Human-Animal Relational Theory: Supervision and Practice of Animal-Assisted Counseling

Presented at: TCA, November 2017, Galveston, TX

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Therapeutic Opportunity

- With AAT-C we are hoping to increase the number and type of therapeutic opportunities presented in sessions by incorporating an additional agent for change, a therapy animal, and an additional method, human-animal interaction.
Increased Psychodynamics (Relational Dynamics) in Counseling

With the integration of human-animal interaction into counseling we are looking to increase the number and type of psychodynamics accessible in a session for therapeutic processing.
The Science of Relating

During the human-animal interaction, similarities in hormonal responses mammals, both humans and animals, facilitate the transitional process:

- **Stress Response System activation:**
  - Adrenalin rises.
  - Cortisol rises.
  - Aldosterone rises.
  - Social response system goes down.

- **Social Response System activation:**
  - Dopamine rises.
  - Endorphins rise.
  - Oxytocin rises.
  - Stress response system goes down.

Sources: Olmert (2009); Panksepp (2005); and Uvnäs-Moberg (2005).
Animals are Keen Perceivers and Signalers of Stress in Others

- Animal’s can perceive stress and signal its perception and can respond to its perception with calming signals, displacement signals, and alerting signals.
Animals Desire to Give and Receive Nurturance

- Socialized animals enjoy nurturing interactions and will invite such interactions.
- Socialized animals may even initiate a nurturing interaction when they perceive stress to try and soothe the person stressed.
- Nurturing touch produces high levels of oxytocin in the human and animal which creates a social connection, lifts mood, and decreases anxiety in a client.
Human-Animal Relating

- From the moment an animal enters the therapy environment the animal and persons present are relating to one another in some way.
- Social Response System is active in either or both humans and animals during nurturing interactions. The animal and person may move toward one another.
- Stress Response System is active in either or both humans and animals when distress is presented during interactions. The animal may signal the perception of a stressor and may even move away from the stressor; sometimes the animal moves toward the stressed person to offer nurturance to reduce the stress.
Human-Animal Relational Theory (HART)

- HART identifies and guides the processing of increased therapeutic opportunities that are presented during human-animal interaction that take place in animal-assisted therapy in counseling (AAT-C).

Source: (Chandler, 2017)
Animal’s Primary Roles in HART

- The animal’s role as nurturer and emotional distress detector are fundamental to HART.
SHARM: Significant Human-Animal Relational Moment

From a series of human-animal relational moments that are occurring when an animal enters the session, HART assist a counselor and/or client to identify and value the most significant human-animal relational moment (SHARM) or moments that occur during human-animal interaction.
SHARMS

- SHARMS are significant human-animal interactions.
- Can be identified by the animal’s behavior or by the client’s behavior.
- Can be either nurturing behavior by animal or client, or behavior reflecting animal or client perceived the presence of a stressor.
Social response system is active during nurturing human-animal interaction.
Stress response system is active when a stressor is perceived during human-animal interaction.
A SHARM is valued on the basis of how its identification and processing may:

- Benefit a client by facilitating awareness, insight and adjustment for personal growth and healing.
- Reflect something important about the counselor’s state during a session with a client.
- Benefit a supervisee during animal-assisted supervision by facilitating awareness, insight, and adjustment for professional growth.
Identification of a SHARM

- Can occur by a counselor or a client.
- More likely occurs by a counselor in the early stages of therapy because the counselor has more knowledge and experience to recognize a SHARM.
- But clients quickly learn to watch the animal’s behavior and will likely begin to identify SHARMs without the aid of a counselor.
Upon identification of a significant human-animal relational moment (SHARM), there needs to be effective processing of the significance of the moment by the client and/or therapist, this is called human-animal relational process (HARP).
I-HARP: Internal Processing

- A counselor and/or client initiate internal private dialogue to process an identified SHARM in a manner that may facilitate insight, awareness, and possible growth for a client.

- I-HARP does not involve an exchange of dialogue.
E-HARP: External Processing

- A counselor and/or client initiate interactive dialogue to process an identified SHARM in a manner that may facilitate insight, awareness, and possible growth for a client.
HARP Type and Timing

- HARP may be either internal, external, or both.
- HARP may be immediate or delayed.
Therapy Animal’s Primary Roles

■ Through activation of the stress response system and/or social response system, a therapy animal plays two primary roles:

1) Nurturer
2) Emotional Distress Detector
Animal as Nurturer

- An animal will want to engage and possibly touch a person to give and receive nurturance – this increases various wellbeing hormone production in humans and animals associated with the social response system.
Animal as Emotional Distress Detector

- If an animal experiences that something in the environment is uncomfortable or threatening, including the behavior of a person or another animal present, the animal will initiate calming signals, displacement signals, or alerting signals.

- This includes animals signaling their perception of stress or distress in a person or other animal.
Animals Have Keen Perception of Emotions

- Animals have advanced smell receptors and can smell emotions in others and can signal stress or distress that is not visible (Source: Correa, 2005).

- Animals from family systems, herd (horses) or pack animals (dogs), also have an advanced kinesthetic sense (feel) for stress or distress in people or other animals (Source: HeartMath, 2006).

- The olfactory (smell) and kinesthetic (feel) sense of animals in detecting stress and distress is very helpful in counseling – provides additional information and therapeutic opportunity.
Animals signaling perception of a stressor -

- **Displacement Signals**: animal changes posture or body position, i.e. dog suddenly sitting up, horse backing away. Sometimes an animal will move toward and engage a client in nurturing when animal perceives a stressor in a client.

- **Calming Signals**: for dogs – rapid eye blinking, yawning, looking away, etc.; for horses – blinking, empty chewing, turning away, etc.

- **Alerting signals**: animal vocalization or body language known to reflect alerting.
AAC Requires that the

- Counselor must be familiar with the language of the animal, especially body language, and what it may be expressing.

a) This is important for effective counseling.
b) This is important to address the welfare of the animal. We must always advocate for the safety and welfare of the animal as well as our clients.

Relational Process of AAT

- In relating to the animal, a series of relational moments (RM) occur.
- These 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). (See next slide)
Relational Process of AAT
Human-Animal Relational Experience

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. The significance of a relational moment (RM) can be identified by a client or a therapist.
Facilitating Relational Moments between Client and Animal:

- The therapist facilitates client-animal relational moments by bringing in a therapy animal to allow for human-animal interaction to occur.
- 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).
Value Relational Moments

- The therapist must recognize, identify, and describe significant relational moments and assess their therapeutic value. Though, sometimes the client is the first to recognize the significance of an RM.

- Each relational moment gives rise to potential therapeutic opportunity (awareness, insight, change).

- A therapist recognizes and appropriately reflects and processes with the client significant relational moments.

- Gradually, a client will also recognize and reflect and process significant relational moments without initiation by counselor.
Human-Animal Relational Process

- When a therapist or a client identifies a significant human-animal relational moment (SHARM), the moment is processed by the therapist and client; this is human-animal relational process (HARP).

- The therapeutic impact of a human-animal RM is determined by how well it is recognized and identified by the therapist and client, and by how effectively it is processed by the therapist and/or client (HARP).
Relational Process of AAT

In relating to the animal, a series of relational moments (RM)s occur.

We need to recognize and identify the most significant human-animal relational moments (SHARMs), processing must occur (HARP), and then the impact of the SHARM and HARP is evaluated. Summarized by the formula below -

\[ \text{SHARM} + \text{HARP} = \text{HARTI} \]

(Amount and Type of Therapeutic Impact).
HARTI
Human-Animal Relational Therapeutic Impact

- Impact is effected by how well a SHARM is recognized and processed either internally by an individual client and/or counselor, and/or externally via interactive dialogue between client and counselor.
Human-Animal Relational Theory (continued)

- The fewer inhibitions that are placed on an animals’ natural social-relational behavior during therapy, within safe and comfortable limits for humans and animals, the freer the animals and humans are to relate naturally to one another, and thus greater relational opportunity can be presented for possible therapeutic gain. Directed activities are allowed, but be mindful of how they may facilitate or interfere with a relational process.
Reflect Relational Moments with Therapeutic Value (some examples):

- Greeting
- Acknowledgment
- Speculation
- Interpretation
- Comfort
- Assurance
- Check In
The therapist facilitates a greeting between client and therapy animal each time the client comes to the session where the animal is present. And, therapist comments on the animal’s body language in response to the greeting and the meaning or value of this body language.
Greeting SHARM

Warms the atmosphere, relaxes the client.

Nurturing touch produces high levels of oxytocin in the human and animal which creates a social connection, lifts mood, and decreases anxiety.
Greeting SHARM

Helps create a connection between client and Counselor.
Acknowledgement

- Animal alerts us when something needs attending - when it senses an emotional need. Alert can be a bark, whine, shift in body language, etc.

- Acknowledge to the animal and client that the animal is sensing something of importance internal to the client or internal to the therapist.

- Therapist wonders aloud as to what this may be, or ask client to wonder aloud.
Dog gets up from sleeping, walks over to client and places paw on clients knee. Therapist and client acknowledge animal is communicating something that needs attention in client.
Speculation

- To wonder aloud or ask the client to wonder aloud about what the animal is thinking, feeling, or doing.

- This allows the client to project the client’s internal state on to the animal and provides therapist with useful information about internal state of client.
Client or counselor can speculate about what animal is thinking or feeling.
Interpretation

- To interpret an animal’s behavior or ask a client to interpret an animal’s behavior to imply what the animal is experiencing or communicating.

- This interpretation given by the client most often represents an aspect of the client’s internal state.
Interpretation of what an animal is communicating about its comfort or discomfort in a human-animal interaction can increase client self awareness.
Comfort

- The animal engages in physical comforting touch (being held, hugged, or petted), and the therapist comments or ask the client to comment on this interaction.

- The client’s response will reveal the need and desire for the client to be comforted and nurtured.
Comforting Interaction With Snowflake
Rusty provides comfort and security during play therapy
Assurance

- Assure the client regarding how the animal feels, maybe about the client.
- Or, assure the client about his/her self based on the behavior of the animal toward the client.
- This often indirectly reveals acceptance or rejection issues the client may have.
Brave therapy dog Dolly assures clients horses are safe to be with.
Client is more assured about participation in therapy activity when accompanied by a therapy animal.
Check In

- The animal walks over to the client and nuzzles client’s hand or sniffs the client’s face.
- 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 animal is okay as a model or covert message for the client.
- Therapist comments on this, or ask the client to comment on this.
Animal checking in with client during equine assisted play therapy.
Therapy dog is checking in with client.
Increased Therapeutic Opportunity

- Many significant relational moments occur during human-animal interaction.
- A therapist must be observant and efficiently assess the potential therapeutic value of an RM that is being presented, and then facilitate processing of that RM with a client.
References

The End

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Resource book:
Animal-Assisted Therapy in Counseling, 3rd edition (2017) by Cynthia K. Chandler,

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https://www.coe.unt.edu/consortium-animal-assisted-therapy