

Therapeutic Value of the Human Being-Animal Relationship

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Abstract

In this paper the authors try to open a window towards the emotional, psychological and social benefits of a new form of therapy – the zoo-therapy (the therapy intermediated by animals). The strong relationship between men and animals as well as its material advantages are very well known but their impact on the conditions, on the stress decrease, on the prevention of some types of cancer, on the rise of self-esteem or school performance is still little known. The emotional and medical benefits can be successfully obtained in old people, children, chronic patients, or children with autism – even in people who are not the animals' owners. Thanks to this information, farmers can choose new alternatives for their work with the animals, in the treatment of different kinds of diseases and helped by specialists.

Keywords: interaction, responsibility, zoo-therapy, well-being.

1. Introduction

Zoo-therapy as form of therapy can be approached from a double perspective. On one hand, it is, according to Costa-Neto, “the healing of human diseases by use of therapeutic products obtained or ultimately derived from animals”. Animals do, indeed, possess an extremely wide range of therapies that play a significant role in the healing of humans worldwide. The first such practices date back to Hippocrates (the 5th – 4th c. B.C.) [1]. The term ‘zootherapy’ was introduced by the American psychiatrist Boris Levinson in 1964 as a result of trials on communication-deficiency children. The German psychologist Erhard Olbrich from the Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nürnberg showed that there is between humans and animals a social and emotional interaction that leads to a general improvement of the owner's health state. Animal-assisted therapy, generally known in literature as AAT, is the process through which

the therapist introduces, in a person's therapy, a well-trained and socialized animal as therapeutic tool to be used successfully in the physical and mental treatment as well as in the rehabilitation of patients. It is successful particularly when we need to re-establish relationships of trust, relaxation, calming down, and motivation or support for success when failure seems to be imminent. It is little known in Romania where there are a few projects (Asociația GAI, Casa Max) whose results confirm the positive impact of animals on life quality.

The animal species most used in this type of therapy are dogs, horses, rabbits, farm animals, fish, cats, and Guinea pigs.

As a therapeutic technique, it is successful and its results cannot be reached by any other method. The animals used in zootherapy do not need to have any special or extraordinary qualities except for submission, non-aggressiveness, and trustfulness. Their natural tendency to communicate non-verbally with the humans help them be at their best in therapeutic interaction.

Children were the first patients subjected to this new form of therapy (they started to walk to

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follow the animal used in the therapy), but they are not the only animal-assisted category of patients: the patient range is a rather wide one, since it includes severe or chronic depression patients, heart-disease patients, or hypertensive patients - Friedmann, Katcher, Thomas, Linch & Mesent - [2], alcohol-addicted people in rehabilitation, aggressive people, people having undergone disasters and/or lost close relatives, and, last but not least, teenagers that are going through confusion and self-identity crises - Kogan, Granger, Fitchett, Helmer & Young -[2]. These patients thus learn to identify others' needs and to be more open to them, developing positive, responsible relationships [3].

Their relationships with the animals help children to easier decode body language and to understand somebody else's motives and feelings, i.e. they develop empathy. The impact is major not only on behaviour and affectivity (boys thus learn to be nice to animals though social models promote a strong, tough, low-emotion boy/man), but also on their IQ. Contact with animals stimulate, even in infants, the wish to interact with surrounding humans: this is what Eduard O. Wilson from the Harvard University calls biophilia, the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes considered to be central in mental development. Spontaneity engendered by animal interaction makes children do what no TV programme or computer game or plastic toy does [4].

Animals have always been the "partner" humans looked for when they could not talk to anybody, thus establishing very strong emotional connections. Humans need to love and to be loved and valued, but they are sometimes reluctant because they are afraid of getting hurt or of failing. They involve emotionally with great difficulty and are condemned to loneliness. Animals provide a better interaction with the humans because they move and behave intentionally, they are not fluffy toys that provide no affection and do not try to look for children when they hide [5].

If humans are social supports, animals are human-assisted support-substitutes for those who are dissatisfied with certain failed relationships with other humans. Animals do not classify humans as beautiful, ugly, white, black, celebrity, disabled, consecrated, failure, etc.: they treat humans as "wholesome", without any reproach, irony, or pretence.

Zootherapy is a form of therapy guided by specialists whose duty is to ensure both animal health and the patient's health; to test the animal behaviourally (it is known that children or psychic patients can have sudden reactions that can startle the animals); to take care of them – all this bearing in mind the golden rule according to which the human – animal team should inspire trustworthiness. To get good results, zootherapy should be practiced by the animal's trainer to avoid inducing stress and impacting negatively the human – animal relationship. To be "therapeutic", an animal has to learn certain rules of behaviour expected and necessary in the presence of humans [6]: it is very important to enjoy the presence and touch of other humans than its owner.

There are major benefits of the human – animal relationship not only in a special environment such as animal-assisted therapy but in other animal-assisted activities that involve social visits with therapy-trained animals – activities with a well pre-established goal (improving life quality through this special relationship). Animal-assisted therapy has a positive impact on human behaviour and on educational activities on or related to animals: even owning a pet animal warrants longevity (since humans want to live longer to take care of their animals).

The presence of a pet as well as its impact on human health is supported by more and more specialists in the field of psychology and psychiatry and even animal owners claim there have been major improvements in their lives once they brought an animal in their house.

2. Types of Animal-Assisted Therapy

2. 1. Horse Therapy

Horses are chosen for children horse-therapy since they have an affinity for each other: horses are good imitators of children's emotions. Thus, to get expected results, a child needs to change his/her behaviour. Horses have been used in Europe as therapy animals in psychiatric patients ever since 1700 [6].

It is difficult to believe that riding a horse can improve in a patient not only motor abilities but also verbal (apraxia) and attention focussing (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) abilities. These patients have a very high stress level and this is why animal therapy, through its activities and communication, help reducing it and, implicitly, increase self-control. The best horses to

be used in animal therapy are at least one year old and are very tender [7].

Equestrian therapy or hippo therapy is a form of assisted horse riding improving physical, psychological, and social functioning of a patient and that supports muscle tonus increase, flexibility, balance coordination, blood circulation, respiration, and posture. The best suited horse breeds are large horses (not ponies) that maintain and mimic normal human walk [8].

In Western European countries, horse therapy is recommended mainly to children with cerebral motor issues and with multiple sclerosis, but also in the therapy of less serious conditions such as behavioural issues and communication and character disorders. Such subjects are initially expected to establish a contact with the animal, to accept the mobility situation, to adapt, and then to take responsibility.

Horse-mediated learning is a special learning method developed by Franklin Levinson for children with emotional disorders. This form of therapy helps children learn more about themselves and about other people (the persons taking care of them). It involves nothing about horse care or horse riding, but it helps children change some of their thinking pattern [9].

Little patients turn calmer by just being close to the horse: they thus stop focusing on past or negative events and live positive experiences. This calmness and quiet, once internalised, can be later on extended to human relationships, as well [10].

A horse, through its nature, helps humans better control the situations by getting them aware of the action – reaction relationship. But as animal a horse is, however, unpredictable, and so are the situations he engenders, which helps children adapt to the real world, when they need to manage fear and adapt to situations that cannot be controlled.

Horse therapy is recommendable to autistic children or to bipolar disorder children, since horses react as mirrors; horses themselves are captive animals that need to feel secure and are, therefore, very attentive to “captivators”. A horse is always frightened in the presence of an aggressive human who shouts, shows disrespect, or is too authoritarian. It is polite and not firm requests that make it cooperate, since it always needs a leader [11].

2. 2. Dog Therapy

This concept was developed in 1976 by the nurse Elaine Smith who noticed that patient recovery is quicker if he/she interacts with dogs. It was at the same time that cat, rabbit, bird, and fish therapy were initiated.

Dogs are the animals the most sued in zootherapy since they are obedient and they can be trained to feel certain anomalies in humans’ health state: they can detect and interpret certain chemical reactions occurring in the human body and that can endanger the life of the latter. Dogs can understand pretty quickly what their owners want from them and, most important, they remember what their owners expect from them.

As animals specially trained for therapy, dogs can alert in due time about the imminence of a stroke or of an epilepsy seizure. The benefits are huge no matter the breed or the size in low blood pressure, stress level, or anxiety. Their main role is to let people around them to touch them and to enjoy their presence despite the fact that children sometimes exaggerate or are clumsy; dogs do not step on children that cry, that pull them by the fur or by the tail: all they wish is to see the humans around them smile. Dogs are recommended in emotional blockage and in developing human relationship in sexually-abused children.

2. 3. Cat Therapy

Cats are the animals most appreciated in animal therapy since they can feel when somebody is sick and they detect negative energy. Purr is an innate instinct expressing pleasure and allowing self-defence and self-healing. In humans, purr impacts healing and bone development having an impact similar to ultra-sound.

Cats are successfully used in reducing pain by simply setting them on the painful spot. They are efficient in character disorder children to teach them responsibility and independence. Insomnia and heart conditions are positively impacted by cats’ presence.

As any animals that need care, cats attract the attention of low-esteem people opening new ways of spending time and of entertainment. Caressing a cat’s fur induces calmness and optimism, which is similar to food for the spirit. As a child that is not touched or caressed cannot develop normal, healthy relationships with people around him/her and fails in his/her psychic development, an adult that is not caressed suffers. Unlike humans, cats cannot be charged of unacceptable touching. There are good results in sexually-abused people

that cannot be touched by the therapists; in exchange, the mere presence of a furry animal exchanging touching with them no longer hurts them.

2. 4. Rabbit Therapy

Rabbit therapy is a form of therapy to use when dog therapy is not available because of the lack of space. Rabbits are very clean animals and are, therefore, ideal for immune deficiency patients or patients undergoing chemo-therapy. Living close to a rabbit, children or adults can learn the process of taking care of somebody (if there was no proper parental model). All rabbit breeds provide a unique form of therapy: breeds are chosen depending on the patient's preferences.

2. 5. Dolphin Therapy

Dolphin therapy has been applied since 1978 by the doctor David Nathason. It has been used as stimulus in communication, locomotion, and interaction improvement. There have been surprising results in special needs children and adults in the field of developing motor ability, vocabulary, and focus on goals to reach.

Dolphin-therapy is best suited in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in autistic children, and in children with Longdon Down and hydrocephalus. Practicing certain movements in the water together with the dolphins help the children focus and be attentive for longer periods of time.

3. Conclusions

The close relationship between human and animal has been known since ancient times as is its supportive role in problem-situations. The novelty consists in the scientific basis of this type of relationship, in the animal species recommended in different conditions, in the type of conditions that can be treated with animal therapy together with medicines, and in how the animals should be trained to be turned into a therapy animal.

It is true that animal assisted therapy in its true sense with organisms that accredit therapeutic animals do not exist in Romania, but we could develop programmes to help the farmers through the implementation of animal assisted activities.

The first responsibility of a farmer is to ensure animal health and then to cooperate with educational (schools of all types) and/or health institutions (hospitals of all types) to share the extraordinary effects of the human – animal relationship. The educational role of this type of relationship has been proven in behavioural and character disorders when children could get aware of the positive or negative effects of their behaviour. Once the consequences of their relationship with the animals are internalised, the relationship can be transgressed on other (sometimes deficitary) human relationships.

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