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The Experience of Social Workers Who Utilize Therapy Dogs in Practice

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Introduction

Most of the current research regarding therapy dogs in the field of social work has focused on the benefits to the clients with a gap in the literature in regard to the experience of social workers.

- Animal assisted therapy (AAT), which incorporates animals into structured therapeutic interventions with clearly defined objectives, and its use in clinical interventions has shown to increase social interactions, communication, and the overall health and safety of clients. ¹
- A certified therapy dog can be defined as a dog that is trained to provide affection and comfort to people in locations such as schools, hospitals, nursing facilities, disaster areas, and office/outpatient settings. ²

Research Aim

This study was conducted to look at the phenomenological experience of licensed social workers who currently utilize certified therapy dogs in their practice.

Methods

- Seven licensed social workers across the United States individually participated in semi-structured interviews for approximately sixty minutes.
- The participants were all white females between the ages of 34 and 54.
- The snowball method of sampling was used to recruit participants.
- Licensure was required for participants to ensure that a comparable level of services were being provided to clients by the social workers.
- Interviews were conducted over the phone or via electronic mail using a semi-structured interview guide comprised of fourteen questions.
- This phenomenological study looked at all aspects of the experience as described by the participants, including physical surroundings, type of activity and interventions, outcomes, social and personal interactions, emotions, belief or value systems, and attitudes. The researcher then identified commonalities among these aspects by coding each interview transcript to identify main themes.



Figure 1. Catherine Ricchetti, LCSWR, of Guilderland Schools with therapy dogs Miss Iggy and Willow (<https://blog.timesunion.com/dogs/wagging-tails-brighten-guilderland-school/4619>)

Theme	Number of Participants Who Identified With Theme
Intensive Coordination and Preparation with Identified Facility	7
Intensive and On-Going Training and Support Needed	6
Increased Organic Learning Opportunities	6
Increased Job Satisfaction	5

Figure 2. Major Themes Identified by Participants



Figure 3. Julie Pacquette, LCSW, with therapy dog Bandit. (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/julie-m-paquette-lcswcad-c-topsham-me/307229>)

Results

Four main themes were derived from the coded data set of seven interviews of licensed social workers who utilize therapy dogs in their practice.

Theme 1: Coordination and Preparation with Identified Facility – “I had to get letters from other AAT programs, met with the school nurse about allergies and asthma, and then created protocols like he is bathed every three weeks at home, it will be a dog with hair and not fur, he gets no nut based foods, he’s not allowed to lick, and I created a protocol for those who fear or worry about dogs. I had to create a proposal to ask permission as well that thought through potential problems. I had to know what I will be asked, know what are the worries and concerns of the district, and weigh out the cons.” Catherine Ricchetti

Theme 2: Intensive and On-Going Training and Support – “My strongest recommendation is to GET TRAINING ABOUT CANINES! It is not enough to know about human clients. If partnering with a canine, the professional must have knowledge and skills with canines as well as with humans. This includes behavior, training methods, training equipment, the humane hierarchy, zoonoses, health and welfare, obtaining consent (from the canine), etc. – all separate from techniques of incorporating interacting with a canine into therapeutic interventions.” Ann Howie

Theme 3: Increased Organic Learning Opportunities – “I use the experiential model of doing to create change and she provides the opportunity to take clients out of office, on walks, into the woods, or into the community, like Petco. I have social anxiety clients who would walk her at the same time, same place each week and people would start to ask her about him...It gave her a safe space to work on her social anxiety. It was harder to work on that without the dog and he was a buffer for social interactions.” Alison Leslie

Theme 4: Increased Job Satisfaction – “In some ways it helps with my self-care [during practice hours]. I have to plan to take the dogs out for walks between sessions and it’s really cool to have a dog there at work. It’s like a coworker that doesn’t talk back, comforts me, and it’s a fun challenge for me to find effective ways to add them into my practice.” Katherine Wenocur

Future Implications

- Research Recommendations
 - More research is needed to get a better understanding of the experience of social workers who utilize therapy dogs in their practice, including the use of therapy dogs in settings such as hospitals, locations of natural disasters, and hospice settings, as well as the experience of male or non-white social workers, and training requirements for best practice.
 - More research should be done on the continued supervision and peer support available to social workers who utilize therapy dogs in their practice.
- Practice Recommendation
 - This research can be used to help create a protocol for billing insurances for the use of therapy dogs as an intervention.
 - This research may clarify the usefulness and benefits of animal assisted therapy and facilitate decision making about including AAT in clinical social work practice.

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