

"Nobody ever asks me that!"

Exploring the Clinical Applications of Human-Animal Relationships

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Objectives

- 01 Assess**
human-animal relationships in individual, family and community life
- 02 Identify**
the conditions under which animals become a barrier to service
- 03 Apply**
the "Matrix of Opportunity" to enhance service delivery and adherence
- 04 Support**
the effective application of animals in medical, social, and mental health services

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Social workers have been exploring HAR for 40+ years

- 01 Anthrozoology**
Study of human + non-human animal relationships and interactions
- 02 Pets and risk**
Pet loss and animal abuse/interpersonal violence
- 03 Animal-Assisted Therapy**
Delta Society = foundational model of AAT
- 04 "Veterinary Social Work"**
Focus on human-animal relationships + animal care settings (2016)

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Transforming the Social Work Lens

- Traditional emphasis is anthropocentric (Besthorn, 2000; Besthorn & Saleeby, 2003)
- "One Health" defines health as an ecosystems issue (OHI, 2013)
- Social science is largely absent from interdisciplinary discussions about ecosystem health (Hanrahan, 2014)
- Interprofessional practice requires a biocentric and collaborative approach



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Animal keeping in the U.S.*



Dog	Cat	Fish	Bird	Horse
Average 146	Average 178	2.1	2.1	2.1
44.6% households	26% households	2.7% households	2.5% households	.02% households

*Prevalent and persistent!

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What percentage of practicing social workers ask about pets during client assessment?

- a) 20%
- b) 30%
- c) 45%
- d) 60%

(Risley-Curtiss, 2010)

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Bio-centric Interprofessional Practice Requires:

1. **Including animals** in a **functional assessment** of the client system
2. **Addressing animal issues** in service to client needs
3. **Mobilizing pet relationships**, when appropriate
4. **Including animal relationship/risk issues** in organizational and social policy

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Animals contribute to individual and family health


- **Augment** human social support, particularly as **social networks decline** (Barker and Wolen, 2008; Sable, 1995)
- Provide a **link** to past relationships and personal history (Savishinsky, 1985)
- **Mediate** family interactions, **buffer** conflict, and **reinforce** family identity (Cain, 1983; Cain, 1985; Strand, 2004; Tannen, 2004)
- **Increase** family cohesion and **improve** adjustment/adaptability during crisis and transition (Allen, 1995; Connell et al., 2007; Cox, 1993; Fritz et al., 1996; Mueller & Callina, 2014)



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Animals contribute to community health

- Animals **reduce** social isolation, **improve** community integration, and **boost** social capital (Garity & Stallones, 1998; Allen & Blascovich, 1996; Putnam, 2000)
- Animals **facilitate** human social approach (Melson, 2002), social contact (Messent, 1983; McNicholas & Collis, 2000), and conversations between strangers/casual acquaintances (Messent et al., 1981; Rogers et al., 1993)



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Animals improve QOL during illness

- **Support** constancy and continuity when daily routines and relationships are disrupted (Geisler, 2004)
- **Facilitate** safe focus of conversation and ability to exercise independence and control (Geisler, 2004)
- **Provide** meaningful occupation for those with chronic mental illness (Zimolag & Krupa, 2009)
- **Improve** adjustment of children to the illness/death of a parent (Ravels, et al., 1994) and buffer bereavement for parents who lose a child (Adkins & Rajecki, 1999)



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Animals contribute to risk

- Co-occurring **cross-species abuse and neglect** (HSUS, 2001)
- **Animal hoarding**, particularly in urban areas (Nathanson, 2009)
- **Animal loss** is one of the most common stressors in midlife (Gage & Holcomb, 1991) and can be highly disruptive to functioning (McCutcheon & Fleming, 2001; Field et al., 2009; Gosse & Barnes, 1994)
- **Physical injuries** (CDC, 2009) and **zoonotic disease**
- Financial and caregiving **strain** (Connell et al., 2007)
- **Barriers to care**, particularly around emergency services and housing

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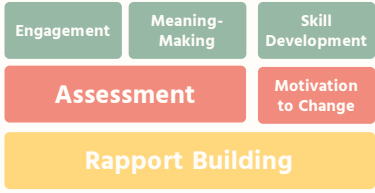
Integrating animals in practice:

Applying the “Matrix of Opportunity”



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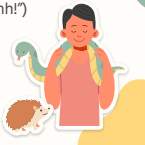
The Matrix of Opportunity



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The foundation: Rapport (+ trust)

1. Dare to inquire!
2. An animal does not need to be physically present to enhance rapport-building
3. Storytelling is a powerful tool
4. Clinician bias = invisible barrier ("ewwww!" vs. "ohhhhh!")



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Assessment: Tune your ear to location and function

- *What is the place and consequence of animals in this client system? (Stability, cohesion, adaptability, identity)*
- *Are these human-animal relationships, human-animal bonds, or both?*
- *Are animals a risk factor in the system? How can we reduce/neutralize that risk? (Conflict, injury, abuse/neglect, zoonotic disease, hoarding, financial issues)*



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Assessing the human-animal bond



(Johnston et al, 1992; Lagoni et al, 1994)

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...and some questions I might ask

- Have you always had animals in your life?
- Do you have multiple animals? (Listen for longevity and turnover)
- What does your animal do for/with you?
- Where does your animal sleep?
- Who is in charge of caregiving?
- To what degree are the animal's needs considered in big decisions?
- How is the animal corrected when they may a mistake?
- What happens to the animal when something bad happens?

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Animals in intervention: Motivation, engagement, meaning + skills

1. Can client's animal be mobilized as a protective factor in the system?
2. Can client's animals enhance treatment adherence, improve outcomes, or improve coping?
 - Motivate client to change targeted health behaviors?
 - Motivate survival behaviors?
 - Illustrate possibility or resilience?
 - Help client practice new physical, emotional, or social skills?
 - Strengthen connections to social networks/community?



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Case example: "Stephanie"

34 y.o. married, Caucasian female
 Presented for MDD and PTSD; previous tx engagement inconsistent
 Hx childhood sexual abuse
 Family system includes dog
 Nature-based spiritual practice
 Interest in environmental/social justice
 Social network sparse, poor emotional/time boundaries

Tx goals:
 Improve self-regulation skills
 Improve interpersonal boundaries
 Reduce helplessness and despair

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Remember:

Ask about animals at every touchpoint

Consult, collaborate, & cultivate

Cross-report danger and risk

Identify + remove organizational barriers to care

Consider access to healthy human-animal relationships an issue of social justice

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Recommended Reading

Ryan, T. (Ed.) (2014)
Animals in Social Work: Why and How They Matter

Kogan, L. & Blazina, C. (Eds.) (2019)
Clinician's Guide to Treating Companion Animal Issues

Fine, A. (Ed.) (2019)
Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy

Kogan, L. & Erdman, P. (Eds.) (2020)
Pet Loss, Grief, and Therapeutic Interventions

Loue, S. & Linden, P. (Eds.) (2022)
The Comprehensive Guide to Interdisciplinary Veterinary Social Work

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