Shepherd's "Gentle Giant": Stories of a Canine Comforter

Rebecca McWalters, BSN, RN, CRRN; Linda Putnam, RN, CRRN; Elyse Costner, RN, CRRN; Gloria Reid, RN, CRRN

Shepherd Center
2020 Peachtree Road, NW
Atlanta, GA 30309-1465
404-352-2020 shepherd.org

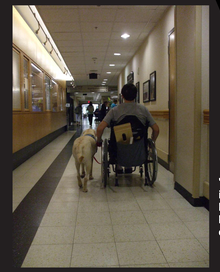
Introduction

Research has long shown the physiological benefits of human-animal interactions. Many studies have demonstrated that the benefits of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) include reduction in blood pressure and heart rate, decreased perception of pain and improved physical strength and endurance. The psychological benefits of positive emotional connections and comfort should also be considered when evaluating the effectiveness of AAT in a rehabilitation setting. These positive effects have been described by individuals after interactions with Frosty, the "Gentle Giant," one of our rehab center's facility dogs.

CDC Guidelines Include:

- Using animals that are fully/currently vaccinated, healthy, clean, well-groomed and under regular care of a veterinarian
- Using animals that are properly trained and under direction of an experienced handler
- Having participants practice hand hygiene before and after every animal contact
- Minimizing potential allergic responses by minimizing dander (i.e., brushing or combing the animal's hair/coat before a visit)
- Having hospital policies and procedures in place specifying correct actions to take in the event of a bite, scratch or disease detection; these include wound care, event reporting, and removal of animal from program
- Restricting animals' access to other hospital areas including medication and food preparation areas, ORs and storage areas

"Frosty makes me feel like I have a new best friend."
Joshua, adolescent pt.



"Frosty is the best medicine there is. It doesn't matter what is happening when Frosty climbs into bed with my son, all worries are diminished."
Stacy, mother of adolescent pt.

Definition of AAT

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) can be described as the utilization of animals to provide therapeutic, educational, and diversional interventions. These animals are used to elicit a positive response from an individual. Over the last 15 years, the popularity of AAT programs has significantly increased in both the United States and abroad.

Potential Risks Associated with AAT

- Allergic reactions
- Physical trauma (bites, scratches, skin tears)
- Risk of zoonosis (transmission of disease from animals to humans)
- Inadvertent contact between therapy animals and nonparticipating patients or visitors with a fear of animals (which may cause emotional distress)

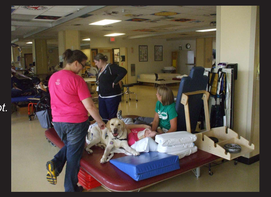
Goals of Animal-Assisted Therapy

Physical	Psychosocial	Cognitive
• Grasp • ROM • ↑ Upper extremity strengthening • Balance • Ambulation • ↓ Tactile defensiveness • Relaxation	• Motivation • Self-confidence • Assertiveness • Self-esteem	• Decision-making • Coping with consequences of actions • ↑ Self-expression of feelings

FUN FACT

A recent study at the University of Missouri followed 54 older adults in an assisted living facility in a walking program 5 days per week. Of these, 23 selected a human walking partner and 12 were assigned a dog from the local animal shelter as a walking partner. Remarkably, walking speed increased 28% in the dog walkers but only 4% in the human partner walkers.

"Nothing calms our troubles or brings us smiles faster than being with Frosty, who gives love without an agenda."
Mother of adolescent pt.



"Hugging a dog eases the aches."
Andrew, adolescent pt.

Conclusion

Having Shepherd's "Gentle Giant" as a part of our rehabilitation team has proven therapeutic to countless individuals center-wide. Frosty has encouraged patients to work harder, socialize more and see themselves in a more positive way. He has improved staff morale, lowered our stress levels and increased our job satisfaction in countless ways. We would recommend animal-assisted therapy wholeheartedly to any appropriate facility.

"Having my 'dog fix' each morning helps the day go better."
John, adolescent pt.

"Frosty makes me feel safe, loved and calm during this time of uncertainty."
Pam, mother of adolescent pt.

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