

6th International Conference on

Depression, Anxiety and Stress Management

April 25-26, 2019 | London, UK

Animal-assisted therapy as an adjunctive modality to DBT in the treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder

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Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is a pervasive and chronic pattern of behavior that causes severe distress. There are numerous theories about the development of BPD; one of which is the development of a disorganized attachment style as the result of an invalidating childhood environment. It is commonly known that many of those diagnosed with BPD have suffered chronic PTSD as the result of ongoing emotional, sexual and/or physical abuse. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) is an evidence-based practice that is widely accepted as a highly effective treatment for BPD. Even with ongoing DBT group and individual therapy, it may take a client many years to recover enough from BPD to no longer meet the criteria. The author has found that the addition of Animal-Assisted Therapy, along with DBT skill training and psychodynamic psychotherapy, can potentially facilitate the healing process. The author explores the human-animal bond through the lens of both Self Psychology and Attachment Theory. Case studies are used to illustrate the direct application of Animal-Assisted Therapy to enhance the learning of DBT Skills. When integrating Animal-Assisted Therapy into the treatment, the animal mirrors appropriate behaviors (such as mindfulness or distress tolerance) and the therapist encourages interactions with the animal which teach emotional regulation and interpersonal skills. Animals provide unconditional positive regard, genuineness and a lack of judgement, which are the nurturing qualities that people with BPD often crave. In addition, animals provide a physical and emotional safety to patients, which is crucial in a population that often reports that they never felt safe. Finally, recommendations will be provided to assess which clients would be appropriate for animal-assisted therapy, possible modifications of the treatment to other populations and future directions for this research.

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