

**Fido and Freud Meet!: Integrating Animal-assisted Therapy  
into Traditional Counseling Theories**

*American Counseling Association Conference & Exposition*

*New Orleans, March 27<sup>th</sup> 2011*

Laura Bruneau, Ph.D., LPC  
Adams State College  
[lbruneau@adams.edu](mailto:lbruneau@adams.edu)

Amy Johnson, M.A., MAT, TLS, CPDT-KA  
Oakland University  
[johnson2@oakland.edu](mailto:johnson2@oakland.edu)

## **A. Introduction**

This handout is in lieu of the PowerPoint presentation. The handout provides 1) foundational information on AAT, 2) a synopsis of the major counseling theories as presented in Corey (2009), and 3) a description of how Animal-assisted therapy best fits these theories.

## **B. Introduction to Animal-assisted Therapy**

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) can be considered a part of ecotherapy, which is defined as treatment approaches that include “the natural world in relationships of mutual healing and growth” (Chalquist, 2009, p. 64). AAT is a goal-directed, documented activity that can be used in a variety of mental health settings to facilitate the therapeutic process. While AAT can be integrated with virtually any counseling theory, there are a few larger ideas as to why may AAT work. These include the biophilia hypothesis and physiological changes within the body.

### *1. Biophilia hypothesis*

The biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1993) serves as an umbrella theory for why AAT works in counseling (Berget & Braastad, 2008). This hypothesis simply states there is an instinctive bond between human beings and other living systems; “humans have an innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” (Wilson, 1993, p. 1). From an evolutionary standpoint, humans have strived to maintain a relationship with nature and all living systems (Fawcett & Gullone, 2001). As friendly animals convey a sense of safety (Melson & Fine, 2006), there is a healing presence in animals.

### *2. Physiological hypothesis*

Research studies indicate that contact with animals can 1) decrease heart rate, 2) decrease blood pressure, and 3) decrease/ increase certain chemicals in the body (e.g. oxytocin, cortisol). Overall, animals can have a calming effect on the client; this provides a rationale for animal-assisted therapy (Odendaal, 2000).

### C. Overall benefits of AAT

The scholarly literature on AAT is expansive and rapidly growing. However, some major themes are easily identified, such as the benefits for integrating animals into counseling. A summary of these benefits is as follows:

1. Animals are able to provide touch and affection to the client. This is especially important as counselors are extremely limited in their ability to provide soothing touch to the client (Chandler, 2005; Parish-Plass, 2008). In addition, some clients are especially starved for appropriate touch; thus, animals can fill this important need.
2. Animals lower psychological and physiological arousal in the client. This can be especially useful for clients who are working through trauma related issues and/or who have high anxiety about attending counseling (Lefkowitz, Paharia, Prout, Debiak, & Bleiberg, 2005).
3. As animals can exhibit some of the same challenging behaviors found in our clients (Chassman & Kinney, 2011), animals are a useful comparison objects. For example, if a client views herself as stubborn and the animal with which she is interacting with is stubborn, this allows the client to see her own behavior objectively.
4. Animals may increase motivation for clients to attend counseling (Lange, Cox, Bernert, & Jenkins, 2007).
5. Animals often make the counselor appear less threatening, thus increasing the client's comfort in session. Those who feel more comfortable in counseling are more likely to disclose (Fine, 2006).
6. Animals can regulate the emotional climate in the room (Fine, 2006); therefore, they can react to the client in the present moment (Chassman & Kinney, 2011).
7. Animals may have a normalizing effect on the client (Hart, 2006)
8. Animals can infuse a sense of warmth into the counseling milieu. As a result, rapport building between the counselor and client is increased (Fine, 2006).
9. While not a benefit, per se, it is important to note that we, as counselors, will often find ourselves on the "periphery of healing" (Johnson, 2011) when implementing AAT. Animals often take center stage in the counseling session. A counselor using this modality needs to be comfortable with being the co-therapist and trusting the animal's lead.

### D. Basic Philosophies of the Major Counseling Theories (Corey, 2009, p. 455-456)

<b>Psychoanalytic Therapy</b>	Human beings are basically determined by psychic energy and by early experiences. Unconscious motives and conflicts are central in present behavior. Irrational forces are strong; the person is driven by sexual and aggressive impulses. Early developmental is of critical importance because later personality problems have their roots in repressed early childhood conflicts.
<b>Adlerian Therapy</b>	Humans are motivated by social interest, by striving toward goals, by inferiority and superiority, and by dealing with the tasks of life. Emphasis is on the individual's positive capacities to live in society cooperatively. People have the capacity to interpret, influence, and create events. Each person at an early age creates a unique style of life, which tends to remain relatively constant throughout life.

<b>Existential Therapy</b>	The central focus is on the nature of the human condition, which includes a capacity for self-awareness, freedom of choice to decide one's fate, responsibility, anxiety, the search for meaning, being alone and being in relation with others, striving for authenticity, and facing living and dying.
<b>Person-centered Therapy</b>	The view of humans is positive; we have an inclination toward becoming fully functioning. In the context of the therapeutic relationship, the client experiences feelings that were previously denied to awareness. The client moves toward increased awareness, spontaneity, trust in self, and inner-directedness.
<b>Gestalt Therapy</b>	The person strives for wholeness and integration in thinking, feeling, and behaving. Some key concepts include contact with self and others, contact boundaries, and awareness. The view is nondeterministic in that the person is viewed as having the capacity to recognize how earlier influence are related to present difficulties. As an experiential approach, it is grounded in the here and now and emphasizes awareness, personal choice, and responsibility.
<b>Behavior Therapy</b>	Behavior is the product of learning. We are both the product and the producer of the environment. No set of unifying assumptions about behavior can incorporate all the existing procedures in the behavioral field. Traditional behavior therapy is based on classical and operant principles. Contemporary behavior therapy has branched out in many directions.
<b>Cognitive-behavior Therapy</b>	Individuals tend to incorporate faulty thinking, which leads to emotional and behavioral disturbances. Cognitions are the major determinants of how we feel and act. Therapy is primarily oriented toward cognition and behavior, and it stresses the role of thinking, deciding, questioning, doing, and re-deciding. This is a psychoeducational model, which emphasizes therapy as a learning process, including acquiring and practicing new skills, learning new ways of thinking, and acquiring more effective ways of coping with problems.
<b>Reality Therapy</b>	Based on choice theory, this approach assumes that we need quality relationships to be happy. Psychological problems are the results of our resisting the control by others or of our attempt to control others. Choice theory is an explanation of human nature and how to best achieve satisfying interpersonal relationships.
<b>Feminist Therapy</b>	Feminists criticize many traditional theories to the degree that they are based on gender-based concepts, such as being androcentric, gendercentric, ethnocentric, heterosexist, and intrapsychic. The constructs of feminist therapy include being gender-fair, flexible, interactionist, and life-span oriented. Gender and power are at the heart of feminist therapy. This is a systems approach that recognizes the cultural, social, and political factors that contribute to an individual's problem.
<b>Postmodern Approaches</b>	Based on the premise that there are multiple realities and multiple truths, postmodern therapies reject the idea that reality is external and can be grasped. People create meaning in their lives through conversations with others. The postmodern approaches avoid pathologizing clients, take a dim view of diagnosis, avoid searching for underlying causes of problems, and

	place a high value on discovering clients' strengths and resources. Rather than talking about problems, the focus of therapy is on creating solutions in the present and the future.
<b>Family systems Therapy</b>	The family is viewed from an interactive and systemic perspective. Clients are connected to a living system; a change in one part of the system will result in a change in other parts. The family provides the context for understanding how individuals function in relationship to others and how they behave. Treatment deals with the family unit. An individual's dysfunctional behavior grows out of the interactional unit of the family and out of larger systems as well.

### E. AAT and Counseling Theory

As stated earlier, AAT is a goal-directed, documented activity that can be used in a variety of mental health settings to facilitate the counseling process. With AAT, a trained animal (under the direction of a competent handler/ counselor) is included within the therapy setting. Animals are not simply "used" in counseling (Chassman & Kinney, 2011), but rather *intentionally* integrated into the counseling process. Furthermore, as AAT is an adjunct to therapy, it can be incorporated into virtually any counseling theory (Chandler, 2005). A counselor using AAT will operate from his/her theoretical orientation to facilitate change within the client.

Most of the current literature on using AAT is based on an intervention approach; these AAT techniques (e.g. brush a dog, tell a story about the dog, teach a dog a new trick) are easy to locate, e.g. Gammonly, Howie, Kirwin, Zapf, Frye, Freeman & Stuart-Russell, 1997; Grover, 2010; Lind, 2009. The interventions can be used to address a number of psychosocial treatment goals, including: a) improve social skills, b) brighten affect and mood, c) provide pleasure or affection, d) improve memory and recall, e) address grief/ loss issues, f) improve cooperation, g) improve ability to trust, and h) learn about appropriate touch (Chandler, 2005).

The following is an example of an intervention for a person with ADHD (Chassman & Kinney, 2011).

1. Behavioral Goal: Increase focused behavior or "client will improve focus from average to 30 seconds to 2 minutes
2. Intervention: Teaching a dog a new trick
3. Skills learned through intervention:
  - a. Planning
  - b. Goal-setting
  - c. Sequencing
  - d. Positive behavior reinforcement
  - e. Positive self talk
  - f. Social skills
  - g. Delayed gratification
  - h. Reduced impulsiveness
  - i. Patience and frustration tolerance
  - j. Emotional self-regulation

While the intervention approach is useful, it does not provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how these interventions are tied to traditional counseling theory. In a recent article, Chandler and colleagues (2010) have provided an excellent foundation for developing this much needed framework. The aim of this presentation is to 1) address the paucity of information on AAT and counseling theory and 2) add to the existing knowledge base.

Additionally, the current biggest obstacle to AAT can be summed up in two words: “prove it” (Voelker, 1995, p. 1898 as cited in Fine, 2006). While grounding AAT interventions in counseling theory does not provide evidence of its effectiveness, per se, it can help to demystify the process of AAT and provides a foundation for future research on AAT and theory.

## **F. AAT and Counseling Theory**

### *Psychoanalytic Therapy*

**Summary:** Psychoanalytic therapy focuses on the importance of early childhood experiences and primary development. From this approach, people are urged by impulses; often people are unaware of these motives and conflicts. As greater self-awareness leads to better choices, the psychoanalytic counselor encourages insight through specific interventions such as dream analysis or analysis of transference.

**Application to AAT:** The literature on psychoanalytic therapy and AAT is quite expansive. First and foremost, Erikson’s psychosocial stages are a useful way to conceptualize development across the lifespan and are easily applied to AAT (Chalquist, 2009; Chandler, 2005; Fine, 2006). AAT can help to facilitate progression through the eight psychosocial stages of development, including: developing trust, autonomy, initiative, identity, etc. For example, children can learn responsibility through taking care of an animal and may be encouraged to have a pet in the home (Fine, 2006). Similarly, clients in later stages of development could explore pet ownership as well (Fine, 2006). However, the latter would be for social support, thus, highlighting the developmental challenges unique to each stage.

Animal can serve a variety of attachment functions, depending on the specific psychodynamic theory (Berget & Braastad, 2008; Parish-Plass, 2008). Whether the animal represents a secure base, a transitional object, or self/other, clients can learn to establish a bond with the animal and then can extend the bond to others. This may be particularly useful for a client who has little attachment with people and as such, has strong fears of abandonment. Additionally, many therapy animals (e.g. dogs) are motivated by developing attachments with humans (Chassman & Kinney, 2011). Often, in this unique relationship, the client (who is often a child) can experience the role of a nurturer (Melson, 2011).

The ideas of the unconscious and transference are essential to this approach. Often, clients will project feelings onto the therapy animal (Chassman & Kinney, 2011). For example, the animal may need to take a rest during session. A client who is experiencing feelings of rejection from others may project these feelings onto the animal. This can become a useful therapeutic moment as transference is often worked out best in the here and now. Other times, clients will disclose

information about their lives but have the animal own the experience, e.g. “Fido doesn’t like it when my dad smells like beer.” Finally, an adult client can work out issues from childhood through the connection with the therapy animal.

Additionally, animals are part of our symbolic life (Chalquist, 2008). Even without a therapy animal present, counselors can use other mediums such as animal puppets and stories about animals to help the client connect with various aspects of themselves. If animal symbols are indeed facets of the self (Melson & Fine, 2006), using various mediums can assist with tapping into feelings and experiences that may be repressed or unknown to the client (Chandler, 2005).

Freud, who was known use his chow, Jofi, in sessions, described personality as being comprised of three structures. The id is the primary source of all energy and is often likened to an animal nature. According to Serpell (2006), Boris Levinson, a leader in AAT, believed humans needed to restore a healing connection with our unconscious animal natures. During AAT, therapy animals will act like animals, e.g. licking genitals, taking a nap, getting into mischief. How a client reacts to this “essential dogginess” (Melson & Fine, 2006, p. 212) can provide the counselor with information on internal struggles of the id, ego, and superego.

### *Adlerian Therapy*

**Summary:** Adlerian therapy is also an insight focused therapy. However, from an Adlerian perspective, people are motivated by social urges. While childhood experiences are also important, the manner in which a person interprets his or her experiences is the essential information. From this perspective, people have free choice and can create and shape their lives as they see fit. A counselor working from this approach would gather much information about the person’s strategy for living, would encourage insight and reorientation, and would view counseling as successful if the client developed greater social interest and community feeling.

**Application to AAT:** AAT fosters a connection to the natural world (Chalquist, 2008). As such working with animals may help the client to develop social interest and social relatedness. For example, when working with at-risk youth, helping them to develop a sense of connection to the larger community is vital. In fact, this population cites being able to give back to the community as one of the most rewarding aspects of AAT. Teaching the trick, ‘watch me,’ to a client is a simple, sensory technique for fostering societal integration. Developing social interest posits that a person is capable of contributing to the welfare of others; certainly, learning to take care of an animal is in line with this approach.

Additionally, the counselor can tell stories about animals throughout history that have made valuable contributions to society. The counselor can also share stories about the therapy animal (e.g. family and personal history; Chandler et al, 2010). These interventions can help to enhance the social connection between the client and the animal, especially if the animal’s history is one that the client can relate to (Chandler et al, 2010).

Adler proposed key life tasks for achieving health and wellness: building friendships, establishing intimacy, and contribution to society (Corey, 2009). Each of these tasks requires that

the client is able to belong, to contribute, and to cooperate. Learning how to belong, to contribute, and to cooperate are skills that can be developed through AAT.

Adlerian counselors wish to develop an egalitarian relationship with the client; AAT can be used to develop rapport and increase feelings of safety for the client (Chandler, et al, 2010).

Additionally, counselors working from an Adlerian approach often want to understand the client's family of origin. Similar to psychoanalytic therapy, the presence of an animal can bring out a wealth of information about the client's home and family life.

Adlerian parent education emphasizes parents learning listening skills, how to encourage their child, and how to implement natural and logical consequences. Through working with a therapy animal, parent and children can learn how to 'listen' to animals and to themselves. Children and parents can learn how to encourage an animal rather than yelling or forcing the animal to do what they wish. Finally, clients can learn about cause and effect through working with an animal, e.g. giving a dog two commands will usually confuse the dog, and make changes to correct mistakes.

### *Existential Therapy*

**Summary:** Existential therapy is simply not a set of techniques; rather, it is a philosophical approach that is central to the practice of the counselor (Corey, 2009). The focus of existential therapy is on aspects of the human conditions including, having a capacity for self-awareness, having the choice to determine one's outcome, searching for meaning, facing death, and striving to become a more authentic self. A counselor using existential theory joins the client on his or her journey and relies on the here and now experiences for the client gain self-awareness, and as a result, become more authentic.

**Application to AAT:** Another aspect of the human condition that is central to the focus of existential therapy is striving for both identity and relationships with others. AAT is a highly social intervention; as such, clients can learn skills in session that can assist them in developing relationships outside of counseling (Chandler et al, 2010). Similarly, stories about the therapy animal and its relationships with others can help the client explore his or her relationships.

A central tenet to existential therapy is the search for meaning. Clients often come to counseling due to having a lack of purpose or direction in their lives. Sharing stories about the therapy animal's purpose in helping other may be inspirational to the client. Additionally, through working with the therapy animal (e.g. training, teaching tricks), clients can see changes in the animal's behavior. As such, clients may be instilled with a sense of hope that they can also change.

Developing a sense of responsibility for one's actions is also another principle in existential therapy. Similar to Adlerian therapy, clients are the authors of their lives. By taking effort to work with a therapy animal in a training setting, clients gather first hand evidence that they have been responsible for something that is valuable and meaningful, thus increasing both personal responsibility and sense of meaning.

Chandler et al (2010) noted that interactions between a client and a therapy animal are often spontaneous. While a counselor can plan out a talk therapy intervention, a therapy animal is a free spirit and interactions are most often unplanned. For example, dogs operate in the present moment with little thought as to what happened yesterday or what will happen tomorrow (Chassman & Kinney, 2011)! As such, these spontaneous interactions provide an excellent opportunity to explore issues in the here and now. Yalom (2010) noted that the everyday events of the counseling hour are rich with data that can be used to understand the client and to help bring certain issues to their awareness. These “here and now interactions” happen during the counseling hour, between the client and the counselor. Adding a therapy animal into the equation provides even more rich data.

A counselor focusing on the here and now does well to use what Yalom (2002) calls ‘rabbit ears.’ This means that a counselor pays attention to how a client reacts to certain stimuli, such a therapy animal. Gathering this information provides a helpful picture of how the client reacts to joy, frustration, times of sadness, etc.

Existential therapy also allows the client to explore a final existential principle, awareness of death. For example, the presence of animal may bring up memories of a deceased pet for the client. Talking through these issues can be enormously helpful for processing the death of the pet or loved one as well as the client’s view on death and non-being. Additionally, the loss of a therapy animal can be quite common with AAT. A competent AAT counselor would be sure to address this loss with each client.

Finally, integrating an animal into therapy may introduce discussions on the topic of what it means to be a human or what it means to be an animal. While these discussions will most likely occur in a spontaneous moment, these teachable moments are inherent in the practice of AAT. Exploring these deep questions, such as “Who am I?” and “What do I want in life,” are key to the practice of existential therapy.

### *Person-centered Therapy*

**Summary:** With person-centered therapy, the view of people is very positive. Within the context of the counseling session, the client has the ability to 1) direct the session and 2) to figure out how to resolve issues. The counselor uses many active listening techniques; however, their role is best described as a way of being (Corey, 2009). Through being congruent, communicating empathy, and having unconditional positive regard for the client, the counselor creates a safe space for the client to become more fully functioning and self-aware.

**Application to AAT:** The counseling relationship is the foundation to AAT. In particular, the relationship between the client and the *animal* is essential. Clients often connect more quickly and more deeply with the animal therapist than the human therapist. Although the author is unknown, there is a quote that states, “All dogs have read Carl Rogers.” In fact, counselors could do well to observe animals and learn a thing or two!

Therapy Dogs International has an inspirational video that provides a rationale for this deep connection with animals, and in particular with dogs, a common therapy animal. The narrator

states, “(Dogs) freely share and give their love without prejudice and question. They don’t care if you are old, or young, sick in body, or what you look like...they don’t let us feel different...they don’t care about our color, our speech or if we are rich or poor, or where we come from. We benefit from their inherent kindness...our presence is all that matters to a dog” (Therapy Dogs International). Animals are unconditionally accepting; “animals are perceived as non-judgmental participants who are outside the complications and expectations of human relationships” (Freisen, 2010, p. 261).

Counselors, who work with animals, are quicker to develop rapport with their client. A client may think to him or herself, “If a dog can like her, maybe I can too.” Overall, counselors who integrate animals into counseling are often seen as more empathic and more trustworthy (Chassman & Kinney, 2011). In addition, the therapy animal is also perceived as empathic (Lange et al, 2007).

Once a rapport is established, animals can provide and teach love, unconditional positive regard, nonjudgmental interaction, and empathy to their clients (Chassman & Kinney, 2011; Gullone, 2003). Clients can develop concern for others and learn how to love and be loved through interactions with a therapy animal. In turn, those clients who feel safer in the counseling session may disclose more and thus gain more insight, self-awareness, and self-acceptance (Chandler et al, 2010).

Similarly, animals provide an opportunity for therapeutic touch (Parish-Plass, 2008). Stroking or petting a dog may be particularly useful to a distraught client. This type of interaction also legitimizes touch (Parish-Plass, 2008), which can be helpful for those clients who could benefit from developing prosocial behaviors.

As just stated, many clients need to practice pro-social skills and behavior in order to learn *how* to show concern for others. The experiential nature of AAT and the humanistic therapies (to be expanded on more in the next section), is a useful way to role-play and work through issues in the here and now of the counseling hour. Lastly, the nondirective nature of person-centered counseling matches well with the spontaneous nature of AAT (Chandler et al, 2005).

### *Gestalt Therapy*

**Summary:** Gestalt therapy is the last of the humanistic theories. This is a creative, dynamic, and experiential approach to counseling that is grounded in the here and now. According to this approach, a person strives for wholeness and integration (Corey, 2009). Overall, a client will become more self-aware, develop healthy boundaries, and as a result, make new and different choices in their lives. A counselor working from this approach would use experiments to help the client gain this self-awareness and would emphasize personal choice and responsibility.

**Application to AAT:** As all of the work with AAT is done in the here and now, the Gestalt approach works well with AAT. For example, clients who are involved in the training of animals are 1) assessing how the animal is behaving, 2) identifying the emotions associated with that behavior, and 3) seeing their own behaviors reflected in the animal. This type of experiential learning tends to be more powerful to the client (Meinersmann et al, 2008).

Gestalt therapy also allows the client to explore personal boundaries and contact styles. Interacting with animals provides the counselor with immediate information about the client's contact style and provides an opportunity for corrective feedback and behavioral rehearsal.

Gestalt therapy also pays attention to nonverbal communication. For example, a client may communicate strong emotions through their facial expressions or gestures even if they are verbally expressing that they are fine. An animal may bring out more nonverbal communication in the client. Additionally, petting or stroking an animal may help the client to become more aware of his/ her bodily sensations (Chandler et al, 2010).

Unfinished business is also a well-known Gestalt concept. This refers to unresolved feelings, such as resentment, guilt, and abandonment. As animals are wonderful "objects," client will often project these unfinished issues on to the animal and thus, are able to be worked on in the here and now of the counseling session. Additionally, if the unfinished business is very powerful, the client may feel safer sharing this information with the animal (Chandler et al, 2010).

Finally, a key technique is the concept of the empty chair. This technique provides an opportunity for the client to externalize introjections and to integrate polarities (Corey, 2009). Essentially, this is a role-playing technique which can be viewed as awkward for the client. However, if a counselor was to use the therapy animal as the object, and if the client already had a safe relationship with the animal, this might hasten the exercise and allow it flow more naturally in session.

### *Behavior Therapy*

**Summary:** Behavior therapy posits that people are both the producer and the product of their environment (Corey, 2009). Traditional behavior therapy uses principles from classical and operant conditioning. From this approach, a counselor is seen as a teacher or mentor and often models specific behaviors in session. This is a goal driven approach, in which the goals are collaboratively determined and evaluated on a set basis.

**Application to AAT:** AAT is a goal-oriented and purposeful intervention. As such, AAT works well with aligning with the action therapies (Behavior, Cognitive-behavior, and Reality therapies). When implementing any intervention, the specific goals should be mutually determined by the counselor and client and evaluated on a regular basis. This is especially important as competent counselors utilizing AAT need to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of this approach and the therapy animal with the particular client.

From this approach, the counselor has an opportunity to be purposeful in their interactions with the animal. By showing care and by developing rules for the session, the counselor can model appropriate interactions with the animal, thereby creating a safe and trusting counseling milieu.

Specific ideas that are key to Behavior therapy (e.g. reinforcement, shaping) are integral to the practice of AAT. All therapy animals have been shaped in some way, e.g. learning obedience skills or having a safe and secure place to be in the counseling room. Often, the AAT

intervention is to teach the animal a new trick. Doing so allows the client to learn a series of valuable skills, such as frustration tolerance, goal setting, and planning (Chassman & Kinney, 2011). As rewarded behavior is repeated behavior, both the therapy animal and the client can benefit. Through this intervention, clients often learn that using positive words and actions will get you what you need from people.

Behavior therapy can be useful to teach various skills including: relaxation, assertion, and social skills. Each of these application areas is easily amenable to AAT interventions. For example, a client can learn how to give a dog a command. To accomplish this, a person needs to be firm but also respectful, which are both key traits of being assertive. When working on social skills training, a therapy animal can help the client learn about consequences of actions (Fawcett & Gullone, 2001) and social cues (Chassman & Kinney, 2011).

Going to counseling and interacting with an animal can be fun and rewarding (Chandler et al, 2011). As such, AAT can be used as an incentive or a punishment, e.g. provide contact with therapy animal as reward or take away contact as punishment. This may be particularly useful in the school counseling setting when a therapy animal is to visit with a handler. In a similar vein, AAT may increase a client's motivation to attend counseling (Chandler et al, 2011; Lange et al, 2007).

Being in the presence of an animal may be relaxing and calming for a client. As such, AAT can be helpful for managing anxiety (Chandler et al, 2010; Kruger & Serpell), a common presenting issue for those seeking behavior therapy. For those clients who are receiving exposure therapy, AAT interventions can help to decrease anxiety during this type of therapy (Lefkowitz, Paharia, Prout, Debiak, & Bleiberg, 2005).

A key aspect of behavior therapy is having the opportunity to practice a new behavior. Typically this is done through homework assignments or during the session, through role-playing with the counselor or group members (if in group counseling). The presence of a therapy animal provides a unique opportunity for the client to practice new behavior and/ or skills (Chandler et al, 2010). For instance, walking therapy (Fine, 2006) enables the client and animal to interact outside of the counseling office (under supervision of the counselor). A client with separation anxiety, for example, can benefit greatly from practicing leaving his or her parents and enjoying time with the therapy animal (Fine, 2006).

### *Cognitive-behavior Therapy*

**Summary:** Rational-emotive Behavior Therapy and Cognitive Therapy are the two most well known theories of this approach. This approach posits that people tend to engage in faulty thinking patterns. These thoughts, which are often based on strong beliefs, tend to cause both emotional and behavioral problems. A counselor working from this approach focuses on the client's cognitions and teaches the client how to gain control over his or her faulty thinking patterns. Often, behavioral exercises are incorporated.

**Application to AAT:** Being an extension of Behavior Therapy, a counselor working from a Cognitive-behavior approach can rely on many of the same principles as outlined in the previous

section. In addition, Cognitive-behavior Therapy (CBT) often targets some of the core beliefs that influence many of the problem behaviors seen in counseling. For example, through integrating AAT with CBT, clients can gain an increased sense of self-efficacy (Missel, 2001). AAT interventions help to reconstruct faulty thinking, for example, a client might report “I used to think I was this horrible kid but training my dog helped me realize I am not.”

Integrating AAT with CBT also allows the client to interact with the animal, allowing for more rapport building and the sharing of feelings (Chandler et al, 2005). Through this, there is a greater opportunity to explore faulty thinking patterns and unhealthy belief systems (Chandler et al, 2010). The client also has an opportunity to experience real life situations, at a safe distance (Parish-Plass, 2008) and to perceived these experiences and the self in new, different ways (Berget & Braastad, 2008). Role-playing with the counselor and/or the therapy animal can provide for these practice opportunities (Chandler et al, 2010).

CBT, like Behavior Therapy, can be very helpful for treating specific phobias. Often, people have phobias about animals that may often be seen in a counseling setting (e.g. dogs, cats, birds). Clients may even contact an agency or clinician that specializes in AAT to request work on a specific animal phobia (Chassman & Kinney, 2011). This type of exposure therapy would require competency in treating phobias as well as paying extra attention to the needs and safety of the animal.

### *Reality Therapy*

**Summary:** Reality Therapy is the last of the action therapies. This is a counseling approach that is based on choice theory (Glasser, 2001). This approach relies on two major principles: 1) that we need quality relationships in our lives and 2) problems tend to develop when we attempt to control others or when we resist the control by others (Corey, 2009). A counselor working from this approach would create a warm but challenging environment. Additionally, clients are encouraged to critically examine their current behavior to determine if these actions are getting them what they want in life.

**Application to AAT:** The presence of a therapy animal creates a warm, but challenging environment (Missel, 2001). This type of environment is exactly the type of environment best suited for reality therapy. The presence of a therapy animal also fulfills a need for love, belonging, and affection (Missel, 2001). As reality therapy is based on the idea of developing quality relationships, a relationship with an animal in a counseling session, can help to build this foundation. Additionally, many of the challenges a client might have with a therapy animal (e.g. overly controlling, having little patience), may also be seen in relationships outside of therapy (Chandler et al, 2010); this provides an opportunity to evaluate these behaviors in the counseling session, i.e. “Is what you are doing bringing those you need closer to you?”

Reality therapy also emphasizes personal responsibility. For those clients who will take care of an animal as their AAT intervention, this is an obvious way to learn responsibility (Missel, 2001). In particular, a counselor working from this perspective could apply the WDEP system (Corey, 2009) to the intervention of teaching a dog a trick (Minatrea & Wesley, 2008). For example, while a client is attempting to teach a dog a trick, the counselor might ask a “W”

question, “What do you want the dog to do?” The counselor might follow up with an “D” question, “What are you doing to get you what you want?” Through a carefully planned intervention and well-timed feedback from the counselor, this can provide an opportunity for client to evaluate their actions (Minatrea & Wesley, 2008).

Finally, reality therapy is simple for the client to learn and can be used in a short-term format; both of which are amenable to AAT. Clients can also learn to make plans on how to implement insights gained into therapy into their everyday lives. For example, a client may modify his or her behavior based on feedback from the therapy animal.

### *Solution-focused Therapy*

**Summary:** Solution-focused therapy is part of the postmodern theories (Corey, 2009), in that this approach is based on the idea that there are multiple truths. This is a strength based approach that emphasizes meaning making through discussion and careful questioning. The focus of therapy is on the present and co-creating solutions to presenting concerns. The solution-focused counselor views the client as expert and uses specific questions to help the client gain awareness about his/her strengths and personal resources.

**Application to AAT:** This is the one theory that has been carefully integrated into AAT. Pichot and Coulter (2007) have developed an excellent resource that describes using AAT within a solution-focused brief framework. There are several solution-focused principles that integrate well with AAT; first, having an animal in session can challenge the concept or expectation of counseling (Pichot & Coulter, 2007). Second, if counseling hasn’t been effective for a particular client, introducing AAT can be a refreshing change (e.g. “if something is not working, do something different”). Similarly, Chassman and Kinney (2011), describe implementing AAT as fun; which can be particularly useful for a client when traditional talk therapy is not effective.

Solution-focused counselors and clients work together to create solutions; according to Pichot and Coulter (2007), a partnership between the animal, the counselor, and the client is often the most effective strategy. From this perspective, the animal is truly a co-therapist and is fully integrated into the counseling process. A counselor working from this approach would routinely highlight the animal’s and client’s strengths, creating a positive therapeutic milieu. Additionally, therapy animals can help to model relationship skills (Chandler et al, 2010).

Another premise in solution-focused counseling is that interventions should be purposeful and the counselor should have the end in mind. One popular misconception of AAT is that the therapy animal is simply present in the room. However, in AAT, the integration of the animal is purposeful and intentional; two hallmarks of solution-focused therapy (Pichot & Coulter, 2007).

Another principle of this therapy is that small changes often lead to big changes. If a depressed client is able to laugh and interact with a therapy animal in session, this can have a powerful effect on the client, especially when this interaction is timed with carefully worded questions and statements by the solution-focused counselor. For example, the counselor could help the client notice how different he or she is when interacting with the animal. Also, if the client has

indicated they want to have more interactions with others, the counselor could highlight how part of their miracle is already happening in the session (Pichot & Coulter, 2007).

Finally, an essential aspect of solution-focused therapy is focusing on creating solutions. Therapy animals can provide opportunities for clients to rehearse new solutions in session (Pichot & Coulter, 2007). For example, developing parenting skills is a useful goal for AAT interventions. A skilled counselor working from this approach will be able to highlight times when the parent is interacting with the animal in a positive and encouraging way. When clients are aware of what they do well, they are able to pay more attention to their strengths out of session as well.

Similarly, if a client is learning how to train an animal during counseling, he or she may feel unskilled or incompetent in specific areas, e.g. impatient; often, these issues are also present outside of therapy. A counselor could use this moment as an opportunity for the client to rewrite that story of his/her life. Through this co-creation of new meaning, the client is working on altering their perception of self through attaining new knowledge and skills.

### *Family Systems*

**Summary:** Family systems theory suggests that people are connected to a much larger, living system. As such, even a slight change in one part of the system will result in a change in the other parts or for the system as a whole (Corey, 2009). From a family systems approach, counseling focuses on improving communication patterns and teaching new ways of interacting, both in the family, and in other systems.

**Application to AAT:** Pets often take on important roles in the family. As such, talking about animals can help to gain important information about family structure, dynamics, and functioning (Walsh, 2009). In particular, discussing the family's pet can be a way to assess for family violence as pet abuse is often an indicator of this (Walsh, 2009). Finally, Walsh (2009) identifies how exploring the loss of a pet (through death or forced separation), can be a healing aspect of counseling.

While an animal does not need to be present in counseling for the above to occur, the presence of a therapy animal may hasten these discussions. However, when an animal is present, the animal can often gauge the mood in room (Chassman & Kinney, 2011). Fine (2006) refers to this as the animal's ability to regulate the emotional climate in a counseling session. For example, when members of the family are yelling in session, the animal may walk away or may reach out to comfort one of the members. This can signal to the family that a new way of interacting may be more useful and helpful.

Secondly, the presence of an animal may trigger home dynamics in a session (Melson & Fine, 2006). For example, an adolescent might comment to the counselor how well behaved his/ her animal is in session. By exploring this comment, it may be discovered that the client's pet dog often misbehaves because no one in the family pays attention to the animal. Perhaps the adolescent also feels that no one in the family pays attention to him/ her as well. Often, these spontaneous discussions about the animal can lead to very revealing information about the client and the family system.

Often therapy animals are rescued or adopted animals. When working with children or adults who come from foster homes or who have been adopted, sharing the story of how the animal came to be adopted/ rescued can be useful. Many counselors will put together a photo album of the therapy animal to share with clients; this creative technique can enhance these discussions and the client's potential connection to the animal. Similarly, stories about the therapy animal's family (e.g. dog pack siblings) can help to connect the client to the animal.

Finally, the idea of Filial Pet therapy (Chassman, 2011) is promising. From this approach, a counselor would do a formal assessment and develop a treatment plan to target problem behavior such as misbehavior. The counselor would then invite the parent into the office to co-facilitate the interventions. Once this has proven successful, the focus moves to the client's home. The family pet is evaluated and provided training as needed. The counselor would then design interventions for the parent to use within the home with their child and the family pet, with regular contact and support from the counselor (Chassman, 2011).

### *Feminist Therapy:*

**Summary:** In feminist therapy, the focus is also on a system, but a system much larger than the family unit. As described by Corey (2009), "this is a systems approach that recognizes the cultural, social, and political factors that contribute to an individuals' problem" (p. 456). A counselor working from this approach would pay special attention to 1) creating a counseling relationship that is egalitarian in nature, and 2) increasing client's sense of empowerment.

**Application to AAT:** In relation to the other theories discussed thus far, feminist therapy has received the least attention in the scholarly literature. In a qualitative study, Meinersmann and colleagues (2008) explored how equine-facilitated psychotherapy would benefit adult female survivors of abuse. One key theme from the data analysis was "I can have power." Through effectively working with these large animals, the women were able to develop a sense of control and power. This experiential learning was then translated into their lives; in that they "realized they did not need to feel powerless anymore" (Meinersmann, Bradberry, & Roberts, 2008, p. 39). Secondly, the women were able to learn how to respect the animal's boundaries as well as set boundaries with the animal. Overall, the experience was described as empowering, a key aspect of feminist therapy.

One of the main benefits of AAT is that clients can experience a less threatening, and thus, safer counseling relationship (Fine, 2006). As the heart of feminist therapy is a focus on an equal relationship between the counselor and the client, AAT may be a useful addition to fostering this type of working alliance. In a similar vein, feminist counselors often rely on self-disclosure to build connections with the client and to develop the relationship. Animals can assist with the disclosure process by allowing clients to freely disclose. Additionally, while an animal cannot self-disclose in the typical sense, the animal can communicate powerful messages to the client (e.g. laying head on client's lap, lying at client's feet, running to greet client). All of these examples communicate a sense of affection and concern for the client, which can be a powerful experience.

As feminist therapy looks at all forms of oppression and encourages both individual and societal change, it may be useful to explore animal rights. While a client might have difficulty at first advocating for him or herself, he or she could be helpful to advocate for animal rights. By learning the skills for social advocacy, the client can then begin to apply these concepts to his or her life. Finally, a typical intervention of feminist therapy is assertiveness training. Similar to behavior therapy, animals in counseling can provide the client with opportunities to practice assertive behavior.

## G. References

- Berget, B., & Braastad, B. O. (2008). Theoretical framework for animal-assisted interventions: Implications for practice. *Therapeutic Communities, 29*, 323-337.
- Chalquist, C. (2009). A look at the ecotherapy research evidence. *Ecopsychology, 1*, 64-74.
- Chandler, C. K. (2005). *Animal assisted therapy in counseling*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Chandler, C. K., Portrie-Bethke, T. L., Barrio Minton, C. A., Fernando, D. M., & O'Callaghan, D. M. (2010). Matching animal-assisted therapy techniques and intentions with counseling guiding theories. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 32*, 354-374.
- Chassman, L. (2011). Filial pet therapy. Retrieved from <http://animalassistedtherapyprograms.com/filial-pet-therapy.html>
- Chassman, L., & Kinney, E. (2011, February). *Integrating dogs into your professional practice*. Workshop presented at Animal-assisted Therapy Programs of Colorado, Denver, CO.
- Corey, G. (2009). *Theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy. (8th edition)*. Pacific, CA: Brooks/ Cole.
- Fawcett, N. R., Gullone, E. (2001). Cute and cuddly and a whole lot more? A call for empirical investigation into the therapeutic benefits of human-animal interaction for children. *Behaviour Change, 18*, 124-133.
- Fine, A. H. (2006). Incorporating animal-assisted therapy into psychotherapy: Guidelines and suggestions for therapists. In A. H. Fine (Ed.), *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Theoretical foundations and guidelines for practice* (pp. 167-206). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Friesen, L. (2010). Exploring animal-assisted programs with children in school and therapeutic contexts. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 37*, 261-267.
- Gammonly, J., Howie, A., Kirwin, S., Zapf, S., Frye, J., Freeman, G., & Stuart-Russell, R. (1997). *Animal-assisted therapy: Therapeutic interventions*. Washington, DC: Delta Society.

Glasser, W. (2001). *Counseling with choice theory: The new reality therapy*. New York: Harper Collins.

Grover, S. (2010). *101 Creative ideas for animal assisted therapy: Interventions for AAT teams and working professionals*. Motivational Press.

Gullone, E. (2003). The proposed benefits of incorporating non-human animals into preventative efforts for Conduct Disorder. *Anthrozoos*, 16, 160-174.

Hart, L. A. (2006). Community context and psychosocial benefits of animal companionship. In A. H. Fine (Ed.), *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Theoretical foundations and guidelines for practice* (pp. 73-94). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Johnson, A. (2011, February 9). Helping youth heal while they teach dogs to heal. Retrieved <http://my.counseling.org/2011/02/11/helping-youth-heal-while-they-teach-dogs-to-heel/>

King, L.M. (2007). *Animal-assisted therapy: A guide for professional counselors, school counselors, social workers, and educators*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse.

Kruger, K. A., & Serpell, J. A. (2006). Animal-assisted interventions in mental health: Definitions and theoretical foundations. In A. H. Fine (Ed.), *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Theoretical foundations and guidelines for practice* (pp. 21-38). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Lange, A. M., Cox, J. A., Bernert, D. J., & Jenkins, C. D. (2007). Is counseling going to the dogs? An exploratory study related to the inclusion of an animal in group counseling with adolescents. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 2, 17-31.

Lefkowitz, C., Paharia, I., Prout, M., Debiak, D., & Bleiberg, J. (2005). Animal-assisted therapy for prolonged exposure: A treatment for survivors of sexual assault suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder. *Society and Animals*, 13, 275-295.

Lind, N. (2009). *Animal-assisted therapy activities to motivate and inspire*. Lombard, IL: PYOW Publishing, Ink.

Meinersmann, K.M., Bradberry, J., & Roberts, F.B. (2008). Equine-facilitated psychotherapy with adult female survivors of abuse. *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing*, 46, 37-42.

Melson, G. F., & Fine, A. H. (2006). Animals in the lives of children. In A. H. Fine (Ed.), *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Theoretical foundations and guidelines for practice* (pp. 207-226). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Minatrea, N. B., & Wesley, M. C. (2008). Reality therapy goes to the dogs. *International Journal of Reality Therapy*, 28, 69-77.

Missel, M. R. (2001). The use of choice theory in animal assisted therapy for children and young adults. *International Journal of Reality Therapy*, 20, 40-41.

Odendaal, J. S. J. (2000). Animal-assisted therapy – magic or medicine? *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 49, 275-280.

Parish-Plass, N. (2008). Animal-assisted therapy with children suffering from insecure attachment due to abuse and neglect: A method to lower the risk of intergenerational transmission of abuse? *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 13, 7-30.

Parshall, D. P. (2003). Research and reflection: Animal-assisted therapy in mental health settings. *Counseling and Values*, 48, 47-48.

Pichot, T., & Coulter, M. (2007). *Animal-assisted brief therapy: A solution-focused approach*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.

Therapy Dogs International (2009). Therapy Dogs International Website. Retrieved from <http://www.tdi-dog.org/>

Walsh, F. (2009). Human-animal bonds II: The role of pets in family systems and family therapy. *Family Process*, 48, 481-499.

Wilson, E. O. (1993). Biophilia and the conservation ethic. In S. R. Kellert & E. O. Wilson (Eds.), *The biophilia hypothesis* (pp. 31-41). Washington, DC: Island Press.

Yalom (2002). *The gift of therapy: An open letter to a new generation of therapists and their patients*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.