

# The Fascinating History of Animal-Assisted Therapy

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## The History of Animal-Assisted Therapy Began in Greece

In 600 BC, the Greeks were the first to notice that the presence of horses seemed to lift the spirits of seriously ill patients.

There aren't many other mentions of animal-assisted therapy after that until the 1600s. At this point, doctors again turned to horses to help improve the mental and physical health of their patients.

Florence Nightingale revisited the benefits of animal interactions for her patients in the 1800s. She observed that small pets seemed to reduce anxiety in her psychiatric patients.

Her notes sparked a wave of interest in the use of animals as a healing force. Several noted physicians started informal experiments about how animals affect the human psyche.

In 1933 Sigmund Freud noted that having his chow present during therapy helped calm his patients. This sparked an upswing with regard to formal studies surrounding animal therapy.

## Formal Research into the Benefits of Animal-Assisted Therapy

During the 1960s, research involving animal therapy began in earnest. Dr. Boris Levinson was first out of the starting blocks. He noted noticeable changes in his patients when his dog was present in therapy sessions too.

Unfortunately, nobody took Dr. Levinson seriously. That is, until Freud's death and the later publication of his early findings.

Dr. Levinson published a book called 'Pet-Oriented Child Psychotherapy'. This work sparked a renewed interest in the field.

His next step was starting the Animal Assisted Therapy movement. This approach advocated the use of pets to provide a safe environment for patients of all ages.

# **Animal-Assisted Therapy Takes Off**

In 1969, the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association came to light. This institution provides therapeutic riding lessons for disabled children and adults.

Elaine Smith founded Therapy Dogs International (TDI) during 1976. This organization focusses on increasing the availability of therapy [dogs for depression](#).

The Delta Foundation came about in 1977. It aimed to study the human-animal connection in more detail.

In 1981, the first conference centered on this inter-species bond took place at the University of Pennsylvania.

By the 1990s, animal-assisted therapy started to gain acceptance worldwide. This led to the establishment of the International Association for Human-Animal Interaction Organization.

## **Modern-Day Animal Therapy**

Today, the medical fraternity accepts animal-assisted therapy as a valid field. It's widely used as an effective treatment for several mental and emotional issues.

Therapists use cats, pigs, birds, and even dolphins in these therapies, but horses and dogs are most commonplace.

These are some of the most common types of animal-assisted therapy used today:

### **Canine-Assisted Therapy**

Therapy dogs undergo training to exhibit behaviors that patients find friendly and welcoming. They comfort patients with body contact as a means to promote feelings of calm and well-being.

Some therapy dogs interact with patients by engaging in activities to improve motor skills. Others encourage trusting relationships with others.

These interactions are useful to treat conditions like PTSD, autism, dementia, and ADHD.

Dogs may also take part in classroom activities. They can help children develop creative skills. They can also encourage participation in group activities.

Some dogs learn to work in canine-assisted reading programs. These involve helping children with learning disabilities practice reading in a non-judgemental environment.

### **Horses in Therapy**

Horses take part in three different types of animal-assisted therapy.

Therapeutic horseback riding is an excellent low-impact exercise. It's good for developing muscle tone, coordination, and confidence. It's mainly used for patients with impaired mobility.

Hippotherapy uses horses as a type of occupational therapy. Here the focus is on addressing cognitive, social, psychological, behavioral, and physical problems.

Equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) involves using horses to help people with mental health issues.

## **How Can Animal-Assisted Therapy Help?**

Nowadays, AAT takes place in schools, prisons, nursing homes, and private facilities. Its primary purpose is to educate and motivate people with various conditions.

Due to its non-invasive nature, there are few limits to how animal-assisted therapy can benefit patients.

It's most often used to treat the following range of conditions:

### **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder**

In 2013, Sabrina E.B. Shuck pioneered the use of dogs to help children with ADHD gain focus.

She found that therapy dogs engaged these children. They also helped them join in less desirable activities.

In its simplest form, this therapy uses animal interactions to reward desirable behavior. Often this is enough motivation to keep these children fully immersed in their tasks.

She also noted a marked improvement in these children's social skills and self-esteem.

### **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder**

The first type of therapy for PTSD occurred between 1944 and 1945 at Pawling Air Force Base. Here, convalescing soldiers got involved with caring for farm animals as part of the healing process.

Recent studies have revealed that working with an animal creates a constant reminder that threat is a thing of the past. Using this method, researchers noticed that PTSD symptoms decreased in almost all participants.

It's now accepted practice for people with PTSD to have a therapy dog as their constant companion.

## **Autism Spectrum Disorder**

During 2011, researchers started paying attention to interactions between ASD sufferers and animals. They noticed a significant increase in pro-social behavior during these engagements.

At the same time, researchers noticed a corresponding decrease in self-absorption.

This may be due to the fact that dogs don't recognize anti-social cues. Due to this, they continue interacting with the child no matter how they respond.

## **More About Health Care Innovations**

The history of animal-assisted therapy has progressed in line with our own understanding of the human condition.

As we uncover more about this complex bond, we're bound to refine this type of therapy even more.

We cover all aspects of health care in our blog. So, if you enjoyed this article, please keep reading for more information on the intricacies of the health industry.