

ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY: FOUNDATIONS, BENEFITS, AND APPLICATIONS IN MENTAL HEALTH

TERAPIA ASSISTIDA POR ANIMAIS: FUNDAMENTOS, BENEFÍCIOS E APLICAÇÕES NA SAÚDE MENTAL

TERAPIA ASISTIDA POR ANIMALES: FUNDAMENTOS, BENEFICIOS Y APLICACIONES EN LA SALUD MENTAL



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ABSTRACT

Animal-assisted therapy has gained increasing relevance in the field of mental health as a complementary intervention that integrates animals into therapeutic processes with the aim of promoting individuals' psychological, emotional, and social well-being. The objective of this article is to analyze the conceptual foundations of animal-assisted therapy, the psychological benefits documented in the scientific literature, and its main applications in clinical, educational, and community contexts, with special attention to contributions developed in the Latin American context. The research was conducted through a systematic literature review following PRISMA methodology guidelines. The search for information was carried out in international academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, SciELO, and Google Scholar. Keywords in Spanish and English related to animal-assisted therapy and human–animal interaction were used. Scientific articles published between 2010 and 2024 were included, as well as systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and empirical studies related to psychological, clinical, or educational applications. The thematic analysis of the literature allowed the identification of five main categories: theoretical foundations of human–animal interaction, psychological and physiological effects of animal-assisted therapy, therapeutic applications in mental health, interventions in educational and community contexts, and ethical considerations in the implementation of these programs. The reviewed studies show benefits associated with stress and anxiety reduction, mood improvement, strengthening of social skills, and increased emotional well-being across diverse populations. In conclusion, animal-assisted therapy constitutes an innovative therapeutic strategy that can complement traditional mental health interventions, although further empirical research in Latin American contexts is needed.

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Keywords: Animal-Assisted Therapy. Human–Animal Interaction. Mental Health. Psychological Well-Being. Therapeutic Interventions.

RESUMO

A terapia assistida por animais tem adquirido crescente relevância no campo da saúde mental como uma intervenção complementar que integra animais aos processos terapêuticos com o propósito de promover o bem-estar psicológico, emocional e social das pessoas. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar os fundamentos conceituais da terapia assistida por animais, os benefícios psicológicos documentados na literatura científica e suas principais aplicações em contextos clínicos, educacionais e comunitários, com especial atenção às contribuições desenvolvidas no contexto latino-americano. A pesquisa foi desenvolvida por meio de uma revisão sistemática da literatura, seguindo as diretrizes da metodologia PRISMA. A busca por informações foi realizada em bases de dados acadêmicas internacionais, como Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, SciELO e Google Scholar. Foram utilizadas palavras-chave em espanhol e inglês relacionadas à terapia assistida por animais e à interação humano–animal. Foram incluídos artigos científicos publicados entre 2010 e 2024, bem como revisões sistemáticas, meta-análises e estudos empíricos relacionados a aplicações psicológicas, clínicas ou educacionais. A análise temática da literatura permitiu identificar cinco categorias principais: fundamentos teóricos da interação humano–animal, efeitos psicológicos e fisiológicos da terapia assistida por animais, aplicações terapêuticas em saúde mental, intervenções em contextos educacionais e comunitários e considerações éticas na implementação desses programas. Os estudos revisados evidenciam benefícios associados à redução do estresse e da ansiedade, melhora do humor, fortalecimento de habilidades sociais e aumento do bem-estar emocional em diversas populações. Conclui-se que a terapia assistida por animais constitui uma estratégia terapêutica inovadora que pode complementar as abordagens tradicionais de intervenção em saúde mental, embora seja necessário fortalecer a pesquisa empírica em contextos latino-americanos.

Palavras-chave: Terapia Assistida por Animais. Interação Humano–Animal. Saúde Mental. Bem-Estar Psicológico. Intervenções Terapêuticas.

RESUMEN

La terapia asistida por animales ha adquirido creciente relevancia en el campo de la salud mental como una intervención complementaria que integra animales dentro de procesos terapéuticos con el propósito de promover el bienestar psicológico, emocional y social de las personas. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar los fundamentos conceptuales de la terapia asistida por animales, los beneficios psicológicos documentados en la literatura científica y sus principales aplicaciones en contextos clínicos, educativos y comunitarios, con especial atención a los aportes desarrollados en el contexto latinoamericano. La investigación se desarrolló mediante una revisión sistemática de literatura siguiendo los lineamientos de la metodología PRISMA. La búsqueda de información se realizó en bases de datos académicas internacionales como Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Scielo y Google Scholar. Se emplearon palabras clave en español e inglés relacionadas con terapia asistida por animales e interacción humano–animal. Se incluyeron artículos científicos publicados entre 2010 y 2024, así como revisiones sistemáticas, metaanálisis y estudios empíricos relacionados con aplicaciones psicológicas, clínicas o educativas. El análisis temático de la literatura permitió identificar cinco categorías principales: fundamentos teóricos de la interacción humano–animal, efectos psicológicos y fisiológicos de la terapia asistida por animales, aplicaciones terapéuticas en salud mental, intervenciones en contextos educativos y comunitarios y consideraciones éticas en la implementación de estos programas. Los estudios revisados evidencian beneficios asociados a la reducción del estrés y la ansiedad, mejora del estado de ánimo, fortalecimiento de habilidades sociales y aumento del bienestar emocional en diversas poblaciones. En conclusión, la terapia asistida por animales constituye una



estrategia terapéutica innovadora que puede complementar los enfoques tradicionales de intervención en salud mental, aunque se requiere fortalecer la investigación empírica en contextos latinoamericanos

Palabras clave: Aterapia Asistida Por Animales. Interacción Humano–Animal. Salud Mental. Bienestar Psicológico. Intervenciones Terapéuticas.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the health sciences, psychology, and social sciences have incorporated innovative therapeutic approaches that seek to address human well-being from a holistic perspective. In this context, Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) emerges, a structured intervention that integrates animals into therapeutic processes with the purpose of improving people's physical, psychological, social and emotional well-being.

The relationship between humans and animals has been historically significant and is present in multiple cultures and traditions. Since the first civilizations, animals have accompanied human beings in productive, symbolic and affective activities, generating bonds that transcend the merely utilitarian. However, it is only in recent decades that this interaction has begun to be systematically studied within the scientific field, especially from disciplines such as psychology, medicine, neuroscience, education, and occupational therapy (Serpell, 2017; Fine, 2019).

Currently, animal-assisted therapy is recognized as a complementary intervention that can contribute to improving therapeutic processes in diverse populations, including children, older adults, people with disabilities, hospitalized patients, and subjects with psychological disorders (Fine, 2019; Gee, Mueller & Curl, 2017). Empirical evidence accumulated over the past few decades suggests that human-animal interaction can generate significant benefits in emotional regulation, stress reduction, strengthening social skills, and improving psychological well-being.

The growing interest in this form of intervention is related to the need to develop more humanized therapeutic strategies that favor affective bonding, emotional regulation and motivation in treatment processes. In this sense, animals not only serve a role of accompaniment, but also act as mediators that facilitate communication, social interaction and the construction of meaningful therapeutic bonds. According to Kruger and Serpell (2010), animals can function as social catalysts that favor interpersonal interaction and reduce the emotional barriers present in therapeutic contexts.

Various research developed in Latin America has begun to strengthen this field of study, analyzing the psychological and social benefits of animal-assisted interventions in educational, clinical, and community contexts. Authors such as Orozco, Quintero, and Vargas (2018) in Colombia point out that interaction with animals can favor processes of emotional regulation and socio-affective development, especially in child populations. Similarly, studies carried out in Brazil and Argentina have highlighted the potential of these interventions in psychosocial rehabilitation and therapeutic support programs (Pereira & Pires, 2016; Gutiérrez, Granados & Piar, 2019).

In Latin America, the importance of understanding the human-animal relationship from sociocultural perspectives has also been highlighted. According to Gómez and Atehortúa (2014), interaction with pets not only has therapeutic implications, but also constitutes a social and cultural phenomenon that influences the construction of affective bonds and people's psychological well-being.

Despite the growing scientific interest around human-animal interaction, there is still limited systematic understanding about the mechanisms by which animal-assisted therapy contributes to people's psychological and emotional well-being. In many clinical and educational contexts, animal interventions are implemented empirically or based on practical experiences, without always having a consolidated theoretical framework or sufficient research support.

In addition, the increase in mental health-related problems globally raises the need to explore new therapeutic strategies that complement traditional intervention approaches. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022), mental disorders are one of the leading causes of disability in the world, significantly affecting the quality of life of millions of people.

In the Latin American context, these problems acquire particular characteristics due to social, economic and cultural factors that influence the psychological well-being of populations. Various studies have indicated that limited access to mental health services and the need for community intervention strategies make it necessary to explore complementary therapeutic alternatives (Ardila, 2018; Gutiérrez et al., 2019).

In the educational and community spheres, there is also an increase in problems associated with stress, anxiety, socio-emotional difficulties and social adaptation processes, particularly in child and youth populations. Various studies suggest that interaction with animals can be a valuable strategy to promote socio-emotional development and promote more accessible and empathetic therapeutic environments (Beetz, Uvnäs-Moberg, Julius & Kotrschal, 2012; Orozco et al., 2018).

Therefore, there is a need to systematically analyze the theoretical foundations and psychological benefits of animal-assisted therapy, as well as its applications in different contexts of intervention, especially in sociocultural realities of Latin America.

The study of animal-assisted therapy is gaining relevance today due to the growing recognition of interdisciplinary approaches in the understanding of human well-being. The integration of perspectives from psychology, medicine, education and social sciences has made it possible to broaden the analysis of the factors that influence people's mental health and quality of life.

From this perspective, animal-assisted therapy represents an innovative therapeutic alternative that complements traditional psychological intervention approaches. Various studies have shown that interaction with animals can generate positive effects both psychologically and physiologically, including reducing stress, reducing anxiety, and strengthening emotional bonds (Beetz et al., 2012; Pendry & Vandagriff, 2019).

Likewise, the academic analysis of this topic contributes to consolidating the field of research known as Human-Animal Interaction (HAI), which has acquired increasing relevance in the international scientific literature (Gee et al., 2017). In Latin America, this field has begun to develop through research that analyzes the impact of companion animals on emotional well-being and therapeutic processes (Gómez & Atehortúa, 2014; Pereira & Pires, 2016).

From the educational and community sphere, animal-assisted therapy also offers possibilities for intervention aimed at strengthening socio-emotional development, especially in vulnerable populations. Research carried out in Latin American countries has shown that the presence of animals in therapeutic contexts can facilitate the creation of more empathetic and less threatening environments, favoring the active participation of subjects in intervention processes (Orozco et al., 2018; Gutiérrez et al., 2019).

In this sense, this chapter is justified by the need to provide a conceptual and theoretical review that allows understanding the foundations and applications of animal-assisted therapy in the field of mental health, integrating both the international literature and the contributions developed in the Latin American context.

The conceptual development of animal-assisted therapy is linked to different theoretical approaches that seek to explain the benefits derived from the interaction between humans and animals.

One of the most important antecedents of this field is found in the work of Boris Levinson (1969), who observed that the presence of his dog during therapeutic sessions facilitated communication with children who presented emotional difficulties. Levinson proposed that animals could act as mediators in the therapeutic process, favoring emotional expression and social interaction.

Subsequently, the field of research on human-animal interaction has expanded considerably. Authors such as Serpell (2017) have highlighted that the relationship between humans and animals has profound psychological and social implications, since animals can provide emotional support, companionship and opportunities for social interaction.

From the perspective of attachment theory, proposed by Bowlby (1988), human beings tend to establish affective bonds with figures that provide security and protection. In this

sense, animals can fulfill functions similar to attachment figures, generating feelings of trust, emotional stability, and affective support (Beetz et al., 2012).

On the other hand, recent research in the field of neuroscience has shown that interaction with animals can generate physiological changes associated with emotional well-being. Studies carried out by Odendaal (2000) and later expanded by Beetz et al. (2012) have shown that contact with animals can increase the release of oxytocin, a hormone related to attachment and well-being, while reducing cortisol levels, associated with stress.

Similarly, the Human-Animal Interaction approach has made it possible to integrate contributions from different disciplines to understand the psychological and social effects of this relationship. According to Gee, Mueller, and Curl (2017), the presence of animals can promote socialization processes, improve people's emotional state, and contribute to the development of socio-emotional skills.

In the Latin American context, some researchers have begun to explore these phenomena from interdisciplinary perspectives. Gómez and Atehortúa (2014) highlight that the relationship between humans and animals should also be understood as a cultural and social phenomenon that influences the construction of affective bonds and care practices. Likewise, studies carried out in Brazil and other countries in the region have analyzed the impact of animal-assisted interventions on rehabilitation processes and therapeutic accompaniment (Pereira & Pires, 2016).

Together, these theoretical approaches allow us to understand animal-assisted therapy as a therapeutic strategy that articulates psychological, social, and biological dimensions of human well-being.

Finally, this chapter aims to analyze the conceptual foundations of animal-assisted therapy, its theoretical bases, the psychological benefits documented in the scientific literature and its main applications in clinical, educational and community contexts.

2 METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this chapter was developed through a systematic review of scientific literature, guided by the guidelines established in the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) methodology, widely used in review research within the health sciences and social sciences due to its ability to guarantee transparency, methodological rigor and replicability in the process of selection and analysis of scientific studies (Page et al., 2021; Moher et al., 2009). In this sense, a structured search of information was carried out in internationally recognized academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Scielo and Google Scholar, with the purpose of identifying

relevant literature related to animal-assisted therapy and its impact on mental health and psychological well-being. The search strategy was developed by using combinations of keywords in Spanish and English, such as animal-assisted therapy, animal-assisted interventions, human-animal interaction, animal-assisted therapy, animal-assisted therapy AND mental health and animal-assisted therapy AND psychology, using Boolean operators AND and OR in order to expand or delimit the results obtained in the databases (Booth, Sutton & Papaioannou, 2016). To guarantee the relevance and quality of the studies analyzed, previously defined inclusion and exclusion criteria were established. Within the inclusion criteria, scientific articles published in indexed journals, research published between 2010 and 2024, studies related to animal-assisted therapy in psychological, clinical or educational contexts, as well as empirical research, systematic reviews and meta-analyses available in Spanish or English were considered. On the other hand, duplicate documents in different databases, articles that did not have peer review, research focused only on pet ownership without a therapeutic approach, and documents that did not have access to the full text were excluded. The study selection process was carried out following the four phases proposed by the PRISMA model, which include identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion, which allowed the initial location of studies in the databases, then the review of titles and abstracts to determine their relevance to the object of study, the complete reading of potentially relevant articles and, finally, the inclusion of those documents that provided significant scientific evidence for the conceptual development of the chapter (Page et al., 2021). Subsequently, the selected studies were analyzed through a process of thematic content analysis, which allowed the identification of recurrent conceptual categories in the scientific literature, among which the theoretical foundations of human-animal interaction, the psychological and physiological effects of animal-assisted therapy, its applications in the field of mental health, and the effects of the Animal Therapy Therapy Animal Therapy T interventions developed in educational contexts and ethical considerations related to the implementation of animal-assisted therapy programs. The organization and systematization of these categories made it possible to structure the development of the chapter and consolidate an integrative perspective on the contributions of animal-assisted therapy in the promotion of psychological and social well-being

3 RESULTS

From the process of systematic review of the scientific literature and the thematic analysis of the selected studies, several analytical categories were identified that allow us to understand the main contributions of animal-assisted therapy in the field of mental health and

psychological well-being. These categories include: theoretical foundations of human-animal interaction, psychological and physiological effects of animal-assisted therapy, therapeutic applications in mental health contexts, interventions in educational and community contexts, and ethical considerations in the implementation of animal-assisted therapy programs.

3.1 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF HUMAN-ANIMAL INTERACTION

One of the main findings identified in the reviewed literature corresponds to the development of theoretical frameworks that explain the benefits of human-animal interaction. This field of research, known as Human-Animal Interaction (HAI), has been approached from different disciplines, including psychology, medicine, sociology and ethology.

One of the most relevant antecedents in this field was raised by Levinson (1969), who introduced the concept of pet therapy when he observed that the presence of his dog during therapeutic sessions facilitated emotional communication in children with psychological difficulties. From these initial observations, it began to be recognized that animals can act as therapeutic mediators, favoring emotional expression, trust and social interaction.

Subsequently, several researchers expanded this approach. Serpell (2017) points out that the human-animal relationship can generate emotional, social, and psychological benefits due to the ability of animals to offer companionship, emotional support, and opportunities for social interaction. In this sense, interaction with animals can contribute to reducing feelings of loneliness and promoting psychological well-being.

Another conceptual framework widely used to explain the effects of animal-assisted therapy is attachment theory, proposed by Bowlby (1988). From this perspective, animals can perform functions similar to attachment figures, providing emotional security, affective stability, and support in stressful situations. Research has shown that people can develop meaningful emotional bonds with animals, which contributes to emotional well-being and strengthened affective regulation.

Likewise, research in the field of neuroscience has shown that interaction with animals produces physiological changes associated with well-being. Studies conducted by Odendaal (2000) and later by Beetz et al. (2012) have shown that contact with animals can increase the release of oxytocin – a hormone related to attachment and trust – and decrease cortisol levels, which contributes to stress reduction.

Together, these theoretical approaches allow us to understand animal-assisted therapy as an intervention that integrates biological, psychological and social dimensions, favoring the integral well-being of people.

3.2 PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY

Another of the emerging categories of the literature analysis corresponds to the psychological and physiological effects derived from interaction with animals in therapeutic contexts.

Various studies have shown that animal-assisted therapy can contribute to the reduction of stress and anxiety, improve mood and promote emotional regulation. In an experimental study conducted with university students, Pendry and Vandagriff (2019) found that participation in brief animal interaction programs significantly reduced levels of perceived stress.

Similarly, research carried out in hospital contexts has shown that the presence of animals during hospitalization processes can reduce anxiety, improve the perception of well-being, and generate more positive therapeutic environments for patients (Kamioka et al., 2014).

Physiological benefits have also been documented in the scientific literature. Several studies have found that interaction with animals can contribute to reducing blood pressure, lowering heart rate, and generating physiological responses associated with relaxation (Beetz et al., 2012; Fine, 2019). These effects are related to the neurobiological mechanisms that are activated during affective contact with animals.

In addition to the physiological benefits, the literature also highlights the positive impact of these interventions on emotional well-being and self-esteem. Interaction with animals can generate feelings of affection, empathy, and responsibility, which contributes to the strengthening of self-esteem and the development of positive emotional bonds (Serpell, 2017).

3.3 APPLICATIONS OF ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY IN MENTAL HEALTH

The literature review also evidenced various applications of animal-assisted therapy in the field of mental health. In many cases, these interventions are used as a complement to traditional psychological treatments.

Research has documented the use of animal-assisted therapy in the treatment of depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and autism spectrum disorders. In these contexts, animals can facilitate emotional communication and strengthen the therapeutic relationship between the patient and the mental health professional.

For example, studies conducted with war veterans have shown that interaction with assistance dogs can contribute to reducing symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder and improve patients' quality of life (O'Haire & Rodriguez, 2018).

Likewise, research carried out with children with autism spectrum disorder has shown that the presence of animals during therapeutic interventions can improve social skills, increase interaction with other people and promote emotional expression (O'Haire, 2013).

In older adults, animal-assisted therapy has also been shown to be an effective strategy for reducing feelings of loneliness, improving mood, and promoting social participation (Banks & Banks, 2002).

3.4 INTERVENTIONS IN EDUCATIONAL AND COMMUNITY CONTEXTS

In addition to its application in clinical contexts, animal-assisted therapy has been implemented in educational and community settings, where it has been used as a strategy to promote socio-emotional development and improve learning processes.

One of the most widespread programs in this area is dog-assisted reading, in which students read aloud to trained animals. This type of intervention has been shown to reduce anxiety associated with reading in public and improve motivation towards reading (Hall et al., 2016).

Likewise, research carried out in school contexts has shown that the presence of animals can favor the development of empathy, improve school coexistence and strengthen students' socio-emotional skills.

In Latin America, several studies have begun to explore the potential of these interventions in educational and community contexts, highlighting their usefulness in social inclusion programs, psychosocial intervention, and promotion of well-being.

3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY PROGRAMS

Finally, the scientific literature also emphasizes the importance of considering ethical aspects in the implementation of animal-assisted therapy programs. These considerations include both the welfare of human participants and the welfare of the animals involved in the interventions.

According to Fine (2019), animal-assisted therapy programs must ensure that animals receive adequate training, veterinary care, and appropriate working conditions, avoiding situations of stress or overload.

Likewise, it is necessary that interventions be developed by trained professionals who understand both the principles of therapeutic practice and the needs and behaviors of animals.

Respect for animal welfare and the implementation of appropriate ethical protocols are fundamental elements to guarantee the sustainability and effectiveness of animal-assisted therapy programs.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The systematic review of the literature carried out in this chapter allows us to conclude that animal-assisted therapy (AAT) has been consolidated in recent decades as a relevant complementary strategy within the intervention processes in mental health, education and psychosocial contexts. The studies analyzed show that human-animal interaction is an interdisciplinary field of increasing scientific development, which integrates contributions from psychology, medicine, neuroscience and social sciences to understand the therapeutic effects derived from the bond between humans and animals.

First, the theoretical foundations reviewed show that the human-animal relationship can be explained from different conceptual approaches, among which the attachment theory, the perspectives of human-animal interaction and the findings from neuroscience stand out. These approaches coincide in pointing out that animals can act as emotional and social facilitators, generating affective bonds that promote feelings of security, trust and well-being. Likewise, neurobiological evidence suggests that interaction with animals can activate physiological mechanisms associated with emotional regulation, such as increased oxytocin and decreased cortisol, which contributes to stress reduction.

Second, the literature analyzed evidences that animal-assisted therapy can produce significant psychological and emotional benefits. Among the most reported effects are the reduction of stress and anxiety, the improvement of mood, the strengthening of self-esteem and the development of social skills. These benefits have been observed in various populations, including children, older adults, hospitalized patients, and people with different mental health conditions.

Likewise, the studies reviewed show that AAT has been implemented with positive results in different intervention contexts, especially in the clinical, educational and community settings. In the field of mental health, these interventions have been shown to contribute to the approach of disorders such as depression, anxiety, autism spectrum disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder, acting as a complementary resource within traditional therapeutic processes. Similarly, in educational contexts it has been shown that the presence of animals

can favor socio-emotional development, improve motivation towards learning and strengthen social interaction among students.

On the other hand, the literature reviewed highlights the importance of considering ethical principles in the implementation of animal-assisted therapy programs, emphasizing the need to guarantee both the well-being of the participants and that of the animals involved in the interventions. In this sense, it is essential that these programs are developed by trained professionals and that adequate protocols for the care, training and handling of animals are established.

Finally, although the results of the research analyzed show the potential of animal-assisted therapy as a therapeutic tool, some limitations in the literature are also identified, such as the need to expand empirical studies with more robust methodological designs, as well as to strengthen scientific production in Latin American contexts. Consequently, future research could deepen the evaluation of the effectiveness of these interventions in different populations and cultural contexts, as well as the development of intervention models that systematically integrate animal-assisted therapy within mental health care programs.

In summary, the available scientific evidence allows us to affirm that animal-assisted therapy is an innovative and promising strategy for the promotion of psychological and social well-being, whose development and application can significantly contribute to the strengthening of more comprehensive, humanized therapeutic practices focused on the well-being of people.

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