

AMERICA

The Center for Counseling Practice, Policy, and Research | 703-823-9800 x324

Overview

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is defined as a goal-directed intervention, delivered by an appropriately credentialed health or human service professional, in which an animal is incorporated as an integral part of the clinical

Using this theoretical framework, we propose nine important competency areas for professional counselors practicing AATC. These competency areas are divided into three domains—knowledge, skills, and attitudes—in accordance with the competency framework (see Figure 1; Myers & Sweeney, 1990). Professional counselors practicing AATC are expected to be familiar with all areas in which the counselors are involved in their practice of AATC. These domains, competency areas, and supporting subthemes are represented in this document. This document is intended to address the need for such standards of competence by many researchers and experienced practitioners of AATC.

These competencies are intended to apply only to counselors who incorporate their own animals into the counseling sessions and therapy. The competencies are not intended to apply (a) when a counselor has a pet with whom the client is permitted to casually interact at the office; (b) when a counselor suggests that a client consider adopting a pet for companionship; or (c) when a counselor authorizes or prescribes a service animal to her or his client. Such situations should be covered under the existing ACA practice standards.

FIGURE 1

Animal-Assisted Therapy in Counseling (AATC) Competencies Framework

Note. Adapted from Competencies in Animal Assisted Therapy in Counseling: A Qualitative Investigation of the Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes of Counselors.

Animal-Assisted Therapy in Counseling (AATC) Competencies

A. Knowledge

1. Formal AATC training. Providers of AATC are expected to acquire AATC-specific training, assessment, and supervision, including:
 - a. Successful completion of formal evaluative course work, to include:
 - i. Evaluation of animal knowledge, including:
 1. Knowledge of how animals are incorporated in therapeutic settings
 2. Ability to work effectively as a team with a therapy animal
 - ii. Evaluation of AATC knowledge, including:
 1. AATC professional identity
 2. History of AATC
 3. Literature and evidence-based practice of AATC
 - b. Knowledge of AATC-specific counseling techniques and principles, including implications for specific presenting concerns and client populations
 - c. Understanding of the relevant aspects of the human–animal bond, including:
 - i. Physiological and neurological

- c. Establishment and maintenance of a strong working relationship with the therapy animal(s), to include:
 - i. Knowledge of triggers to stress
 - ii. Ability to educate others about the animal's triggers
 - iii. Ability to recognize and apply effective calming interventions to a stressed therapy animal
- 3. Knowledge of existing ethical requirements. Providers of AATC demonstrate integrated ethics. Thus, competent providers of AATC are aware of AATC-specific ethical considerations and are able to incorporate AATC within the ACA Code of Ethics, with actions that include:
 - a. Ability to recognize and discuss the ethical implications of AATC, including:
 - i. Assessing the suitability and amenability of each client to this type of counseling
 - ii. Informing clients of the purpose of AATC
 - iii. Discussing and addressing potential safety issues
 - iv. Maintaining respect for the animal(s), the client(s), and the therapeutic process
 - v. Being aware of the provider's personal biases, including the impact of the provider's emotional connection with the animal and its impact on the therapeutic process
 - b. Ability to understand the social and cultural factors relevant to AATC and multicultural implications of AATC, including:
 - i. Respecting the attitudes of others, particularly those concerned with the animal's presence
 - ii. Understanding that human–animal interaction may hold different meanings across a variety of cultures
 - c. Ability to maximize the potential for safe interactions between clients and animals, including:
 - i. Infection prevention/control and consideration of other zoonotic agents
 - ii. Considerations for allergies, phobias, past history of animal abuse, and past history of animal trauma
 - d. Effective risk-management strategies and skills, including:
 - i. Knowledge of liability issues related to AATC
 - ii. Knowledge of legal issues associated with AATC
 - iii. Inclusion of appropriate documentation procedures
 - iv. Confirmation of personal and professional insurance coverage for AATC

B. Skills

- 1. Mastery of basic counseling skills. Competent providers of AATC demonstrate competency in general counseling skills prior to integrating AATC interventions. AATC is practiced only within the boundaries of a provider's professional scope of practice.
 - a. Counselors are expected to effectively integrate AATC into their personal model of counseling.
 - b. Counselors are expected to demonstrate counseling effectiveness without the integration of a therapy animal
 - c. Counselors are expected to recognize that AATC is used to enhance the therapeutic process rather than as a stand-alone intervention

2. Intentionality. Competent providers of AATC demonstrate intentional incorporation of AATC into the counseling relationship, plan, and process. Providers are able to demonstrate:
 - a. Knowledge that AATC is a skillful intervention and that AATC is:
 - i. More than owning/loving animals
 - ii. More than simply including an animal in the counseling setting
 - b. Knowledge and integration of theory-based interventions, including:
 - i. Ability to articulate the role of AATC within a provider's personal theoretical approach or personal model of counseling
 - ii. Understanding of the goals of AATC interventions
 - iii. Awareness of the validity of the AATC interventions being used
 - c. Skillful selections and assessment of AATC intervention strategies, including:
 - i. Selection of appropriate interventions and strategies for each client, in each session, based on treatment goals
 - ii. Ability to assess the outcome of AATC interventions
3. Specialized skill set. Competent providers of AATC recognize that AATC is a specialty area with a learned and practiced skill set. Competent AATC providers demonstrate specialized skills and abilities that are appropriate to the specialty area of AATC, including:
 - a. Ability to understand the experiential nature of AATC interventions and demonstrate skill in spontaneous

- e. Ability to objectively assess an animal's suitability, strengths, and limitations despite the provider's personal emotional bond with or personal bias toward the animal
 - i. Ability to identify and address personal biases toward the therapy animal(s), including:
 - 1. Awareness of transference/countertransference considerations related to AATC interventions
 - 2. Objective assessment of an animal's suitability for AATC in general
 - 3. Objective assessment of an animal's suitability for each AATC session on an individual basis
 - ii. Ability to identify and address personal biases toward AATC interventions in general
- f. Ability to attain and maintain compliance with applicable legal requirements for registration, care, and inoculation of the animals used for AATC

C. Attitudes

- 1. Animal advocacy. Competent providers of AATC prioritize their responsibility to animals involved in AATC and demonstrate that they are effective animal advocates by:
 - a. Understanding that the animal(s) involved in AATC is (are) the provider's responsibility, including:
 - i. Understanding how and why animal welfare and advocacy directly affect client safety
 - ii. Understanding how and why animal welfare and advocacy are essential to the ethical practice of AATC
 - b. Respecting animal rights and animal welfare, including:
 - i. Recognizing that animals have a right to choose their level of participation in AATC
 - ii. Recognizing the potential for animal exploitation, either accidentally or intentionally
- 2. Professional development. Competent providers of AATC continue the development of their AATC skills
 - a.

References

American Counseling Association. (2014). ACA code of ethics. Alexandria, VA: Author.

Chandler, C. K. (2012). Animal assisted therapy in counseling (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Chandler, C. K., Portrie-Bethke, T. L., Barrio Minton, C. A., Fernando, D. M., & O'Callaghan, D. M. (2010). M