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Experts provide 5 tips for therapists incorporating animal assisted therapy

As therapists and other mental health professionals see colleagues incorporating animal assisted therapy into their practices, they have questions about how they might take advantage of its proven value, too.

One expert says that while animal assisted therapy can be used in a variety of settings that include hospitals, community programs, schools, programs for children who are abused or neglected, nursing homes, and more, it's not simply a matter of taking your pet to work.

"It's important to know what you want to accomplish with each client, but it's also essential that you're aware of an animal's special needs and limits, too," says Amy Johnson, director of Oakland University's Center for Human Animal Interventions and manager of the school's animal assisted therapy certificate program.

Johnson recommends considering the following issues before introducing an animal into a therapeutic setting.

1. **Know what you want to accomplish.** Merely having an animal, whether it's a dog, cat, bird, or anything else, in the room during a counseling session is not considered animal assisted therapy (AAT). AAT is a goal-directed, documented activity that's used to facilitate the therapeutic process. "You want to have measurable goals for the AAT component so that you can track progress – or lack thereof and adjust accordingly," Johnson says.
2. **Get buy-in from the top.** If you're going to introduce AAT to your facility or agency, getting the support of the person in charge can make the difference between success and failure.
3. **It helps if you're already an animal lover.** Because it's important to keep the animals safe, you should have a working knowledge of your animal's behavior. Animals get stressed, tired, and over-stimulated, too, so you need to be able to recognize that and act accordingly, removing the animal to a safe place when necessary. As a practitioner, you are the advocate for the animal first, as well as for the client.
4. **Notify clients of animal involvement in advance.** If an animal will be in your office, you'll need to alert clients ahead of time. It's not about whether or not they're comfortable with pets – there are also allergies, cultural beliefs, and fears to consider.
5. **Investigate insurance requirements.** Insurance needs will vary depending on situations, but it's important to find out whether you will need liability insurance if you're going to work with animals. A therapist's coverage will probably not include problems like dog bites, for example.

Many therapists are taking the extra step of getting training in animal assisted therapy through Oakland University's online Animal Assisted Therapy Certificate program. For more information, visit the school's [animal assisted therapy website](#).

