

Animal Assisted Therapy as the Best Type of Sexual Abuse Therapy

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Abstract

By comparing Group Therapy with AAT, it becomes clear that AAT is a better treatment option for child sexual abuse (CSA) survivors. This paper aims to compare simple group therapy and animal assisted therapy in order to show the benefits of both, but to demonstrate the greater strengths of animal assisted therapy.

Animal Assisted Therapy as the Best Type of Sexual Abuse Therapy

I have two friends who were sexually abused at a young age. Greta* was six when the abuse began and Rebecca* was only four. Once their families discovered the truth of what had happened to their daughters, the girls were immediately put into therapy. Greta described her experience as uncomfortable, embarrassing, and unhelpful. She remembers having breakdowns during therapy due to the discomfort of the situation, but always being forced to return and do it all over again. Rebecca recalled her therapy experience as a time where the therapist told her what was wrong with her and, even when she disagreed, being forced to say prewritten prayers or talk to others about the specifics of her trauma. I once sat in on Rebecca's therapy session. I felt a tension in the room that is indescribable, so thick that it could be cut with a knife. If I felt such tension, I could only imagine what Rebecca thought as she sat terrified and angry in the seat next to me. Neither girl feels that her therapy helped at all and both strongly disagree with the types of therapy both underwent: group therapy, individual therapy, and spiritual therapy. Imagine if you were my friends' therapist. What type of therapies would you have tried to reach them better? One type of therapy that neither survivor was offered, and is less offered in general, as a valid treatment option is Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT). Studies show that in the presence of an animal, the mood of fear and anxiety decrease, and thus, more positive results are obtained during treatment. By comparing Group Therapy with AAT, it becomes clear that AAT is a better treatment option for child sexual abuse (CSA) survivors.

While group therapy is a warm environment for survivors of CSA, after being harmed by a human, some women may need a non-human to break down walls which they have built against humans, which AAT provides. Coulson and Morfett (2013) additionally reference a study done by Yalom (2005) in which he outlined positive effects of group therapy. Yalom emphasized

**names have been changed for the sake of privacy*

interpersonal learning, explaining that at the beginning of treatment, the women were wary of each other and refused contact. Eventually, the group became a safe place where they could express themselves and be accepted with warmth and love. Additionally, the group provided cohesiveness and catharsis, further developing the women's emotions and interpersonal relationships. The patients can hear and understand other women in a way in which they cannot in individual therapy (20). As a result, the women developed and retrained socializing techniques which had been harmed through CSA. While these things may be true, some women cannot open up to other humans after they have been harmed by a human. As a result, they need a non-human to break down the wall they have built up. Animals can act as those ice breakers in therapy, serving to quickly create a relationship between the therapist and patient. Therapists with animals are less intimidating to children and will be more readily accepted by the child. Additionally, it is evidence supported that blood pressure, anxiety, and heart rate decrease in the presence of animals and as a result, when children are asked to relive their trauma, an animal can help to keep the child calm (277-282, 2006).

In any type of therapy, long lasting results are of extreme importance. When comparing the long term effects of group therapy and AAT, it is clear that AAT produces better, longer lasting results than group therapy. Elkajer, Kristensen, Mortensen, Poulsen, and Lau of The British Psychological Society aimed to find the long term effects of group therapy. In a three year study conducted by this group, 106 women 18 years and older were put into group therapy treatment. The study "proved efficient in improving general symptomology, psychosocial functioning and interpersonal problems," showing its superiority over individual therapy (960-961, 2014). However, its results could not compare with those of a study conducted by Dietz, Davis, and Pennings in 2012. This study compared simple group therapy with AAT to determine the effect of an animal on the symptoms displayed by the 153 participants of the study. The

results of this study concluded that when an animal was present in therapy, the patients demonstrated often drastic changes in CSA symptoms. These results are shown in Figure 1 below.

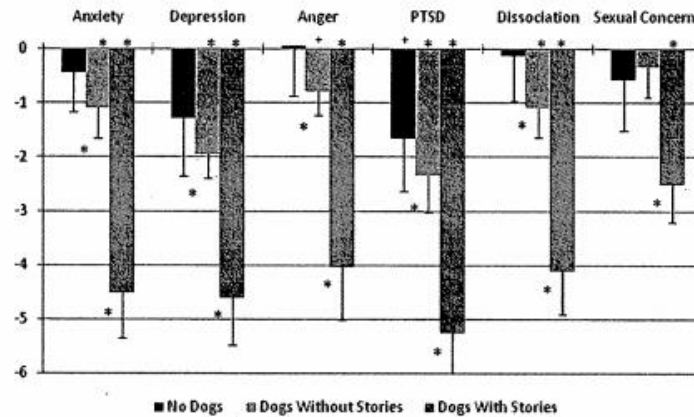


FIGURE 1 Means of subscales with standard error bars by group.
 Note: Asterisks (*) above the gray bars indicate groups that showed a significant reduction in scores from pre- to posttest. Asterisks (*) below the gray bars indicate pairs of subscales that are significantly different from each other. The asterisks below the gray bars are centered between the pair of subscales that are significantly different from one another.

In this diagram, the black bars show changes in symptoms of standardly treated children, while the grey bars demonstrate the changes in symptoms of animal assisted treated children. The comparison between “No Dogs” and “Dogs without Stories” is minimal because the error bars on the black results end up being approximately equal with the results of those grey results. The main comparison to point out is the “No Dogs” and the “Dogs with Stories” categories. “With Stories” means that the therapy dog also came from an abused background. There is a significant change in symptoms between these two groups of patients. Animals clearly offer unconditional love, support, acceptance, and security and so are promoted as excellent treatment plans for sexually abused children (Dietz et al. 669-678, 2012).

Additionally, group therapy is capable of treating psychological symptoms of CSA, but AAT is capable of treating both psychological damage and physical damage. Lisa Miffit supports group therapy as well, pointing out that group therapy accomplishes healing in personal, interpersonal, and societal interactions, all of which are harmed by sexual abuse. She states that

group therapy corrects adolescent behaviors and tendencies which have been tainted by sexual abuse. Her study also indicates that group therapy is less daunting than individual therapy and children therefore, may respond more positively. Group therapy also fosters belonging and acceptance, reducing the amount of loneliness often felt by the patient (Miffitt 175-176, 2014). While group therapy and AAT may both share this last quality, simple group therapy cannot accomplish healing in all of the areas in which AAT is able. Guerino, Briel, Araujo from The Department of Physical Therapy in Brazil conducted a study which included two female patients, 18 and 21, who were exposed to sexual abuse at a young age. The patients exhibited severe motor function limitations resulting from the trauma induced by sexual abuse. The women received twenty sessions of hippotherapy (i.e. therapy assisted by a therapy horse) on horseback, each session lasting 30 minutes, once a week, for six months. Throughout the treatment, activities and skills increased in difficulty in an effort to correct the many physical and emotional defects effecting the patients. At the end of the treatment, the patients had regained coordination and balance and, through interactions with the horses, the patients became comfortable with physical touch, their interests and curiosity were aroused, and they allowed their emotions to show (960-961, 2015). Certain types of AAT can heal both physical and emotional detriments caused by CSA.

It is clear that AAT is a better therapy method than simple group therapy, so it is important that this type of therapy for CSA victims come to the forefront of the psychology world. Millions of children are sexually abused yearly around the world and need ways of healing and coping. Imagine if you were my friends' therapists. What type of therapy would you have tried to reach them better? Consider AAT as your choice of therapy.

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