

# Feline-assisted therapy: a promising part of animal-assisted therapy (AAT)

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## Abstract

The amount of literature describing the effect of human-animal interactions is quite large. The available sources describe its impact in many different areas, environments and effects. The majority of studies in this area are focussed on the use of the dog. Moreover, there are many works dedicated to therapeutic interaction with horses and only a small portion of studies is reporting usage of small or exotic mammals or farm animals. It is very surprising that although the cat is the second most-owned animal, there is little literature describing the use of a cat as a beneficial assistant in human-animal intervention. The question is why?

**Key words:** cat; animal-assisted therapy; feline-assisted therapy; human-animal interaction, human-cat interaction

## Introduction

Human-animal interactions are gaining popularity all over the world, especially in the domain of animals' effect on human health. Marino (2012) describes the positive influence of these interactions in every human life stage.<sup>1</sup> The review suggests that for example in childhood interactions with an animal can improve emotional stability in children with emotional disorders or increase the frequency of social contact in autistic children. During middle age, human-animal interaction could be beneficial for example for adults with psychiatric disorders to enhance self-efficacy and coping skills. In older adults, who sometimes suffer from loneliness, the presence of an animal can also support social contact and there is also evidence that companion animals increase physical activity and physical functioning in healthy older adults.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, older adults with pathological conditions such as dementia also benefit from interactions with animals. The positive effect was found in treating depressive symptoms, apathy, agitation and improving the quality of social interaction.<sup>3</sup> Most research is focussed on canine-assisted and equine-assisted

interventions, however, the number of published papers with the use of husbandry animals, small mammals, birds, fish and other animals is growing.<sup>1</sup>

One of the animals that can be used as a therapeutic animal is the cat. Surprisingly, only a little research has been done on this topic, although the cat is the second most-owned animal.<sup>4</sup> Reviewing the literature and using keywords like “cat and animal-assisted therapy”, “cat and animal-assisted activity” or “cat and human-animal interaction” we reviewed seven articles. Few authors include cats as well as other animals in their work. Somerville *et al.* (2008) report no effect of dog or cat-therapist on blood pressure or pulse.<sup>5</sup> In this study authors used cats obtained from a shelter, thus none of them had been kept in a home setting or even trained as a therapy animal. Barak *et al.* (2001) describe positive effect of a dog and a cat session on social functioning of geriatric schizophrenic patients, but they did not differ results between these two animals, so it is not possible to tell whether this effect was brought on by a dog or a cat or both.<sup>6</sup>

A study by Hart *et al.* (2018) focussing specifically on human-cat interaction suggests, that cats can be social mediators for children with less severe forms of autistic spectrum disorder (ASD).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, some family cats are more affectionate towards ASD children than towards adults or other children in the family. Cats improve ASD children's quality of life, mood and encourage them to talk or express emotions.<sup>7</sup> Cats can decrease the negative mood of their owners, although the effect on positive mood was not observed.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, adults aged 50 with previous cat ownership are at a lower risk of developing cardiovascular disease and myocardial infarction however, no protective effect has been associated with present cat-ownership.<sup>9</sup> Stasi *et al.* (2004) reported that geriatric patients undergoing a 6-week therapy session with a cat showed lower depressive symptoms and a decrease in blood pressure values.<sup>10</sup> Another study, that must be considered on this topic is a clinical note published by Wells *et al.* (1997).<sup>11</sup> Authors

describe changes in communication of psychotherapy clients after feral cats started entering mental health facility. Persons, who were seriously vulnerable, such as persons with schizophrenia, multiple personality disorders or severe character pathology bonded with the animal and started speaking to the therapist about themselves through the cats. An important change was observed in victims of childhood sexual, physical and emotional abuse. These clients paid particular attention to the ways the cats manage to survive in the winter when they face other hardships and natural enemies. They quickly identified with the cats who were also seen as victims and survivors because of their own perceived experiences of hardship. The authors then describe the situation of an obsessive-compulsive client who was distressed by her obsessive conviction that she could easily hurt others with whom she interacted. After interacting with the cat, she realised the cat's superior survival capabilities and found out the cat sensed no danger from her. This resulted in restructuring the client's faulty thinking.

## Conclusion

According to available literature, it seems that feline-assisted therapy has great potential and the authors hope to conduct future studies on this subject. Unfortunately, there is currently little literature relating to this area of interest and it is very difficult to follow-up on other works.

## Conflict of interests

The authors have no conflicts of interests to declare.

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