

# Practice of Animal Assisted Therapy in Psycho-Social Rehabilitation for Victims of Violence and Abuse

Anita Sunil

Execdirector@ahsrehab.org.

Psychologist, Dubai Foundation for Women and Children

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## ABSTRACT

Presentation aims at sharing the best practice method and effectiveness of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT), as part of intervention in rehabilitation of victims facing violence/abuse, at Dubai Foundation for Women and Children, the first NGO providing support to victims of Domestic Violence, Human Trafficking and Child Abuse. An alternative treatment modality, AAT helps to improve mental, physical, social and cognitive functions. Human-animal bond/interaction research has been credited with reducing depression, anxiety, loneliness while increasing a sense of self-worth, purpose, empathy and general well-being. The psychological effects caused by violence lead to anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, low self-esteem, inability to concentrate, flashbacks, questioning sense of self, suicidal thoughts and sleep disturbances. This innovative form of therapy was found to help victims cope with their trauma, stress levels, and anxiety by interacting with therapy partners mainly - dogs, cats, horses, birds, turtles, hedgehogs, hamsters and ducks. The simple act of petting animals has proved to result in an automatic relaxation response. Research has supported the fact that engaging with the animal promotes the release of serotonin, prolactin and oxytocin- hormones that help in elevating mood and providing comfort. The most advantageous benefit to AAT over other forms of therapeutic modalities is the reciprocity that client obtains in one to one or group sessions and the much-desired chance to give love and affection as well as receiving it, providing direction/pathway to recovery and healing. The presence of an animal was found to create spontaneous communication, provide comfort, and reduce loneliness, especially for those clients who reside in the shelter. The animal was often found to be acting as a catalyst in the therapy process by reducing initial resistance that might accompany, increasing mental stimulation, improving attention and interaction skills, lowering stress-induced behavioral responses. Willingness to be involved in a group activity, interaction with peers and staff members, also helped to identify and develop leisure skills in some clients. In conclusion, practicing AAT showed effective and positive responses in supporting therapy, as it diminishes the victim's PTSD, anxiety and depression, in turn increasing self-esteem and improving self-awareness, in their road to recovery.