Students, community learn the ropes of Animal Assisted Therapy

By Mary Murphy

In 2000, COE Counseling and Higher Education Professor Cynthia Chandler incorporated Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) into the counseling program at UNT. It became the first accredited counseling program in the U.S. to offer training for students and community members to work with their pets in volunteer and professional settings.

Now, Chandler helps students, professionals and community members – and their pets – get registered to work in Animal Assisted Therapy, bringing the beneficial effects of AAT to a much wider audience across North Texas.

"Research has shown that within five minutes of petting a therapy dog, hormones associated with stress and anxiety go down in the person petting the dog, and hormones associated with wellness and healing go up," Chandler said.

The Workshop

Each semester, Chandler hosts an Animal Assisted Therapy Workshop on campus for students, professionals and community members who want to work with their pet as a therapy animal. Getting registered to do this is a two-part process – the handler must attend an eight-hour workshop, and the pet and handler must pass a team evaluation. Chandler hosted her most recent AAT workshop on April 9, and held team evaluations for dogs and horses April 16.

Chandler's eight-hour weekend workshops are open to anyone over the age of 10 who wants to volunteer with his or her pet. Participants who are younger than 18 must have an adult sponsor. Professionals who are interested in receiving introductory training on incorporating AAT into a professional counseling practice also often attend.

The majority of the workshop is designed to teach non-professionals and is constructed by Pet Partners, the largest therapy animal program that registers multiple types of species as therapy animals, including dogs, horses, cats, llamas and more.

Workshop attendees learn the basic precautions of volunteering with therapy animals, such as infection control and risk management. They are also taught how to read animals' body language and how to use this to gauge the pets' stress level and determine if they need a break or if they're comfortable approaching a stranger.

Chandler includes some advanced AAT training for professionals toward the end of the workshop, and explains how therapy animals add to the psychodynamics of a therapy session as a live, social being. She also expands on how counselors can read their pets' body language to learn more about their clients.

"I'm a strong believer in animal communication," said Dee Ann Knight, workshop attendee and school counselor at Walker Creek Elementary in Birdville ISD. "It was interesting to see how [this communication] could be used to help others. I learned to trust the animal, which I try to do already, but this workshop really validated that watching and listening to the animal can give insights into human behavior. They can help us with ourselves and others."

According to Chandler, there are two ways pets assist in a therapy session. First, the pet plays the role of "nurturer" by providing physiological nurturance through engagement with a human being. Pets also perform this role when they volunteer as a therapy animal.

In a therapy setting, pets also take on a second role as an "emotional distress detector." According to Chandler, animals (especially dogs and horses) can smell hormonal changes in the body, and they can smell when a person is sad, anxious or upset. When the animal smells these hormone changes in a client, it can use its body language to tell the counselor new things that the client may not be comfortable revealing outright.

"I value [my therapy dog's] sense of smell, and her sense of sight," Chandler said. "When she smells something going on with a client that the client hasn't revealed to me yet, I can read her body language and she tells me...
what's going on with that client. It helps the client and I get to important issues."

Although the AAT workshop only skims the surface of different techniques that can be used in a professional setting, Chandler offers two more advanced courses about AAT at UNT: the AAT Distance Learning program and a university course that is open to undergraduates, graduates and returning professionals.

The Evaluation

The weekend after the workshop, dogs and horses were tested for aptitude (how well they can follow commands like for dogs, “sit,” “down” and “stay” or accept petting) and temperament (how the animal reacts to stress, such as crowded petting, waving a plastic bag in front of them to see how they react to visual distractions and by dropping a metal can behind them to see how they handled loud noises). There are over 20 evaluation exercises each animal must pass. Each evaluation is catered to the species of the animal. This spring’s session was the first time horses were evaluated on the UNT campus.

Therapy animals must be able to remain calm in loud and stressful situations because they will often volunteer in settings that are loud and full of commotion, such as hospitals or schools.

“Not all animals have the temperament, interest or desire to do this, so we have to find out if they do,” Chandler said. “The most important thing is that the pet is happy, enjoys being with people, and shows a desire to continue [the evaluation] with a smile and a wagging tail.”

Once a team passes their evaluation, they qualify to be officially registered to practice Animal Assisted Therapy in a volunteer setting or incorporated into a professional practice. Not only does AAT benefit people in the community, but is also benefits the handler and their pet, Chandler said - the handler gets to spend more time with their pet, and the pet lives a more stimulated life going out and doing things instead of staying at home.

According to Chandler, AAT is also beneficial because it promotes the awareness of the special relationship between humans and animals.

“[AAT] keeps reminding people of the important relationship available to us between humans and animals,” Chandler said. “As long as we can be reminded of this, and remember how important it is for us as a human race to interact with and honor nature, I think it will keep us a better people - we stay kinder, we stay more compassionate, and maybe we stay a little bit more authentic.”