

Animal-Assisted Therapy in the Rehabilitation of Violence and Abuse Survivors

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ABSTRACT

The abstract highlights the integration of Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) in the rehabilitation of survivors of domestic violence, human trafficking, and child abuse at the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children (DFWAC), the UAE's first licensed non-profit shelter. AAT is a complementary therapeutic approach that supports mental, emotional, social, and cognitive well-being. Survivors of violence often present with PTSD, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, flashbacks, and low self-esteem. Research on human-animal bonding demonstrates that interactions with therapy animals reduce stress, anxiety, and loneliness, while enhancing self-worth, psychological well-being, and emotional stability. Therapy animals—including dogs, cats, horses, birds, turtles, hamsters, and ducks—were integrated into the rehabilitation programs. The human-animal bond facilitated spontaneous communication, comfort, and reduced isolation, especially for clients residing in the shelter. Animals often acted as catalysts in therapy, enhancing emotional regulation, social interaction, mental stimulation, and reducing stress-induced behaviors. Observations of client interactions and their reciprocal responses suggest that Animal-Assisted Therapy fosters emotional regulation, improves social communication skills, reduces symptoms of anxiety and PTSD, and enhances self-esteem and overall psychological well-being. These findings support the use of AAT as an effective complementary intervention within rehabilitation programs, offering a holistic and compassionate approach to the healing and empowerment of survivors of violence and abuse.