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## *PETS AT YOUR PRACTICE*

*Linda Chassman, PhD, LMFT*

Many therapists, including myself, have brought our pets to work in a variety of treatment settings. We know the value of animals to human health, love our pets and think they're therapeutic. We have wanted to share our enthusiasm for our therapeutic animals with the people we help. I have felt so strongly about the therapeutic value of my cat Mazey that I became motivated to start an entire counseling agency with animal assisted therapy as its focus. We now have therapists that work with cats, dogs and horses. And the results for our clients have been amazing. Clients come to us because they also love animals. Parents bring their children and teenagers to help them become invested in therapy when they don't really understand why they should be going. As far as our clients are concerned, all has been positive.

All the while focusing on how my clients would love to work with our animals, I had given little thought to how our animals would react to working with our clients. Sure enough I had seen Mazey's enthusiasm for meeting new people and her easy affection for children and adults who were suffering. But I've learned that Mazey has a limit. And more research I investigate about the actual practice of integrating animals into treatment settings has heightened my awareness much more about our responsibility to consider the well-being of the animals.

A fundamental question concerns our "use" or "exploitation" of our pets as therapeutic aides. One recent article I read posed some deep philosophical questions of the morality of having animals involved in therapeutic settings (Zamir, 2006). I came away with a heightened appreciation for Mazey and our other therapy animals, and the work they do. My conclusion is that when both the animal and client are benefitted by the interaction I believe there is a moral justification for animal assisted therapy. But this also means carefully monitoring the animals and respecting their needs, physically, mentally, and emotionally. I also have re-considered my plan to use non-domestic animals as therapy animals; animals that don't intrinsically enjoy human interaction, like rabbits and guinea pigs. While the clients may benefit from holding the rabbit, does the rabbit benefit as well? This is a question I am still attempting to answer.



By all indications Mazey loves her “work” and willingly comes to my office with me each day. But I do not take her to places with lots of people, especially children because this stresses her. Also I limit the amount of sessions I have with her each day, give her a good break between sessions, allow her the choice if and how she interacts with each client, and continue to monitor her for signs of fatigue, stress, or declining interest. Mazey has several places in the office to sleep and even hide and the rules are that when she goes there we leave her be. We have rules about interaction with all our therapy animals that we review with all our clients, and we closely supervise all activity to be certain the animals are always safe and comfortable.

But first and foremost I need to remember that Mazey is my pet. There is no one else who will consider her health and happiness; I am ultimately responsible for her wellbeing.

*Linda Chassman is the director and a psychotherapist at Animal Assisted Therapy Programs of Colorado, in Denver.*

*She can be reached for comment at: [lchassman@aatpc.com](mailto:lchassman@aatpc.com)*