

## **Animals in Service for Mental Health - Perspective**

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Animals in service for mental health had been known to be used in various capacities and for the achievement of specific outcomes, such as the improvement of social, emotional, and cognitive functioning; reduction in anxiety levels; amongst other therapeutic values. The Paws for People (Pet-Assisted Visitation Volunteer Services, or PAWS) organisation based in the United States, listed a range of benefits of animal therapy in mental health, and include: lifts spirits and lessens depression; decreases feelings of isolation and alienation; encourages communication; provides comfort; increases socialization and sense of community; reduces boredom; decreases anxiety; helps children overcome speech and emotional disorders; creates motivation for the client to recover faster and reduces loneliness [1].

The historic use of Animal Assisted Therapy (the term normally used when a clinician provides therapy with the assistance of an animal) derived from the belief, at the time, that animals had supernatural powers. In modern times animals are seen as “agents of socialisation” and as providers of “social support and relaxation [2]. In 1860, the historic Bethlem Psychiatric Hospital in England introduced animals to the ward, and it’s believed to have made a significant positive impact on the morale of the patients [3]. Sigmund Freud involved his dog (Jofi) during his pioneering sessions of psychoanalysis and noted that the presence of the dog instilled a sense of security and confidence in the patients, allowing the patients to speak without fear as “their speech would not shock or disturb the dog and this reassured them and so encouraged them to relax and confide” [4].

A psychiatric social worker in a forensic psychiatric hospital in the United States carried out a year-long study on the effects of Animal Assisted Therapy and noted a 50% reduction in the need for medication in the participants of the Animal Assisted Therapy group, compared with the group who did not receive Animal Assisted Therapy. Where no animals were introduced to a ward, eight suicide attempts were recorded, and no suicide attempts in the ward where animals were introduced. The study further indicated a lower level of violence recorded in the Animal Assisted Therapy group (Lee 1987) [5].

Various terms had been used for animals who are providing a service to persons with mental disorders and these include, “therapy animals”, “assisted therapy animals”, “emotional support animals” and “service animals”. Dogs had been historically introduced as service animals for persons who are blind and that enabled the person to navigate their way around, fulfilling an important role in creating autonomy of the person. As for a blind person, animals deployed as providing a service to a person with a mental disorder, whether in a therapeutic or emotional support capacity, do also create autonomy of the person, just in a different manner as for a blind person.

Although dogs are known to be utilised in the treatment of mental disorders and to provide psychosocial support of persons with mental disorders, other types of animals had also been deployed to fulfil this role, and ranges from parrots, cats, goats, horses, to dolphins [6]. Regulatory systems in disability policies and legislations do not always acknowledge all types of animals as service animals, with the exception of dogs.

Parrots are increasingly being used as service animals to persons with mental disorders and is able to provide a calming influence over those suffering from various levels of anxieties [7], brought on conditions ranging from bipolar mood disorder to schizophrenia.

As a person living with schizophrenia and having an African Grey parrot as a companion and service animal, I can testify to the invaluable role she (my parrot) plays in my life and in my daily living activities. I have difficulty with concentration and memory and by living a structured life I am more equipped to manage these difficulties. The parrot plays her part in assisting me, where she has learnt my daily routine and through her ability to speak (short phrases), she is able to remind me of the sequence of my daily routine. The parrot demands a lot of attention which helps to direct my thoughts on the present and on my surroundings, which otherwise could easily result in getting consumed by thoughts that are separated from reality. Having the responsibility to care for an animal gives purpose to life and when thoughts of suicide emerge, the responsibility for another (animal) life takes precedence.

Treating mental disorders need to be approached in a holistic manner and not one intervention for example, pharmacology. Mental disorders affect a person in all aspects of life. Additional interventions that had proved beneficial in the management of mental disorders include psychotherapy, psychosocial rehabilitation programs, healthy lifestyle, support at home, and support in education or work environments. Animals in service for mental health can be a greatly beneficial intervention and improve the quality of life of the person affected.

Case studies and research papers available suggest that the benefits of animals in service for mental health are overall positive. However, there is a need for more evidence-based information, both qualitative and quantitative studies in the area of animals in service for mental health and the various roles animals play in improving the quality of life of persons with mental disorders.

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