

Animal Assisted Therapy Career



Animal assisted therapy career is an increasingly popular field that combines the healing power of animals with therapeutic practices to help individuals improve their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. This multifaceted profession attracts those passionate about animal care and people, as it offers a unique opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others. In this article, we will explore the various aspects of an animal assisted therapy career, including its definition, benefits, required qualifications, potential job settings, and future prospects.

Understanding Animal Assisted Therapy

Animal assisted therapy (AAT) is a therapeutic intervention that involves animals to help individuals cope with various emotional, psychological, and physical challenges. The animals used in therapy can range from dogs, cats, and horses to even smaller creatures like rabbits or guinea pigs. The primary goal of AAT is to enhance a person's overall quality of life through structured interactions with animals.

Types of Animal Assisted Therapy

There are different forms of animal assisted therapy, each focusing on specific therapeutic goals:

1. **Therapeutic Animal Interaction:** Involves structured interactions where trained animals assist in therapeutic activities.
2. **Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA):** More informal and recreational interactions that promote socialization, motivation, and emotional support.
3. **Animal-Assisted Education (AAE):** Focused on enhancing learning outcomes for children and adults through educational programs involving animals.

Benefits of Animal Assisted Therapy

Animal assisted therapy offers numerous benefits for individuals undergoing various types of therapy. Some of the key advantages include:

- Emotional Support: Animals provide comfort, reducing feelings of loneliness and anxiety.
- Improved Social Interaction: Engaging with animals can facilitate communication and social skills, especially in children with autism or social anxiety.
- Physical Health Improvements: Interaction with animals can lower blood pressure and promote physical activity, improving overall health and well-being.
- Enhanced Therapeutic Outcomes: AAT can increase motivation and engagement in therapy, leading to more effective treatment results.
- Stress Reduction: Spending time with animals has been shown to decrease cortisol levels and increase serotonin, leading to lower stress levels.

Qualifications Required for an Animal Assisted Therapy Career

To pursue a career in animal assisted therapy, individuals typically need a combination of education, training, and experience. Here are the main qualifications:

Educational Background

1. Bachelor's Degree: A degree in psychology, social work, counseling, or a related field is often required.
2. Specialized Training: Completing a certification program in animal assisted therapy or a related area can enhance your qualifications. Organizations such as the Animal-Assisted Therapy Programs of Colorado offer certification courses.

Experience with Animals

- Animal Handling Skills: Experience with animals is crucial, whether through personal pet ownership, volunteering at shelters, or working in veterinary settings.
- Understanding Animal Behavior: Knowledge of animal behavior and training is essential to ensure the safety and well-being of both the animal and the clients.

Licensure and Certification

- Many states require therapists to hold a valid license in their respective field (e.g., licensed professional counselor, social worker).
- Additional certifications specific to animal assisted therapy may also be beneficial and sometimes

required.

Potential Job Settings

Animal assisted therapy professionals can find employment in various settings, including:

1. Hospitals: Working with patients recovering from surgery, illness, or mental health challenges.
2. Schools: Assisting students with emotional or behavioral difficulties.
3. Rehabilitation Centers: Helping individuals with physical injuries or disabilities.
4. Nursing Homes: Providing companionship and emotional support to elderly residents.
5. Private Practice: Offering individual or group therapy sessions involving animal interaction.

Skills Essential for Success in Animal Assisted Therapy

To excel in an animal assisted therapy career, individuals should possess the following skills:

- Empathy and Compassion: Understanding clients' emotions and challenges is crucial for effective therapy.
- Communication Skills: Clear communication with clients, families, and other healthcare professionals is essential.
- Problem-Solving Abilities: Therapists must be able to adapt their approaches based on individual client needs and situations.
- Patience and Flexibility: Working with animals and people requires patience, as progress can be slow and unpredictable.
- Strong Animal Handling Skills: Being comfortable and confident while working with animals is vital for safety and effectiveness.

The Future of Animal Assisted Therapy Careers

As awareness of the benefits of animal assisted therapy continues to grow, the demand for trained professionals in this field is expected to increase. Several factors contribute to the positive outlook for careers in AAT:

1. Growing Recognition: Medical and psychological professionals are increasingly recognizing the value of incorporating animals into therapeutic practices.
2. Research and Evidence: Ongoing studies highlighting the effectiveness of AAT are helping to validate its use in various therapeutic settings.
3. Expanding Fields: New areas of application, such as in schools and corporate wellness programs, are emerging, creating diverse job opportunities.

Getting Started in an Animal Assisted Therapy Career

If you're interested in pursuing a career in animal assisted therapy, here are some steps to consider:

1. **Research Educational Programs:** Look for accredited programs that offer coursework in psychology, social work, or animal-assisted therapy.
2. **Gain Experience with Animals:** Volunteer at local animal shelters or participate in animal training classes to develop your skills.
3. **Network with Professionals:** Attend workshops or conferences to connect with current professionals in the field and learn from their experiences.
4. **Pursue Certification:** Consider obtaining certification in animal assisted therapy to enhance your credentials and job prospects.
5. **Stay Informed:** Keep up with the latest research and developments in the field to remain knowledgeable and relevant.

Conclusion

An animal assisted therapy career can be a fulfilling and impactful profession for those who love animals and wish to help others. By combining therapeutic techniques with the natural bond between humans and animals, AAT practitioners can facilitate healing and improve the quality of life for numerous individuals. With the right education, training, and skills, aspiring professionals can embark on a rewarding journey in this dynamic and growing field. As awareness of the benefits of animal assisted therapy continues to expand, the opportunities for meaningful work in this area are likely to flourish.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is animal assisted therapy (AAT)?

Animal assisted therapy (AAT) is a therapeutic approach that incorporates animals in various therapeutic settings to help individuals improve their emotional, social, and cognitive functioning.

What qualifications are required to pursue a career in animal assisted therapy?

To pursue a career in AAT, individuals typically need a background in psychology, social work, or nursing, along with specialized training in AAT and certification from recognized organizations.

What types of animals are commonly used in animal assisted therapy?

Commonly used animals in AAT include dogs, cats, horses, and rabbits, though almost any domesticated animal can be used depending on the therapeutic goals.

What are the benefits of animal assisted therapy for clients?

Benefits of AAT include reduced anxiety and depression, improved social skills, increased motivation, and enhanced emotional regulation, making it effective for various populations, including children and the elderly.

Can I start a career in animal assisted therapy without a degree?

While a degree in a related field is often preferred, there are some certification programs and volunteer opportunities that allow individuals to work with therapy animals without a formal degree.

What job opportunities are available in the field of animal assisted therapy?

Career opportunities in AAT include working as a certified therapy animal handler, mental health professional integrating AAT into practice, program coordinator for therapy animal organizations, and AAT researcher.

How can I find training programs for animal assisted therapy?

Training programs for AAT can be found through professional organizations, universities offering related degrees, and specialized certification programs dedicated to animal assisted interventions.

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