The use of animal assisted therapy in counseling (AAT-C) can increase and enhance therapeutic opportunities through human-animal interaction. With the use of human-animal interactions, therapeutic opportunities are made available to a therapist and client when there is comprehension of the sorts of conditions an animal will place on a relationship with a person. This requires an appreciation for the natural tendencies of animals. A therapy animal that has been properly trained and socialized has learned that it can, for the most part, feel comfortable and safe around humans. But a therapy animal has survival instincts and will not disregard cues from its environment that help it thrive and survive. A therapy animal will signal with positive behaviors that it perceives someone as safe and potentially rewarding; such as, a dog wagging its tail in a relaxed manner and moving toward a person for petting. A therapy animal will also signal with cautionary behaviors that it perceives someone is in distress or is unsafe to be near; such as, a dog moving toward someone who is in distress to offer nurturance, or to move away from someone that might be threatening. A therapy animal may ignore stimuli that it perceives to have no reward and is capable of choosing one object over another based on its perception of which stimulus offers the greatest reward. If a therapy animal perceives a human’s presentation as uncomfortable, it may choose to not approach a human, to not cooperate with a human, or to demonstrate signs of distress around a human. For example, if a client is speaking in an angry tone of voice, a therapy dog may hesitate to approach the client. Or if a client runs directly toward a therapy horse, the horse is likely to run away from the client. And if one client holds a dog treat and another client does not, the therapy dog is most likely going to choose to interact with the client holding the dog treat. Animals can also retain memories of past events based on the perceived thrive or survive value of the event. For instance, in a small group session where clients spend a few minutes first playing fetch with a therapy dog, the dog may prefer to bring a ball to one client for play instead of another because the dog remembers that one of those persons frequently teased the dog by only pretending to throw the ball instead of actually throwing the ball for the dog each time so it could retrieve it. An ability to learn and recall the reward value of specific environmental stimuli or, as in the previous case, the actions of specific people is what allows animals to thrive and survive. So because of thrive and survive instincts therapy animals can place conditions on a relationship with a client. But the conditions placed by a therapy animal on its relationship with a client are usually confined to that relational experience, in that an animal does not typically judge a person outside the parameters of its interactions or observations with that person, unless of course that person reminds the animal of someone else or the animal has generalized previous experiences with other people onto the current person with whom it is interacting. A therapy animal does not know that a particular client has a history of failed relationships prior to coming into the therapy animal’s world or is in a detention center because of acts of vandalism or feels abandoned by a parent after a divorce or is a victim of child sexual abuse or whatever precipitating event or events that brought the client to therapy. The animal knows and cares about the client only in relationship to it and its environment. If a therapy animal consistently experiences a client to behave in a manner the animal understands to be comfortable, rewarding, and nonthreatening, then it is likely to behave in positive ways toward the client. A client who consistently offers no reward value might be ignored by a therapy animal. When a therapy animal experiences a client to behave in a manner that makes the animal uncomfortable, then it will act distressed around or avoid the client. Though a therapy animal has a memory for negative events it experiences, relationships with a therapy animal can still be formed or repaired if a client commits to consistently providing the therapy animal with sufficient evidence that it is worthwhile to interact with the client, that is, many positively rewarding experiences in the absence of negative experiences.

An animal’s limited capacity to judge a client beyond its experience with or observation of a client is what allows a client and therapy animal relationship to form much more quickly than a client and human therapist relationship. Clients may be hindered in the relationship-building process with a human therapist because they typically understand that humans tend to negatively judge or be critical of other humans based on things they have done or experienced in their past and may fear that a human therapist will do likewise. Clients can be very anxious about how a human therapist’s judgment of them may negatively impact them, so clients may be slower to form a trusting relationship with a human than with a therapy animal. Forming a relationship with a therapy animal is much simpler than forming a relationship with a human. While the expectations of the therapy animal must be met in order for a client to form a positive relationship with the animal—expectations of safety,
comfort, and reward—these expectations are much easier for a client to comply with than the complexity of expectations that humans have for other humans. The client–therapy animal relationship is more easily formed and maintained when compared with the more complex client–human therapist relationship. And because it is fairly easy for clients to understand that therapy animals do not intentionally respond to clients in ways that may minimize, embarrass, humiliate, or otherwise threaten them emotionally, clients are likely to be more authentic in their relationship with a therapy animal. Experiences of success while being authentic with a therapy animal contribute to clients’ understanding of how this is beneficial and facilitates them being more authentic with the human therapist as well. A therapist can use the dynamics of the client–therapy animal relationship to assist clients in generalizing relational experiences to other events, such as contributing to the formation of a strong therapeutic alliance between the client and the human therapist, interacting more positively with other humans, and facing other life challenges.

Given that clients may more closely associate with and relate to a therapy animal than a human therapist, at least in the earlier stages of the therapeutic process, this connection between client and therapy animal may facilitate conditions that foster client recovery. Clients’ connection with the therapy animal may contribute to a warmer and safer atmosphere for the clients. They may experience the therapy animal as a support mechanism during sessions, feeling comforted by the animal’s presence or from touching or holding the animal. Clients may experience quicker and deeper trust for the human therapist seeing how the therapy animal and human therapist interact. The therapy animal can be an additional mechanism to convey the human therapist’s empathy for clients, especially when the human therapist reflects the interactions between clients and the therapy animal. It is of primary importance that human therapists establish rapport and convey empathy for clients to form a therapeutic relationship. This therapeutic relationship is necessary for client recovery to occur. A therapy animal can enhance the establishment and continuation of a therapeutic relationship between clients and the human therapist. The incorporation of a therapy animal into a counseling session should not serve as an excuse for failing to foster a close, caring relationship between a human therapist and clients. The relationship between the therapy animal and clients is not meant to be a substitute for the relationship between clients and the human therapist. In fact, it is meant to do the opposite—to facilitate the relationship between clients and the human therapist. As clients observe the nurturing relationship between the counselor and the therapy animal, their fondness for the animal spills over to the counselor.

The greatest assets a therapy animal brings to a counseling session that make it such a powerful therapeutic agent for change for human clients are: 1) its ability and desire to give and receive emotional and physical nurturance with humans; and, 2) its ability to perceive and desire to signal emotional experiences of humans, especially those emotional experiences of humans that are not outwardly observable. It is incredibly useful the way a therapy animal can perceive and signal non-visible emotional distress in humans, making the invisible available for consideration and processing in the session.

The more capable a counselor is at recognizing therapeutic opportunities and facilitating processing of psychodynamics of human–animal interactions, the more therapeutic benefit can be had from including an animal in a counseling session. Counselors should apply the observation and processing skills they use in non-AAT sessions to AAT-C sessions by additionally acknowledging the impact that human–animal interactions have on clients, therapy animals, the counselor, and the therapeutic environment. To further understanding of how human-animal interaction can be effectively utilized to benefit clients, I will now present a theory I developed in the spring of 2015 designed to guide the practice of animal assisted counseling and psychotherapy; I call it Human-Animal Relational Theory (HART).

**Human-Animal Relational Theory**

We know from scientific research that all mammals, both humans and animals, share similar psychophysiological systems: a social response system and a stress response system. These two systems can be activated at different times during human-animal interaction. During animal-assisted therapy, therapy animals may provide service in the role of nurturer via activation of their social response system, which is involved in positive relational activity, for example, approaching or making positive physical contact with a client or therapist. This type of engagement may, in turn, activate the social response system of the client or therapist and this gives rise in the client or therapist of hormones associated with a sense of wellbeing, for example, oxytocin, dopamine, and endorphins. Likewise, the client or therapist may serve this same role of nurturer for the therapy animal. Therapy animals may also provide service in the role of emotional distress detector via activation of their stress response system, which is involved in signaling their perception of a stressor presented by a person, another animal, or in the environment. Activation of the stress response system means there is an increase in production of hormones such as cortisol, adrenalin or aldosterone. A therapy animal will communicate via body
language or vocalizations their perception of a stressor, including their perception that a person is stressed or anxious, and so forth. These alerting signals from the animal assist the client and therapist in determining that something needs to be attended and explored, thus encouraging introspection followed by emotional and behavioral change by a client or therapist so that the animal may feel safer and more comfortable. The roles a therapy animal may serve as nurturer, via activation of the social response system, and as emotional distress detector, via activation of the stress response system, are fundamental to understanding the impact of human-animal interaction and its potential therapeutic benefits. A therapy animal’s service in the roles of nurturer and emotional distress detector during a counseling session are fundamental to ideas presented in Human-Animal Relational Theory.

Human-Animal Relational Theory (HART) is a set of constructs I designed to explain the value of therapeutic process and resulting therapeutic impact of human-animal interaction. The practice of Human-Animal Relational Theory is referred to as Human-Animal Relational Therapy. Here I shall describe theoretical constructs and practice concepts of HART. I begin with the idea that, when a therapy animal is present during a therapy session the people and animals involved in the session are relating to one another, and we can observe that a series of human-animal relational moments occur (RMs). These can be between the animal and client, or between the animal and therapist, or between all three at the same time. HART assigns greater value to the more significant human-animal relational moments (SHARMs) that occur during human-animal interaction, along with effective processing of those moments by a client and a therapist. The processing of a significant human-animal relational moment (SHARM) is what I call human-animal relational processing (HARP). The more effective the processing is of a SHARM by a therapist and/or a client, the greater therapeutic impact is likely to be obtained. Effective HARP can be accomplished individually and silently by a therapist or a client (internal processing = I-HARP), or can occur with a therapist and a client processing out loud and together (external processing = E-HARP). Both I-HARP and E-HARP may occur regarding a human-animal interaction. I encourage a counselor to facilitate E-HARP when deemed appropriate to aid a client’s comprehension of how a human-animal interaction that occurred may reveal something of value to the client. The degree of human-animal relational therapeutic impact (HARTI) is dependent upon the recognition of a SHARM by a therapist or client, along with the effectiveness of the processing of that SHARM, individually and/or together. Sometimes the client, and not the therapist, is the first to recognize a SHARM during human-animal interaction. But most of the time, especially in the early phases of therapy, the therapist is first to recognize a SHARM, because of experience and knowledge. Processing is the action of going forward to enact change or make progress. The action of going forward in a counseling session can involve increased insight, enhanced awareness, furthered understanding, and emotional and behavioral changes. When a SHARM occurs and a person consciously processes that moment, individually and/or together with someone else, the consideration is in regard to what the human-animal interaction may reveal for or about the person with whom the animal is relating. Any new insight or awareness facilitated by this revelation is moving the client forward.

I chose the terms “relating” and “relational” as descriptors in HART because I believe they best represent the social dynamic that occurs in therapeutic human-animal interaction. Relating involves bringing into or establishing association, connection, or relation with some other being. Relational is a feeling of being close or connected to another being. SHARMs represent impactful events between a person and animal, an animal with which that person feels a connection or desires to feel a connection. Feelings of connection and desires for connection can result in either nurturing or challenging moments of interaction. Someone who wants a dog to bring a ball back after the person throws the ball may feel rejected if the dog takes the ball to someone else. Someone grooming a horse that refuses to lift its hoof for cleaning may feel frustrated by the horse’s lack of cooperation. Someone who has a cat snuggling in the lap may feel comforted. Both nurturing and challenging relational moments can assist conscious and unconscious motivational forces of the client, originating from past or present experiences, to be presented in the here and now, thus providing opportunity for therapist and client to process these constructively. Each of the examples just described reflect actual cases. When the adolescent felt rejection because my dog Rusty did not bring the ball back to him this provided opportunity to process his feelings in the moment with me as his therapist and for him to gain insight on these same feelings that were present in relationship with his family members. The adolescent who felt frustrated by the horse’s lack of cooperation immediately recognized the situation was similar to the one she presents to her mother and declared, “Now I know what I put my mother through!” From her internal processing of this experience with the horse, the adolescent gained significant new insight and became motivated to change her problematic behavior at home; within one week she and her mother both reported the adolescent was extremely more cooperative and pleasant. The adolescent who felt comforted by my cat Snowflake in her lap processed with me, her therapist, how it was the most relaxed she had been in a long time and elaborated on her anxiety providing opportunity for her to gain important insight.
I believe human-animal interaction can be more impactful, and thus more therapeutic, if a social connection or even a desire for social connection with the animal is present. When animal-assisted therapy is applied in counseling (AAT-C) it is possible that the people and animal involved with one another can form a sympathetic association, that is, caring about each other’s emotional welfare. This is why it is important the therapeutic environment allows for social relatedness to occur between client and therapy animal. The animal should not just be considered an object for interaction, as this limits the potential benefit that may be gained. A therapist must appreciate the animal as a social being and social stimulus, honoring the contribution the animal may make to the psychodynamics of therapy.

The values in my simple, descriptive HART formula for studying and practicing human animal interaction, SHARM + HARP = HARTI, are subjective values. First, there must be recognition that a significant human-animal relational moment (SHARM) has occurred. Many human-animal relational moments are likely to be presented during a session, thus a therapist or a client must discern which human-animal relational moments hold significance for potential benefit. Once a SHARM has been recognized it must be processed to be effective. As mentioned, this processing can be done internally by either the therapist or the client, and/or it can be done externally with therapist-client interactive dialogue. How effectively a SHARM is processed determines the therapeutic impact that can be had from that human-animal relational moment; this is called HARTI – human-animal relational therapeutic impact. While the values of the formula are subjective, one could suppose the more significant the moment (SHARM) is in combination with the more effective the processing (HARP), then the greater the impact of these two values combined is likely to be thus, the greater the HARTI.

The HART formula may be used in a qualitative manner to determine efficacy of AAT-C intervention.

When a SHARM is processed externally, that is, using interactive dialogue between therapist and client, the observed or potential therapeutic impact may become very apparent to both client and therapist. When a SHARM is processed internally, that is, via a private dialogue within either the therapist or client, the therapeutic impact may not be apparent in the moment to both the therapist and the client, but may be very useful in benefitting the client, nonetheless. Consider the following examples. A therapy dog moves from a resting position during a counseling session to an alert position near the client signaling something about the client needs attention. A counselor may facilitate an external dialogue with a client about the observation of the dog’s behavior in wondering aloud what it could mean. During this external process the client might reveal he/she became anxious about something just prior to the dog’s shift in position, when the dog directed attention toward the client. Through continued interactive processing of the observed SHARM the potential impact may become very apparent to both client and therapist. In contrast, internal processing is not shared in the moment but can still be beneficial. For example, a therapist may observe a therapy horse shy away from a particular client and internally process or privately speculate this might reflect the client has a distressed emotional state. But a therapist may choose to withhold this information from the client in the moment, while keeping it in mind during succeeding human-animal interactions. The reason a therapist might withhold the awareness from the client in the moment would be unique to the assessed needs of the client. For example, perhaps a therapist is waiting to see if sometime during the session the client notices for himself/herself how the horse is behaving toward him/her as a determinant of the client’s emotion-recognition ability. Another instance of how internal processing alone may benefit a client would be when a client experiences a friendly greeting from a therapy dog and internally processes that it feels good that the dog likes the client, thus the client feels likeable or worthy.

When facilitating human-animal interaction we must also consider the client’s capacity or readiness for insight as a variable in determining therapeutic impact. Additionally, therapeutic impact may be difficult to measure because of its nature. Therapeutic impact may be immediate or delayed and it may be obvious or less obvious. Therapeutic impact may not be stationary, but rather increase (progression) or decrease (regression) across time. Or, the impact of therapy may present only in unique circumstances. But of course the client’s capacity or readiness for insight as well as the many variations of therapeutic impact are the same issues confronted whether or not therapy involves human-animal interaction.

Now, I will be the first to admit that human-animal interaction can still be therapeutic even if a therapist and client never recognize or process significant human-animal relational moments. We know from past researchers that just a few minutes visit with a therapy dog can have a great deal of positive impact on human participants, such as, calming, uplifting mood, increasing positive social connection and so forth, this being accomplished through the natural physiological changes that occur from positive human-animal interaction. What HART provides is an approach for increasing the potential benefits that human-animal interaction provides. After years of practicing AAT-C and providing supervision for my graduate students who practice AAT-C it became much clearer as to the significant contribution the therapy animal made to the relational dynamics of the counseling session. I developed HART in an attempt to convey how much more therapeutic impact can be gained during an AAT-C session by consciously attending to and processing the social-relational dynamics contributed by a
therapy animal. By understanding that human-animal interaction involves the occurrence of a complex series of human-animal relational moments, one can then examine these relational moments, identify those of greater significance or relevance to the client’s state or well-being, and discern meaningfulness for the client of those relational moments. This involves describing and processing observed human-animal relational dynamics and how they reflect something significant for the client. The constructs of HART – that of SHARM, HARP and HARTI – were designed in an effort to help researchers, practitioners and beneficiaries of human-animal interaction appreciate the tremendous amount of therapeutic opportunity presented when animals participate in therapy. HART recognizes the value of a therapy animal as a social-relational being whose participation may significantly impact the relational dynamics of therapy, giving rise to potentially greater therapeutic gain.

The descriptive formula SHARM + HARP = HARTI may be enacted several times during a therapy session, depending upon how many SHARMS are recognized and processed. However, a therapist must not choose quantity over quality. One must remember, it is not the number of SHARMs that are recognized during a session that determines therapeutic impact (HARTI). Rather, it is how effective the processing (HARP) is performed related to a SHARM that determines therapeutic impact. The processing (HARP) of a SHARM gives personal meaning and relevance to the event (SHARM). Without effective HARP, the meaning and relevance of a SHARM may be missed or quickly forgotten. The more effective HARP is regarding a SHARM, then the more HARTI is gained for the session. I have enacted the formula only once during a session and found it to be a very powerful session based on the amount of insight provided for the client. In this case, the recognition of just one SHARM alone resulted in a full session of HARP, and the therapeutic impact (HARTI) or gain for the client was transforming. However, the formula can be applied more than once during a session if therapeutic opportunity is presented.

The art of processing is a standard skill that is required learning in counselor training programs. And the level of this skill increases with practice, in that, the more experienced counselor is often a more effective processor with a client. To be an effective processor, a counselor must keep in mind the presenting concern or concerns of a client relevant to how the client engages as a social being. With this in consideration, counselors attempt to help a client identify conscious and unconscious motivational forces, that is, the psychodynamics that are presented in a therapy session, so these may be reflected to the client in a manner that increases client self-awareness, self-insight, and self-understanding. In-depth client-therapist discussion that follows can lead to additional client insights. The more opportunities presented to identify and process client psychodynamics, the more potential therapeutic gain. Incorporation of human-animal interaction in counseling gives rise to additional social-relational dynamic forces for a therapist and client to identify and process. This is what I mean when I say integrating a therapy animal into a counseling session presents additional therapeutic opportunities. During a therapy session, relational moments with a therapy animal can occur within all dynamic pairings (separately or at the same time, meaning integrated): between client and animal (with therapist observing), between therapist and animal (with client observing), and between therapist and client (with animal observing). During a therapy session, observations are made on how a therapy animal, therapist and client are relating to one another at any given moment and the potential impact of this relating upon all possible relational dynamic pairings. As mentioned earlier, the significance of a relational moment can be identified by a client or a therapist.

A therapist facilitates human-animal interaction and resulting relational moments by bringing a therapy animal into a session. Spontaneous relational moments occur (e.g., dog walking up to client) as well as those that may be more directed by the therapist (e.g., game of fetch between client and dog). A therapist may guide or direct the client or therapy animal in interactions to achieve certain goals, while at the same time keeping in mind the need to allow the client and animal to interact naturally. While the therapist is facilitator of AAT-C, the modality works best if we honor, value, and respect the natural state of the animal and work within those parameters. But, set limits on animal and human behaviors for preservation of safety and welfare of therapy animals and humans engaged in the therapy. The state, attitude, needs, desires, ability or disability of humans and animals must be taken into consideration during AAT-C. Many human-directed activities are not too inconsistent with the natural behaviors of animals. It is not too unnatural or too inhibiting, in many cases, to ask a therapy dog to respond to simple commands such as sit, down, stay, come and walk politely on a leash. In fact, there are a variety of activities a therapy animal, such as a dog, can engage in that are consistent with the natural ability of the animal. Thus, much opportunity with a variety of social activity is available with which to work, i.e., petting, fetch, seek and find, walk on a leash, etc. Similarly with other species of animals many human-directed activities are not too inconsistent with the animal’s innate makeup and thus, do not interfere much with the opportunity for the animal to interact naturally with a client. However, it is important to remember the fewer restrictions placed on an animal’s natural social-relational behavior during therapy, within safe and comfortable limits for humans and animals, the freer the animals and humans are to relate to one
another naturally, and thus greater relational opportunity can be presented for possible therapeutic gain. Human-directed activities are effective in AAT-C, but be mindful of how directed activities may either facilitate or interfere with relational opportunity between client and therapy animal. For example, a therapy dog who strictly adheres to “sit,” “stay” commands in a therapy room, may not feel free to signal emotional distress it perceives in a client, a signal it normally would give for example by perhaps walking over to the client and licking the client’s hand. The key is to not restrict or overly direct a therapy animal’s behavior in such a way that the animal may not provide us with extremely valuable signals about a client that we might otherwise miss.

Facilitating engagement between a therapy animal and a client can be accomplished with or without utilizing additional objects such as treats, toys, or agility challenges. However, treats, toys, or agility challenges can be used to gain the animal’s attention and direct the animal’s interaction. These objects are very helpful when a therapist wishes to have the client engage in command giving or play behavior with a therapy animal as part of the therapy session. However, when these objects are brought into the therapy session these objects will direct the animal’s focus, attention and behavior and to some extent pre-determine the amount and type of the animal’s social engagement. What may be lost in these directed activities, since the animal is otherwise occupied, is the degree to which the animal may sense, reflect or attend to the internal state of the client or the internal state of the therapist. It is likely that more information about internal personal dynamics may be discerned and signaled by the animal when the animal’s attention or behavior is less preoccupied or directed. I rarely bring food treats into my AAT-C sessions. I do not want the dog to be preoccupied with the food treat. I want my dog to interact with me and my clients for social reward, not for food reward. And without the presence of food to distract, my dog’s interactions with myself and my client serve as a valuable mirror reflecting our state of being. The only time I bring food treats into a therapy session is when I determine it would be valuable for a client to experience the reward of a dog complying with obedience or trick commands, which can build confidence and a sense of self-efficacy in a client. In this case the dog is motivated to comply with client commands for want of a food treat, yet the directed human-animal interaction still has great benefit for the client.

In committing an error, a therapist may under-utilize or over-utilize human-animal interaction. In over-utilizing, the therapist over directs human-animal interaction in a manner that does not allow for a significant relational dynamic to occur between the therapy animal and the client. In under-utilizing, the therapist fails to recognize when a significant relational dynamic is actually occurring or has occurred and the therapist misses an opportunity to point out and process that relational moment with a client. Both over-utilization and under-utilization are two sides of the same coin. Both over-utilization and under-utilization can limit therapeutic opportunities in human-animal interaction. They are both symptoms of a therapist under valuing the potential contribution of the therapy animal as a relational being capable of significantly contributing to therapeutic dynamics.

When a therapy animal is present in a session it attends to the social dynamics of all beings present, including other animals and all humans. During a therapy session the animal is not only discerning the client’s emotions and behaviors but also those of the therapist. If a therapist is frustrated with a client, the therapy animal may sense and signal the therapist’s frustration in some manner, such as attending to the therapist in a nurturing way or trying to break the tension up by re-directing attention. This became apparent to one of my graduate students and myself as we viewed a film of her counseling performance with a client and observed the behavior of her dog during the session. The graduate student counselor was confused about why her dog behaved the way it did and asked my opinion as to why the dog ignored the client and focused engagement with her instead. While we watched the film of the session I inquired as to the emotional experience of the graduate student counselor at these moments of working with her client and experiencing the curious behavior of her dog. The graduate student conveyed her frustration with the client’s resistance and how her frustration with the client grew across the session. In hindsight, we could see on the film how the dog’s behavior exactly paralleled the rising frustration in the graduate student counselor. At first the dog kept going over to the counselor’s lap and sniffing her face. When this did not yield a satisfactory result for the dog, it started trotting back and forth between the therapist and the door. With still no satisfactory result, the dog resorted to bringing her toy to the therapist and shoving it in the therapist’s face until she got the therapist to start laughing at the dog’s silly behavior. With the tension release, the atmosphere felt better for the dog and the dog settled down at the therapist’s feet and took a nap. The therapist confirmed she recognized and released her frustration with her client at that moment during the session and relaxed for the remainder of the session. The therapist confirmed that her dog behaved in a similar fashion at home when the therapist experienced frustration or stress while at home, but she had not recognized it in the session with her client. Now the therapist is more aware of her own presentation with her client, thanks to the signals from her dog working as a therapy animal.

If a therapist is feeling insecure or anxious about her/his own performance during a session, a therapy
animal may attend to the therapist in an attempt to calm or reassure the therapist. It may not want to leave the therapist’s side, or it may want to lick the therapist’s hand or face. This was observed on multiple occasions of reviewing film of counseling sessions with my graduate student counselors with confirmation of their internal experience that likely triggered the dog’s behavior toward them. The point I am making here is that a therapy animal may signal relational dynamics in all beings present, often choosing to signal the experience that seems most intense or uncomfortable in either the counselor or the client. This makes the animal’s communication all the more valuable as it assists both the therapist and the client to be more aware of their emotional and behavioral presentation in a session. It also assist therapists to better recognize and regulate their emotional state so that the animal is not distracted by the emotional state of the counselor, and the animal may instead feel freer to attend to the client and communicate how the animal experiences the client’s emotional and behavioral presentation.

A key in correctly interpreting an animal’s communication is to place the animal’s behavior in context within a session. For instance, a therapist or client must attempt to discern if a dog is bringing a client a toy to play with because the dog is merely bored and wants to play, or is the dog trying to lighten the distressed mood of the client. Most of the time we can only guess at what the animal is conveying, but the more familiar you are with the animal you are working with, the more often you will accurately comprehend the animal’s behavior in a session. In observing my animals work, I have learned they have certain patterns they present in relation to others that are consistent with certain moods presented by clients, and these patterns are repeated with different persons with which the animal works. So, the more I work in partnership with a particular animal, the better I get at discerning what the animal is signaling in relation to me or the client with whom I am counseling. The easiest way to discern what the animal may be signaling is to simply ask the client what he or she believes the animal is communicating in relation to what the client is feeling or thinking at that moment and, regardless of whether the client’s speculation about the animal is accurate or not, something of value is usually revealed about the client.

A therapy animal can discern a complex set of social dynamics occurring in an environment, and choose to attend to one or more of these social dynamics based on perceived need to bring the atmosphere, and the beings present in the atmosphere, back to a more comfortable state. Because of this, I believe doing a live public demonstration of animal assisted therapy is a very difficult thing to accomplish. This is because the animal will not just attend to the client’s emotional and behavioral presentation during the demonstration, but will also attend to the therapist, and be simultaneously distracted by everyone in the room who is watching the demonstration. When an animal experiences sensory overload like this, it may just resort to exploratory behavior or calming signals, i.e., sniffing all around the room, or it may try friendly engagement with several persons present. When demonstrating the therapeutic value of human-animal interaction, I prefer to show film clips of role play demonstrations or, with permission of clients, film clips of real animal-assisted therapy sessions. It is impossible to ask an animal to be selective in its focus and attention, thus live demonstrations of AAT-C for public consumption rarely approximate the value of human-animal interaction that occurs in a more private therapy session where fewer beings and distractions are present to draw the animal’s attention.

Human-animal relational dynamics can be quite complex and difficult to identify. If a therapy animal senses that a significant emotional experience occurs in the client and/or therapist, the therapy animal will likely signal the need for this to be attended to or resolved. Furthermore, if this dynamic does not get attended to or resolved in a timely manner (within seconds or sometimes minutes), a therapy animal may make repeated attempts with similar or varied behaviors until the psychodynamic is attended to or resolved. For example, if a client experiences an intensity in emotion, such as greater emotional pain when reflecting upon a memory or fear, a therapy animal is likely to sense the intensity of the client’s experience. The animal may sense this as an olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), visual (see), auditory (hear), or kinesthetic (feel) perception. Animals, such as dogs and horses, have very well developed olfactory systems, much more developed than humans, and this well-developed olfactory system possibly permits these animals to smell emotions through the endocrine secretions perceptible by the animal in the breath, sweat, and urine of humans. Their enhanced olfactory ability suggests why animals can perceive emotions occurring in humans quicker and more efficiently than human observers. Likewise, an animal may taste endocrine secretions by licking the air or the skin of a person. Once an animal perceives emotional intensity, then the animal may choose to alert by demonstrating a signal, such as, a shift in body posture, body language, or with some type of vocalization. The animal may move toward or away from the client, the animal may look toward or away from the client, the animal may demonstrate another type of social signal, calming signal, or displacement signal, and so forth. For example, during one session my cocker spaniel Jesse was lying quietly on the couch snuggled next to my client who was gently petting her. My client had been sharing with me her exhaustion from school and work and her need for self-care, along with her struggle to actually provide herself with that self-care. I asked my client to introspect deeply about why she was

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not able to prioritize giving herself self-care. The client became very quiet and began to introspect. After just a few seconds Jesse sat up quickly, and turned her face toward my client. She then did four quick “calming signals” in a row (that is, behaviors that exhibit the experience of stress or distress) – a look away and look back, an eye blink, lip licking, and a yawn – all of these taking place within a few seconds of each other. She finished by gazing at the client while continuing to sit next to my client. Unfortunately in the moment I missed these initial, very overt calming signals from Jesse that she was sensing strong emotional reactions and I did not recognize them until later when reviewing the video recording of the session. But fortunately for me and the client, when her initial signals went unnoticed in the session Jesse continued to give alerting signals that reflected her perception of distress in the room. As the client sat silently in continued contemplation, teetering on the precipice of resistance versus insight, Jesse leaned heavily against the client’s side, rolled over on to her back staying pressed against the client’s thigh, and then engaged in active wriggling with her little paws flopping in the air, as if to say “come on, get into it, you will feel better, let’s talk about it, it will be okay.” When Jesse did this snuggling roll over against the client’s side, the client smiled at Jesse and made a deep sigh. I commented on the client’s recognition that Jesse was signaling her concern and expressing encouragement for the client. The client nodded and courageously began to explore intense personal concerns while gently rubbing Jesse’s belly and chest. Jesse then settled in quietly enjoying her belly rub. My client reflected upon how difficult it was for her to give herself time and space for self-care because of her fear of performance failure. She felt she had to push herself hard or she would not achieve her goals. This was complicated by the fact that she was experiencing an emotionally unsafe work environment at the time. She came to the realization that the more unsafe she feels, the harder she pushes herself. So, therapy dog Jesse had accurately signaled the client’s emotional distress. Jesse had mirrored the client’s experience of distress by demonstrating alerting signals and persisted with variations in signaling until the client and I acknowledged Jesse’s behavior as signaling that some distress in the client needed attention. I am thankful that Jesse persisted in expressing alerting signals until we noticed she was signaling us. Jesse’s signals reflected the level of distress the client was experiencing during her hesitation (resistance) to introspect and express, and simultaneously Jesse’s signals encouraged the client to decrease her resistance and engage in therapeutic processing. Furthermore, when a client initiates a catharsis the animal often senses the emotional pressure in the client is subsiding and with this sensation the animal usually settles down in a more relaxed posture, which is what Jesse did after the client lowered her resistance and began fully expressing herself while rubbing Jesse’s belly.

The reality that I did not see those initial four alerting signals given by Jesse with the client (the look away and look back, eye blink, lip licking, and yawn) until later while reviewing a film of the session is a demonstration of how difficult it can be sometimes to recognize what a therapy animal may be communicating in the moment with a client. The point here being that in realizing its fuller potential, animal assisted therapy is an advanced and complex form of therapy that provides a therapist and client with numerous and varied cues for processing. But even if cues signaled by the animal are initially missed by a therapist and client, the animal will likely provide additional signals until proper attention is paid by the therapist and client to whatever is causing the animal to feel a need to generate certain social or alerting signals. Even if an animal’s behavior is misinterpreted by the client or therapist, it can still be therapeutic in the way clients imagine what the animal may be feeling or thinking, in that clients project their inner experience onto the behavior of the animal.

To increase potential in recognizing social or alerting signals from a therapy animal you should become familiar with common behavioral signals known to be generated by the species of animal with which you work with in therapy. For instance, a “look away,” “eye blink,” “yawn,” and “lip licking,” by a dog are well known “calming signals” reflecting the experience or perception of the animal of stress and/or distress. Having this knowledge allowed us to recognize that Jesse was giving these common calming signals in relation to perceiving a client’s distress. Additionally, you should be familiar with and pay attention to personality and behavioral traits unique to your animal that help you recognize signals from it about what it may be experiencing from any humans present in a therapy session, as well as signals that may represent the animal itself has a need that wants attending.

*Significant Human-Animal Relational Moments*

We have established that integration of human-animal interaction into therapy provides additional opportunities for therapeutic impact from significant human-animal relational moments (SHARMS) that may occur. It is important to recognize, describe and process these moments to enhance therapeutic impact. In my work as a counselor and supervisor I began to identify and classify SHARMS that can tend to occur in animal-assisted counseling sessions as well as animal-assisted supervision sessions. I present some of my observations here. I do not consider this an exhaustive list of possible SHARM categories, but by presenting these as examples in
the context of when they occurred may provide you with a better understanding of how to identify and process a SHARM and assess the potential therapeutic impact of performing this exercise. The categories I have identified for SHARMs that occurred in either my own or my student counselor’s sessions are: Greeting, Acknowledgment, Speculation, Interpretation, Comfort, Assurance, and Checking In. Remember, different animals have different personalities and may be communicating different things with their behavior. For instance, a particular behavior by one dog may mean something different when enacted by a different dog. It is important to become familiar with your own animal’s behavior. And, it is not always necessary to accurately comprehend what an animal may be communicating because therapeutic benefit may occur when clients project their own meaning onto the animal’s behavior. All of the following vignettes are true stories provided by the therapist who was working with a therapy dog. The client participants in each of the following vignettes verified at some point during the session the significant relational moment with the animal and the resulting therapeutic impact from processing the moment with the therapist.

**Greeting.** For a Greeting SHARM, a therapist facilitates a greeting between client and therapy animal each time the client comes to a session where the animal is present. And, the therapist comments on the animal’s body language in response to the greeting and the possible meaning or value of this body language. This aids in conveying acceptance and warmth to a client. Additionally, a client may get a feeling of “I’m likeable” because the animal, which is authentic in its interactions, wants to engage with the client.

Example Vignette: (provided by therapist Dr. Cynthia Chandler working with her dog Jesse, a buff and white cocker spaniel). The therapist and her therapy dog, Jesse, meet the client in the waiting area. The therapist signals Jesse to say “hello” to the client. Jesse wags her tail and enthusiastically moves to the client, who then smiles and reaches down to pet Jesse. Jesse responds to the petting with a faster tail wag, body wiggle, and a broad smile. The therapist comments on how happy Jesse is to see the client. The therapist, therapy dog and client then walk back to the therapy room together. As the client takes a seat, Jesse walks over to the client and continues to interact with a tail wag and broad smile. The client mirrors the dog’s behavior with a broad smile of her own while petting Jesse. The client comments on how soft Jesse is and how good it feels to touch her fur. The counselor reflects how Jesse enjoys the client petting her and feels comfortable with the client. Jesse then jumps on the couch and lays down next to the client. The counselor inquires as to how it feels to have Jesse relax next to her. The client replies that it is very comforting and relaxes her body posture while petting Jesse. The therapist suggests that Jesse can serve as a support for the client while she shares what is on her mind today. The client begins discussing her presenting concerns, occasionally glancing toward the dog who has settled next to her on the couch. The client continues to pet and glance at Jesse as she presents and works through her concerns.

In the example above, the SHARM was the greeting facilitated by the therapist between the client and animal in the waiting area through to the point where the dog settled next to the client on the couch in the therapy room at the start of the session. The therapist described the SHARM and briefly processed what the SHARM could mean for the client (HARP), to “provide support.” The processing was intended to enhance the therapeutic impact (HARTI) of the therapy animal’s engagement with the client, that is, to encourage the client to share her presenting concerns. In this case, the HARP was quite brief, yet the HARTI was still important and maintained its importance throughout the remainder of the session. The amount of HARP that accompanies a SHARM is not relevant to the type of SHARM, rather it is relevant to the need presented by the client. Thus, HARP can be brief or can be more in-depth, depending upon the need of the client and resulting intended impact (HARTI).

**Acknowledgment.** For an Acknowledgment SHARM, a therapist acknowledges the animal is communicating something of value to the client, the therapist, or about the animal itself. With an Acknowledgment SHARM, a counselor or client acknowledges the animal is communicating something of value that needs to be attended to about a person present in a session or about the animal itself, for example, by the animal’s demonstration of a stress signal, calming signal, or an alerting signal. This is one of the most valuable assets of a therapy animal, to signal when it detects an intense emotional experience of a client, even one that is not apparent from the client’s outward appearance. It is most likely that the animal can see, smell, taste, hear or feel the client’s emotional experience. Since human therapist lack the ability to detect emotion’s masked by a client’s outward appearance, when a therapy animal is present, issues can be addressed in the moment that might not otherwise get attended. Common stress signals, calming signals, or alerting signals in dogs include: lip licking, eye blinking, looking away, yawning, quick and vigorous shake of the body, moving toward or away from the source of distress, quick bark other vocalization, and so forth. Other species have some stress and alerting signals similar to dogs and also some that are different from dogs. What a therapy animal is communicating is highly valuable and when this communication is acknowledged and explored by counselor
and client it may significantly benefit the client. An animal’s contribution should be acknowledged with the animal also, by petting and thanking the animal, thereby reinforcing its tendency to serve this positive role. An untrained therapist working with a therapy animal might find the animal’s stress signaling and alert signaling behavior annoying or distracting and might either ignore or correct the animal. This error not only devalues the animal’s contribution but also discourages the animal from providing these important signals in the future.

Example vignette: (provided by therapist Tiffany Otting working with her dog Wally, a black Schnauzer-Poodle, or Schnoodle). Therapy dog Wally is pacing back and forth between the client and therapist. Then he sits down by the therapist, looks at the client and barks once. From experience the therapist knows this is how Wally signals there is unexpressed anxiety. The therapist thanks Wally for letting the client and therapist know that something needs attending. The therapist explains the reason for Wally’s behavior and asks the client what she thinks. “Wally is letting us know that something needs attending, meaning there is a thought or feeling in a person that may reflect discomfort, anxiety, or something else. Do you know what that might be?” The client then begins to express feelings that were previously suppressed. Wally relaxes on the floor and falls asleep while the client expresses the previously unshared feelings or thoughts that the client believes reflect what the animal was sensing.

In the example above, the SHARM was the dog pacing back and forth and vocalizing the bark. The therapist acknowledged Wally for his contribution to the session and described the SHARM to the client, which involved Wally making the therapist and client aware that something needed attention. The therapist then began to process the SHARM with the client by asking the client what it was that needed attention (HARP). The client agreed that there was indeed something she was holding back, and then began to share the previously suppressed feelings and concerns. By sharing these concerns the client was able to experience some relief and work on her issues, this was the resulting HARTI.

Speculation. For a Speculation SHARM, a therapist may wonder aloud what the animal is thinking or feeling in an effort to make a point that may provide insight or awareness to the client. Or, ask the client to speculate about this to provide a medium through which the client may project the client’s internal experience. The speculation does not have to be accurate to be of value.

Example vignette: (provided by therapist Dr. Cynthia Chandler working with her dog Jesse). Therapy dog Jesse is fast asleep on the floor between the therapist and the client. The therapist and the client notice that Jesse seems to be dreaming. The dog is making small running motions with her feet and vocalizing muffled whimpers and barking softly while she sleeps. The therapist wonders aloud as to whether Jesse may be having a good dream or a bad dream and what Jesse may be feeling. “Jesse seems to be dreaming. I wonder if she is running toward something or away from something. I wonder if she is happy, or I wonder if she is scared.” The client then shares her thoughts, projecting the client’s own desires or fears into the speculation about the dog’s behavior. The therapist and client continued to process eventually exploring how the experience of the dog might resemble the client’s own life experience.

In the example above, the SHARM was Jesse dreaming, making small running motions with her feet and vocalizing muffled whimpers and barking softly while she slept. The therapist pointed out the dog’s behavior to the client, and speculated about what it meant. In responding to the therapist’s inquiry the client projected her own inner experience onto the dreaming behavior of the dog (HARP). As the therapist and client continued to process they explored how the experience of the dog resembled the client’s own life experience, the resulting awareness and insight gained by the client was the HARTI.

Interpretation. For an Interpretation SHARM, a therapist offers an interpretation of the animal’s behavior or ask a client to interpret an animal’s behavior to imply what the animal is experiencing or may be communicating. In this instance we are looking to offer an accurate interpretation of what the animal is likely experiencing or communicating.

Example vignette: (provided by therapist Dr. Cynthia Chandler working with her dog Jesse). At the beginning of the session, therapy dog Jesse jumps up next to the client who is sitting on the couch and greets her by moving her nose up near the client’s face. The client pets Jesse on the head and Jesse lays down on the couch next to the client. After a few moments pass, Jesse jumps down off of the couch and walks a few steps across the room and jumps into the lap of the therapist. The therapist strokes Jesse a few times and then Jesse jumps off her lap and goes back over onto the couch and lays next to the client who gently pets her. In a few moments, Jesse jumps off of the couch and goes back over to the therapist’s lap. After observing the back and forth behavior of Jesse the therapist conveys to the client that Jesse is experiencing a dilemma. “Jesse is conflicted, she wants to be near you, but at the same time she wants to be near me. This seems to be a dilemma for her. I wonder if we can help her with a solution.” The client and therapist then explore Jesse’s desire to be next to both the therapist and client. Together they resolve that since the couch is very big that the therapist would sit on one end, the client would sit on the other end, and Jesse would be able to be in the middle if she
desired. The therapist moves to the couch and Jesse spontaneously jumps between the client and therapist, lays down, and stretches her body out lengthwise so that she is making physical contact with both people at the same time. The therapist ask the client to explore what thoughts and feelings are invoked in the client by Jesse’s conflict and ultimate resolution and relate this to the client’s own life. The client expresses a dilemma she is experiencing and explores her conflicted feelings.

In the example above, the SHARM was Jesse’s conflicted feelings and resulting behavior. The therapist pointed out the dog’s behavior to the client, and interpreted the perceived meaning. The therapist and client processed this and worked together toward a solution of having Jesse lay down between the client and therapist (HARP). As they continued to process, the therapist asks the client to explore a similar situation in the client’s own life regarding conflict and needed resolution. The client’s sharing and exploration of her conflicted feelings about a dilemma in her own life was the HARTI.

**Comfort.** For a Comfort SHARM, a therapist reflects on the animal spontaneously engaging in comforting physical touch with the client such as snuggling, laying in the lap or trying to lick the face or hands. With this SHARM we can convey the animal’s perception of a client’s need for comforting, and/or we can convey the animal’s desire to be comforted by a client with whom the animal feels safe.

Example vignette: (provided by therapist Dr. Cynthia Chandler working with her dog Jesse). Therapy dog Jesse moves to the client and tries to lick the client’s face. She then curls her body around, leans in, and snuggles her back against the client’s side. Jesse then glances back toward the client. The therapist comments on Jesse’s caring behavior and suggest to the client that the animal senses the client is needing comforting or nurturing. “Jesse is caring for you; she senses you need to be comforted right now.” The client then expresses her feelings of discomfort, vulnerability or emotional pain. With the client’s revelations the therapist is able to assist the client through conveyance of empathy and support.

In the example above, the SHARM was Jesse’s nurturing behavior toward the client. The therapist pointed out the dog’s behavior to the client, and explained that Jesse sensed the client needed comforting (HARP). In response to the therapist’s comments the client shared significant distressful feelings she was having. With the client’s presentation of distressful feelings, the therapist was then able to utilize clinical knowledge and skills to assist the client (HARTI).

**Assurance.** With the Assurance SHARM, a client experiences assurance or self-assurance because of how the animal behaves around the client or from a client observing some behavior of the animal. This SHARM involves primary issues of, a) worth, b) self-efficacy, or c) safety. For instance, a therapy animal who chooses to engage with a client contributes to feelings of worth for that client. For instance a horse that willingly follows a person around with no rope attached to the horse assures a client they are worthy or have value to the horse; the client feels “I’m worthy” because the horse wants to follow me. And, it assures the client the horse trust and feels safe with a client. Or, a dog who complies with commands given by a client to perform a trick or command conveys the animal is willing to work with a client, and success with the task boost a client’s confidence and sense of self-efficacy, leaving a client feeling “I’m capable.” Or, a client who feels vulnerable may avoid or resist participation in therapy, but then may choose to participate when in close contact with or accompanied by a therapy animal whose presence increases the client’s sense of safety; the animal’s presence or behavior encourages a client to feel “I’m safe.”

Example Vignette: (provided by therapist Dr. Cynthia Chandler working with her dog Jesse). During the session, therapy dog Jesse, who has been sleeping next to the therapist on one end of a long L-shaped couch, spontaneously arises walks to the other end of the couch where the client is sitting, jumps up on the back of the couch and lays down nestling her body against the back of the client’s neck and head. The therapist reflects, “Jesse feels very comfortable with you. She senses you are a safe person she can trust right now.” The client smiles, gently reaches back to pet Jesse and then shares with the counselor how she feels about herself in regard to a certain situation where she feels unsafe with a person in her life. While speaking the client occasionally reaches back behind her head to stroke Jesse’s soft fur.

In the example above, the SHARM occurred when Jesse moved over to the client and laid down on the back of the couch with her body nestled against the back of the client’s neck and head. The HARP involved the therapist explaining that Jesse felt safe and comfortable with the client, along with the client reaching back to pet Jesse before and during her sharing how she feels about herself in regard to a painful experience. The resulting HARTI was how the client seemed encouraged to express herself because of Jesse’s close contact. As she continued to reach back to touch Jesse, the client was both providing and receiving assurance of comfort and safety. This added emotional support for the client to explore a situation where she felt vulnerable.

Another example Vignette: (provided by therapist Dr. Cynthia Chandler working with her dog Dolly, a red and white cocker spaniel). When I was co-counseling adolescents from the county juvenile detention center utilizing equine assisted counseling, my dog Dolly would often accompany me to the therapy ranch. The
juveniles already knew and trusted Dolly from her many visits with me to the detention center for either recreation or counseling with the adolescents. This trusting relationship with Dolly greatly benefited many adolescents when participating in equine counseling. For example, some of the adolescents would be afraid of the horses and hesitate to interact with them in the corral upon first contact. When the adolescents saw Dolly’s comfort level with the horses the adolescents commented on this and became assured of their own safety and would then stand exactly next to Dolly and risk reaching out to pet the horses.

**Checking In.** For the Checking In SHARM, a therapist points out the animal is checking in to make sure the client is okay or the therapist is okay. Or, the therapist or client can check-in with the animal to see if the animal is okay in order to model care or facilitate sharing. A dog checking in is demonstrated by the animal moving toward a client and sniffing or licking the client’s face or hand. Licking often provides additional olfactory information for some animals if that species has an additional olfactory pathway in the mouth (like dogs and cats); so, licking can increase the animal’s ability to discern emotion through smell. Horses will also sniff and lick, either the air or a person or object, to gather information. And horses can increase their sense of smell by curling their upper lip to capture and hold odor molecules in the upper regions of their long nasal cavity; so this flehmen response by a horse may signal that a horse is checking in, that is gathering information about a client’s emotional state.

Example Vignette: (provided by therapist Mickey White working with his dog Bolt, a blonde Labrador retriever mix). Therapy dog Bolt greets the client in the beginning of the session and eventually lays down on the floor and closes his eyes. Then at one point in the session when the client is feeling emotional Bolt gets up on his own initiative, walks over to the client and nuzzles the client’s hand with his nose. Bolt continues to nudge the client’s hand until the client pets him. The therapist explains that Bolt is checking in to see if the client is okay by Bolt’s expression of concern. “Bolt is checking in with you to see what is going on with you right now, to see if you are okay.” The client then expresses to a deeper level how he is at that moment, what he is feeling and thinking, and how he is managing his state.

In the example above, the SHARM occurred when Bolt walked over to the client and nuzzled the client’s hand until the client pet him. The HARP involved the therapist explaining that Bolt was checking in to see if the client was okay. The client then expressed to a deeper level how he was at that moment, what he was feeling and thinking, and how he was managing. The resulting HARI was increased awareness for the therapist and client about the client’s feelings and thoughts and how he was coping. A SHARM of Checking In is a potent conveyer of empathy and powerful encourager for client expression.

The Checking In behavior most commonly exhibited by my dog Jesse is to get close to a person’s face and smell their breath. She may even try to lick the person’s face to get a better sense of the smell of the emotions of the person. Jesse commonly does this Check-In behavior at two times with a client. She performs this behavior when greeting a person to initially surmise how they are doing, making this also a part of her SHARM of Greeting, and she performs this Check In during a session when she perceives a client is experiencing some emotional need for support, making this behavior part of her SHARM of Checking In. Jesse also licks a person’s face or hand in a show of providing comfort, making this also a part of her SHARM of Comfort. A therapy animal’s behavior may be exhibited for different, but often related, circumstances; such as, in the example just provided where Jesse licks a person’s face or hands both as an instance of checking in and as a show of comfort.

There may be times when more than one SHARM is presented during an episode of human-animal interaction. Any SHARM may initiate internal and/or external processing by a client and/or therapist regarding the meaning or value of that SHARM. I developed HART as a means for assisting counselors and psychotherapist to better understand and recognize the contribution a therapy animal makes to the social-relational dynamics of a therapy session. Attending to social-relational dynamics is a primary medium for helping clients grow, develop, and heal in counseling and psychotherapy. Thus, the additional social-relational dynamics provided by a therapy animal can be of great assistance. The value of HART is more pronounced when working with therapy animals that have interest in social engagement with humans. The more social engagement that occurs then the greater likelihood of occurrence of SHARMS.

**Counseling Supervision and Animal-Assisted Therapy**

There are two applications of supervision related to the practice of counseling where a therapy animal may be involved. One application, is the supervision of animal assisted therapy in counseling (AAT-C), that is, to supervise counselors in training for their practice of animal assisted therapy. In supervision of AAT-C, a therapy animal does not have to be present during the supervision session, but an animal was present during the
counseling session or sessions practiced by the supervisee. The second application is animal assisted supervision of counseling (AAS-C). That is, to have an animal assist a supervisor in the provision of supervision regardless of whether the supervisees practice animal assisted counseling. In AAS-C, a therapy animal is present in the supervision session, but a therapy animal did not have to be present in any of the counseling sessions practiced by the supervisee.

**Supervision of Animal Assisted Therapy in Counseling**

Supervision of animal assisted therapy in counseling (AAT-C) does not require the presence of a therapy animal during the supervision meeting. Supervision of AAT-C means the supervisor is assisting one or more supervisees in their practice of animal-assisted therapy during their counseling sessions that is, counseling sessions where a therapy animal was present. A supervisor assisting supervisees in their practice of AAT-C, should have knowledge, skill and, preferably, experience in the practice of AAT-C. AAT-C is an advanced and complex counseling application. Not only does the counselor need to attend to the presentation of the client, but the counselor must also attend to the presentation of the therapy animal. The supervisor must assist the counselor-in-training to recognize and appropriately act on all useful psychodynamics in a counseling session presented by all social beings, including animals, and to do this in ways that benefit the client. Supervision of AAT-C requires a supervisor highly value the contribution an animal makes to a therapy session because the animal’s presence and social engagement with the counselor and client are often significantly impacting past and present, conscious and unconscious, relational and motivational forces of the client. The greater knowledge, skill and experience a supervisor has in practicing AAT-C, the more effective a supervisor will be for supervisees who practice AAT-C. Information presented in this paper, is very useful for guiding supervision of AAT-C. A therapy animal does not have to be present during supervision sessions for a supervisor to assist supervisees with their counseling practice of AAT-C.

**Animal-Assisted Supervision of Counseling**

Animal assisted supervision of counseling (AAS-C) is the incorporation by a supervisor of a qualified therapy animal into the counseling supervision process. In the practice of AAS-C, it is not necessary that the supervisor’s supervisees practice AAT-C. In AAS-C, a therapy animal is present during the supervision meeting and the animal’s presence and social engagement with the supervisor and supervisees during the supervision meeting assists the process of supervision. Because the psychodynamics involved in counseling clients is somewhat similar to the psychodynamics that occur in a supervision relationship, AAS-C functions in a manner very like AAT-C, but with a different goal in mind. Instead of facilitating personal awareness and insight in clients for their personal growth, development, and healing, AAS-C assist supervisees with their personal and professional awareness and insight to facilitate their growth, development, and performance as counselors in training. Following is an example of how AAS-C, that is the inclusion of a therapy animal into a supervision session, can be beneficial to supervisees.

I directed the supervisor training of the doctoral student in this story, Tiffany Otting, and together we reviewed films of her supervision sessions to obtain my feedback. Tiffany was supervising, with the assistance of her dog Wally, two master’s-level graduate student counselors-in-training. Neither of these supervisees were practitioner of AAT-C, but they were in a graduate-level counseling techniques course that required they practice counseling with clients. During one supervision session, Wally was sleeping on the couch next to his owner/handler Tiffany, the supervisor. Two supervisees were present during this triadic session, one was sitting on the couch a few feet from Wally and Tiffany, while the other supervisee was sitting on the floor near an audio-visual cart. The supervisee near the audio-visual cart began introducing a film clip of a counseling session she performed that she was intending to show during the supervision session for feedback from Tiffany and the other supervisee. The supervisee was about two minutes into her prelude to showing the film when Wally suddenly woke up, sat up quickly, jumped off of the couch, walked over to the supervisee sitting on the floor who was speaking, where he smelled her breath, wagged his tail, sat down next to the supervisee, and then looked over to the supervisor, Tiffany. The supervisee petted Wally who then briefly walked away only to come right back to the student counselor again showing similar concern. Tiffany verbally acknowledged Wally’s behavior to the two supervisees in the room and to Wally himself by reaching out to pet and reassure Wally. The supervisor asked the supervisee if she wanted to continue her plan to show the film clip or process what Wally was picking up regarding her internal emotional experience. The supervisee chose to discuss her internal emotional experience. She revealed that immediately before Wally woke up and came over to her she began experiencing a great deal of anxiety over a memory in her past that resembled feelings she had regarding the
client in the film clip she was just about to show. Prior to Wally’s engagement she had not demonstrated any outward signs of this anxiety, nor had she verbalized anything about her experience of anxiety, nonetheless Wally had signaled that he had discerned her anxiety. The supervisee went on to describe her extreme anxiety about an upcoming parent consultation with an emotionally unstable parent. She felt distress because that parent reminded her of an experience she had with an emotionally unstable parent when she was a teacher in the past. Two years prior, a troubled parent of one of her students committed suicide and she was carrying a large amount of residual anxiety with her today from that past experience. She was holding that in the back of her mind during her introduction of her film clip and had not thought it relevant to bring up in the moment because it originated from two years ago before she started her counselor training. But, Wally’s signaling his perception of her current emotional distress suggested immediate relevancy. The valuable supervisor-supervisee processing that came from that SHARM assisted the supervisee to gain significant insight that alleviated her anxiety and enhanced her upcoming counseling and consultation performance. Once the supervisee began to process the SHARM, Wally sensed the necessary catharsis was taking place and settled down back to sleep next to the supervisor.

At the end of the semester both supervisees included in their evaluative comments of their supervision with Tiffany how much they enjoyed having Tiffany’s dog Wally in supervision sessions. Each described how they experienced support and comfort from his presence and their interactions with him. And one of the supervisees declared how wonderful it was that Wally “did not let us get away with anything,” meaning that was difficult to avoid addressing that which needed to be addressed because of Wally’s keen perceptual skills. This is just one example of how animal assisted supervision of counseling (AAS-C) can be very beneficial. Any type of SHARM can be appropriate for sessions with clients or with supervisees.

I have found that the presence of my therapy dog during my supervision sessions with my supervisees is very facilitative of the supervision process, with both supervisees that do and do not practice AAT-C. Animal-assisted supervision of counseling (AAS-C) is beneficial in a number of ways. First, a supervisor accompanied by a therapy animal may seem less threatening to a supervisee and thus, the formation of a positive supervisor-supervisee relationship may be hastened and strengthened. Supervisee observations of supervisor and therapy animal interactions may confirm for the supervisee that the supervisor is kind, compassionate, nurturing and trustworthy. Second, interaction with a therapy animal during supervision meetings may calm and soothe anxiety a supervisee may experience regarding performance and evaluation. And third, a therapy animal may alert a supervisor and supervisee of concerns the supervisee may have that are not readily apparent without the alerting response of the therapy animal and thus, deeper and more meaningful supervisee growth and development can be accomplished in supervision.

It is important to respect the right of any supervisee to choose to not have a therapy animal present in a supervision session; especially because the supervisee may have an allergy or phobia related to the therapy animal. I have rarely had a supervisee request that a therapy animal not be present in supervision. But, this reminds me of an interesting dynamic that occurred in supervision sessions of doctoral student supervisor-in-training, Tiffany Otting, with a particular pair of supervisees she was training. She was working in triadic supervision with two supervisees enrolled in a master’s-level counseling techniques course where they practiced counseling clients. Initially, both supervisees expressed enthusiasm about wanting Tiffany’s dog Wally present during supervision meetings. At the first supervision meeting, Wally became very busy with attending to one of the supervisee’s needs while that supervisee described her professional development goals for supervision. I have described before how Wally is very good at alerting when unobservable and unattended anxiety is present in a room. Wally moved over next to the supervisee and signaled anxiety in her by staring at her, wagging his tail, initiating a soft bark, and then looking back at Tiffany. It was as if Wally was declaring, “Hey Tiffany, this person is upset. Can we help her feel better?” Tiffany explained the likely meaning of Wally’s behavior to the supervisees and invited the designated supervisee to elaborate on what she might be feeling. But, the supervisee denied she felt any anxiety or other discomfort. Tiffany invited Wally to lay back down next to her on the couch, which he did. But moments later Wally moved back over to the supervisee, stared at her, wagged his tail, barked once and looked back at Tiffany. Whereupon Tiffany again invited the supervisee to share anything that Wally might be signaling. The supervisee repeated her denial that she was feeling any anxiety or other form of discomfort. Tiffany reassured Wally and invited him to lay down at Tiffany’s feet. Moments later, Wally went over for a third time to the same supervisee who was still speaking, stared at her, wagged his tail, barked once and looked over at Tiffany. The supervisee once again assured Tiffany and the other supervisee that she was feeling okay and the supervisee tried to reassure Wally by petting him. Then the supervision session time was up for the day. The next day the supervisee, who was pointed out by Wally three times the previous day, sought Tiffany out and told her she preferred not to have Wally present in supervision meetings any more. In a caring and respectful tone, Tiffany said she would certainly oblige the supervisee, apologized for any discomfort.
Wally may have caused for the supervisee, and said the supervisee need not explain why she did not want Wally present. However, the supervisee immediately volunteered the reason. She said that Wally was fine and did not cause her to be uncomfortable at all, it was just that she had not been honest in yesterday’s supervision meeting. She explained that Wally had been correct all three times he signaled she was experiencing anxiety. She did in fact have a lot of anxiety about performance and being evaluated but could not bring herself to be authentic about that anxiety in the immediate moment. She was afraid acknowledging her anxiety would make her look incapable. She was not used to talking about her inner anxiety, of which she had a great deal. She was also afraid she was making Wally uncomfortable and concerned she would take too much time away from the other supervisee if she processed her anxiety out loud. So in her explanation as to why she did not want Wally in supervision anymore, the supervisee revealed to her supervisor a number of very valuable things — personal issues of the supervisee that could potentially inhibit her growth and development. Tiffany addressed the supervisee’s concerns and assured her that performance anxiety was normal and typical for counselors in training, that it would be beneficial for her professional development to process out loud her internal experiences in supervision, and that she as the supervisor would make sure that Wally and the other supervisee were cared for and had their needs met. She encouraged the supervisee by saying she would never be pressured to share her internal emotional experiences, but would always be invited to do so. The supervisee chose to continue supervision meetings with Wally present and became much more comfortable with sharing. She in fact credited Wally’s presence and interaction in supervision sessions as a major stimulus for much of her personal and professional growth that semester.

**Conclusion**

As with animal assisted counseling, animal assisted supervision is a valuable tool for facilitating growth and development. The keen sensory perception of animals and their willingness to signal their perceptions is a tremendous aide in counseling and counseling supervision. Animals need no training to vocally or behaviorally signal their perception of emotions in humans as it is part of their natural biology to elicit these signals. Some animals will do this more overtly than others. And animals who are encouraged and rewarded for signaling their perceptions will be more likely to continue this behavior. I have experienced canines and equines as some of the more prolific vocal and behavioral communicators when signaling and attending to the emotions they perceive in other animals and in humans. This is one of the reasons why dogs and horses are the two most frequently utilized species in animal assisted counseling and supervision.

To achieve some of the greatest benefits that animal assisted counseling or supervision has to offer, a practitioner: 1) must be able to recognize and to some extent interpret an animal’s vocal and behavioral communications; 2) must appreciate the potential value of an animal’s vocal and behavioral communications; and 3) must assure, acknowledge and reward an animal for its vocal and behavioral communications by responding to the animal with a nurturing touch and soothing verbal response. Someone who is not appropriately trained in animal assisted interventions is prone to fail these three principles. Without the knowledge to recognize and to some extent interpret animal vocalizations and behaviors a practitioner will fail to comprehend valuable information being presented. A lack of appreciation for the potential value of animals’ vocal and behavioral communications will cause much therapeutic opportunity to be missed. And, failure to assure, acknowledge, and reward an animal for its willingness to signal and respond to what it has perceived may discourage a therapy animal from sharing these valuable gifts.

**Reference**