

Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) - Getting Started



What is Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT)?

AAT involves health care professionals working with a therapy dog, or other animals, to achieve certain goals with their clients or patients. Physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, recreation therapists, social workers, psychologists and others may incorporate AAT into scheduled visits, either routinely or as needed. The benefits of AAT are supported by literature published in professional journals. Ottawa Therapy Dogs (OTD) has participated in this research.

Who Benefits from AAT?

Anyone who loves dogs and is not allergic or afraid of them probably will enjoy and derive benefit from AAT. A therapy dog is non-judgmental, calming, and fun. Those who feel depressed, socially isolated or not motivated to work on treatment goals often benefit. The presence of a therapy dog can turn a routine therapy session into one long remembered. The animal-human bond can nurture trust and enhance the patient-therapist relationship.

How can a health care professional get started with AAT?

This will depend on where you work, whether OTD teams already are involved at your facility and whether you intend to work with your own dog or an OTD team.

If you want to work with your own dog, have it properly evaluated. OTD evaluators are qualified to determine whether or not your dog can do this kind of work reliably and safely. Professional liability and insurance needs also have to be seriously examined. Health care professionals who want to involve their dog in therapy are encouraged to work with a therapy dog organization such as OTD because it can provide ongoing support and mentoring.

While there may be advantages to health care professionals working with their own dogs, generally it is much easier and less stressful to work with a certified team. This allows the professional to focus on the patient while the OTD handler looks after the dog. Also, if you work with an OTD team, insurance and liability issues for the handler and the dog are covered when the team completes the necessary evaluation and registration process. An OTD team can be arranged by collaborating directly with the recreational therapist or whoever is responsible at your facility for coordinating therapy dog visits.

How can OTD handlers support client goals?

Many OTD handlers are eager to assist health care professionals and work well under their direction and supervision. Occupational therapists may involve a team in activities to improve upper body strength or fine motor movements (i.e. chasing a ball, patting the dog). Physiotherapists may ask handlers to practise walking with patients by using a double leash technique (i.e. two leashes on the dog: one is held by the patient and the other, by the handler to ensure safety). Speech-language pathologists may involve a therapy dog team in practising speech, listening, reading or writing activities.

OTD handlers may wish to speak to therapists and educate them about AAT. It is not covered routinely in university course work.

Are there any safety risks?

As with any therapy activity, there are risks unless care and attention is taken. Be sure to obtain consent first, either directly from the client or from the Substitute Decision Maker (SDM). This is often a spouse or other family member, if the client is not capable of providing consent. Clients can be protected from the spread of disease by routine hand washing before and after each AAT session.

Professionals and handlers need to work collaboratively to ensure safety both for the client and the animal. You will need to watch for signs of stress in the dog, ensure that physical activities are carried out on a skid-free surface and provide the animal with appropriate breaks and water. Sessions will need to be cancelled when the client, the handler or the dog is ill. Benefits can far outweigh any risks, when carefully planned.

Getting Started - Useful Books

Fine, Aubrey. Handbook on Animal Assisted Therapy: Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice. Elsevier Press. 2010.

Butler, Kris. Therapy Dogs: Compassionate Modalities. Roles and Goals for Clinical Environments. FunPuddle Publishing Associates. 2004.

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OTD Toolbox Infosheet #9

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Good dogs doing great work!

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