residents.

4. Provide daily opportunities to give as well as receive care.

5. Imbue daily life with variety and spontaneity by creating an environment where unexpected and unpredictable interactions and happenings can take place.

6. De-emphasize the programmed activities approach to life.

7. De-emphasize the role of prescription drugs in the residents’ daily life, and commit these resources to the maintenance and growth of the Human Habitat.
8. De-emphasize top-down bureaucratic authority, and seek instead to place the maximum possible decision making authority in the hands of those closest to the residents.

9. Understand that "Edenizing" is a process, not a program, and that the Human Habitat, once created, should be helped to grow and develop like any other living thing.

10. Believe that leadership supporting quality of life is the lifeblood of the "Edenizing" process, and for it there is no substitute. (Brown University Long-Term Care Quality Letter, 1995).

Finally, the Eden Alternative has powerful devotion to the art of replication. Innovations in long-term care are valuable only when they can be practiced effectively by many different organizations in many different situations so that a fundamental culture change can be brought about, not merely a new system. Pet therapy is a part of the Eden Alternative and fails to take root in an organization that embraces the philosophy. These failures have offered some of the most valuable lessons of the decade of experience (Bursack, 2011).

Conclusion

Pet therapy is an evolving field. It benefits not only older clients and other demographic groups. Pet therapy with dogs and other animals can use Adler’s holistic approach to understanding of human nature. This project demonstrated the increased awareness of the benefits of pet therapy.
References


http://www.helpguide.org/life/pets.htm


