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Review article

Feline-assisted therapy: Integrating contact with cats into treatment plans

Katarzyna Tomaszewska^{*}, Iga Bomert, Elżbieta Wilkiewicz-Wawro

University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Faculty of Animal Bioengineering, Department of Commodity Science and Animal Improvement, Poland

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Feline-assisted therapy is contact therapy involving cats. Some breeds of cats have innate characteristics that may be desirable in feline-assisted therapy. These include Ragdolls, Maine Coons and American Shorthairs. Cats have to meet certain requirements to participate in feline-assisted therapy: they should be adults aged 1 year or older, they should have a well-developed temperament, they should be vaccinated, sterilized and in good health.

Aim: The purpose of this paper was to discuss feline-assisted therapy (cat-assisted therapy) as a potentially beneficial form of treatment for various physical and psychological conditions in humans.

Material and methods: The paper was based on the available literature and publications.

Results and discussion: Contact with a cat can contribute to the treatment of many diseases, including depression (anxiety and fear), arthritis, Alzheimer's disease, AIDS, ADHD, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, cardiovascular disease, progressive muscular atrophy (muscular dystrophy), sclerosis, loss of sight and hearing, mental illness, osteoporosis and autism. Feline-assisted therapy may be conducted in nursing homes, prisons, hospices, hospitals, kindergartens and schools.

Conclusions: Feline-assisted therapy can be used in a variety of settings, and it is gaining increased popularity. Cat-assisted therapy is particularly recommended for patients who are unable to interact with large animals such as horses or are afraid of dogs.

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^{*} Correspondence to: University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Faculty of Animal Bioengineering, Department of Commodity Science and Animal Improvement, Oczapowskiego 5, 10-719 Olsztyn, Poland. Tel.: +48 89 523 34 24; fax: +48 89 523 34 24.

E-mail addresses: katarzyna.kleczek@uwm.edu.pl (K. Tomaszewska), igabomert@o2.pl (I. Bomert), e.wilkiewicz-wawro@uwm.edu.pl (E. Wilkiewicz-Wawro).

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1. Introduction

Animals have been used for therapeutic purposes for two millennia. In the ancient times, horseback riding and interactions with horses were regarded as effective remedies for various diseases and a form of exercise that stimulates the body. Animal-assisted therapy improves the patient's physical and psychological wellbeing.¹ Animals other than horses are also used for therapeutic purposes, including dogs, cats, donkeys, rabbits, hamsters, guinea pigs, birds, pet reptiles and amphibians.²

Interactions with animals deliver numerous health benefits:

- Pet owners have a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, lower blood pressure and lower blood cholesterol levels³;
- Dog owners have a higher life expectancy after a heart attack⁴;
- An increase in the levels of dopamine and endorphins, which are responsible for feelings of happiness and wellbeing, and a decrease in cortisol (stress hormone) levels is noted after 30 min of interaction with a dog⁵;
- Children who frequently interact with cats are less likely to develop asthma and allergies in adulthood⁶;
- Children who are visited by a therapy dog in hospital are less affected by post-operative pain⁷;
- Patients with Alzheimer's disease have better appetite and gain weight when they watch fish in an aquarium during meals.⁸

Scientists examined the brain activity of people petting a dog or a cat. The results of EEG tests revealed an increase in the frequency of theta brain waves, a state that is associated with a sense of relief and relaxation. This was accompanied by a decrease in the frequency of alpha brain waves, which points to alleviation of stress and depression, and stimulation of immune function.⁹

Dogs and horses are most frequently involved in animal-assisted therapy. The popularity of cat-assisted therapy is also on the rise. Similarly to other therapeutic techniques involving animals, cat-assisted therapy is only an auxiliary method that supports specialized types of treatment. In line with international therapeutic guidelines, independent therapists should have the required knowledge and skills and should be suitably qualified to provide therapeutic services in a given area.^{10,11} There are two types of feline-assisted therapy: stationary therapy, where the animal resides permanently in a therapeutic institution (indoor cat) and interacts with the patients and personnel, and visiting therapy, where the cat and a volunteer or a trained therapist visit a patient.¹²

The presence of cats, their purring and their soft and warm fur deliver both psychological and physical benefits for owners. Cats relieve stress, and even a short moment spent playing with a cat has a calming effect. Petting a cat lowers the risk of cardiovascular disease and asthma because cat fur generates negative ions which are highly beneficial for humans. Negative ions bring a sense of relief and relaxation, they improve patients' wellbeing and speed up recovery.¹³

2. Aim

This paper discusses feline-assisted therapy as a potentially beneficial treatment for many physical and psychological conditions in humans.

3. Material and methods

The paper was based on the available literature and publications discussing the role of cats in human therapy and education. A total of 24 references were used, including 11 original research papers, 6 books, 3 popular science articles and 4 Internet sources.

4. Results and discussion

Numerous diseases and conditions are effectively remedied by feline-assisted therapy, including depression (anxiety, fear), arthritis, Alzheimer's disease, AIDS, ADHD, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, cardiovascular diseases, muscular dystrophy, dementia, sight and hearing loss, mental disorders, osteoporosis and autism.^{12,14,15} Patients undergoing feline-assisted therapy are encouraged to stroke a cat, brush its fur, perform cat back stretches and imitate the movements of a cat as physical exercise. Such activities are highly therapeutic in people suffering from autism, arthritis and muscular dystrophy. Cats help patients to come to terms with a terminal disease or to recover after a serious illness. Cat owners are less susceptible to colds, cough, insomnia, headaches and back pain, and require fewer medications.^{12,16}

Certain cat breeds have features that are particularly desirable in feline-assisted therapy. They include Ragdolls, Maine Coons, Abyssinians, Persians, Scottish Folds and American Shorthairs. Despite the above, not all cats of a given breed can participate in feline-assisted therapy. Every cat has an individual temperament and character, and it can differ significantly from other representatives of the same breed. Non-pedigree cats can also be used for therapeutic purposes if they have the right temperament and behavior, are healthy and have been socialized with humans early in life. Preferably, therapy cats should be adult individuals, aged 1 year or older, with a well-developed temperament. A therapy cat has to be vaccinated and in good health. It should also be neutered/sterilized to eliminate any breaks in therapy caused by different stages of the animal's reproductive cycle.^{12,16}

A therapy cat has to be trained to walk in a harness with a leash. A prospective feline therapist should also have a positive attitude to grooming, including combing in the direction of hair growth and against the grain, and powdering. Cats have to be socialized with humans. They should be accustomed to house guests, walks on a leash and riding in a car to the veterinarian and other locations. Animals that have been trained to walk on a leash will not cause problems during therapeutic sessions. A well trained and brought up cat can be a wonderful therapy animal for the owner and other people.^{12,17}

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