Animal and Nature-Assisted Therapies – Unique Ways to Reach the Hard to Reach

Animal and nature-assisted therapies are new to our Canadian concept of counseling. Unfortunately, they have not yet been fully accepted by the medical professions but the research is becoming more scientific and they are now becoming more recognized.

Sometimes children and youth need help because they are cognitively compromised or too afraid, angry or shy to get along with others or succeed in the school setting. Some children and youth do well with the school counselor or with a play or talk therapist in an office setting and are able to get the help they need in these settings which are plentiful. There is a percentage of children and youth however, who do not fair well in these traditional therapeutic settings. These children may have diagnosed disabilities or mental health disorders, brain abnormalities, behavioral symptoms or many other things affecting their ability to do well in traditional counseling or in school. Animal and nature assisted therapies provide a natural motivation for this population to get the help they need. In a relaxed and natural setting, young people are partnered with a non-threatening, loving animal and a highly skilled human professional.

According to anthropologist Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence and entomologist E.O. Wilson (1984), winner of two Pulitzer prizes, humans are genetically attuned to pay attention to animals and nature due to the fact that we, as a species, evolved with animals in a natural setting. They claim that we have a need to affiliate with other living organisms, that animals and nature optimize our health and bring about positive changes in our behavior and that contact with animals and nature influences our cognition, health and well being. This is the foundational belief behind working with animals in a natural setting to help people in need.

Animal and nature assisted therapies are being accepted in a wider variety of therapeutic settings. More research must be conducted before it is fully funded in our country but it is well on its way. Animals provide unconditional love and acceptance, honesty, immediate responses to our feelings and actions and have a way of putting people at ease in social situations. The research that has been conducted states that animal interactions can facilitate language, enhance verbal skills, increase attention span and stimulate and improve cognitive abilities in children and adolescents (Nathanson & de Faria, 1994); pet owners have higher self esteem and confidence (Terpin, 2004); interacting with a dog can lower anxiety (Barker & Dawson, 1998); interacting with an animal can reduce anxiety during therapy (Allen, Blascovic & Mendes, 2002); children with behavioral and mental health issues showed an increase in General Functioning scores when an animal was included in their therapy sessions (Schultz, Remick-Barlow & Robbins, 2007); and interacting with animals can improve empathic ability (Ascione, 1992).
Research and anecdotal evidence also clearly identifies that animals can act as a buffer in traumatic experiences, can help people adjusting to serious illness or death of a loved one, can support sexual and physical abuse victims, can reduce Post Traumatic Stress symptoms and can decrease loneliness and depression. Research in this field is ongoing and is becoming more scientifically based. Animal and nature assisted therapies have been in existence for hundreds of years but are only recently being recognized as effective alternate therapies in Canada.

One such program which works alongside rescued animals to help children and youth who have not found success in traditional therapy models is the Dreamcatcher program in Ardrossan, Alberta. Dreamcatcher has been in operation since 2003. It is run by a Registered Psychologist and currently has 20 fur or feathered rescued or adopted animals all of whom come with their own life story, personal issues and life obstacles. At Dreamcatcher, rescued and once homeless animals who have been specially screened and chosen as co-counselors are partnering with children and youth to help them overcome their life issues, whatever they might be. Together, young people are healing animals and animals are helping to heal young people.

One such example is a 16 year old girl who was brought to Dreamcatcher by her mother who claimed she “did not know what else to do.” The youth was diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). Reportedly, the youth was physically and verbally aggressive at home and at school, was at risk for being expelled from her school and exhibited behavior that had criminal potential. The youth had a low cognitive ability and was in a Special Needs classroom. The youth (who we’ll call Sherry), was extremely resistant in her first session. She did not hold eye contact with me, did not speak to me and was extremely rude to her mother. I stood near my rescued race horse while I talked to her mother and during our conversation my horse, Echo, put his head on my shoulder. Quietly and unexpectedly Sherry said “aww”. I moved away and continued to talk to Sherry’s mother. In my absence, Sherry approached Echo and began to stroke his nose while he nuzzled her. The bond was made. Sherry agreed to come back and we have been working together for more than a year now. Sherry is no longer physically aggressive, the school is collaborating with our team to better understand and support Sherry at school and Sherry’s mother says things are quieter and calmer at home. Sherry is learning to communicate verbally in a way that is respectful and her mother is learning to set fair and consistent boundaries. Sherry has 16 years of habit to retrain so the progress is ongoing. Until she met Echo, Sherry had been to four therapists, had two different psychiatrists and refused to engage with any of them. The power of animals for children and youth sometimes provides enough motivation for them to get the help they so desperately need but vehemently resist.

Another example is a 14 year old boy who was brought to Dreamcatcher by his mother because he was diagnosed with Anxiety Disorder and suffered from panic attacks that mostly occurred at school. He was afraid to go to school for fear that he would have a panic attack and so was in trouble with the school board. His mother had brought him to several therapists and psychiatrists and he was on a concoction of medication for his condition. He was still suffering from the attacks and still not able to attend school. When this boy (who we’ll call Allan) attended Dreamcatcher he was desperately hoping that something or anything could help him. He was motivated to attend therapy but
worried that he was not going to benefit from it as he had many failed attempts in the past. Allan chose the lead mare, Buttons, to work with. Buttons is a highly sensitive Arabian Quarter horse cross and she too suffered from severe anxiety when she was away from her herd. Together, Allan and Buttons helped each other to overcome their fears in a way that helped Allan increase his self confidence while providing him with concrete coping skills for his anxiety that he could use at school. Buttons learned to stay away from her herd comfortably with Allan’s support. Allan eventually returned to school and has now graduated from grade 12. He credits our work with Buttons for his success.

Sometimes animals just know what to do in the right moment when a child or youth is “stuck.” We were running an anger management camp for children and youth with cognitive disabilities and behavior management issues last summer. At one point, the children got into conflict and one girl (who we’ll call Teena), who was about 11 years old and diagnosed with FASD along with other things, decided that she was no longer going to be part of our group. She withdrew and sat with her back to us at the gate. We problem solved ways to get her to rejoin us and took turns trying to re-engage her in the program. She flatly refused and dug in. Just as I began to think we were not going to get her back, our sheep Dolly stuck her head into our circle and began to nudge the girl. We told her that Dolly too wanted her to join us. Still, she flatly refused. Dolly would not take no for an answer. She turned herself around and started to rub her behind on the girl’s leg! Teena burst out laughing, as did the rest of us which broke the ice and helped Teena rejoin us easily. Everyone apologized and problem solved the situation and the activities resumed. Animals are sometimes incredibly good at doing things us human helpers just can’t seem to manage.

Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) is new in Canada and standards to practice it are in the process of being developed. Until then, anyone can claim that they are an animal assisted therapist. Fact is however, much damage can be done if the work is being carried out by people who are not qualified in the helping professions. Animal and Nature-Assisted therapies are tools to helping, mediums for reaching those who do not benefit from other therapeutic mediums. Ensuring your animal assisted therapist is professionally qualified is imperative to ensuring that no harm is done.

AAT is rewarding and has been found to be extremely effective especially at reaching the hard to reach or those who have not yet found success in therapy. For more information about this exciting new field or for a more detailed story of some of the cases briefly described here, please visit dreamcatcherassociation.com.

More empirical research in this field will lead to more acceptance of it as a viable therapeutic medium which will in turn hopefully lead to more government funding so more people can attend economically. It is well on its way to being recognized and is providing hope for those who, in some cases, have given up hope.

References


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