

## Therapy through the contact with animals

Hippotherapy (therapy with the participation of horses) can be included among the most known forms of therapeutic work, less known, although developing forms, are onotherapy (therapy with using contact with a goat) or felinotherapy (therapy with using contact with a cat); however, in the paper I will mainly focus on discussing therapy, in which the contact with a dog is used as a stimulating factor, mainly considering the dynamical development of exactly this field.

Lessons that use the contact with a dog as a stimulating and motivating factor of the therapeutic process, are becoming more and more popular in Poland. The development of this relatively new form of therapy brings great possibilities, however, at the initial stage of its development there exists a distinct need aspiring to an agreement, unification, and standardization of educating therapists, as well as training dogs and developing a cohesive ethical code.

There are, at the moment in Poland, several acting firms, associations, foundations, and unions organizing people, who want to develop and promote this new field of therapy. Thanks to the activity of these centers, publications, which contain programs and therapeutic scripts, are appearing on the Polish market. On the columns of the publishing companies, also main problems with which therapeutic practitioners – dog guiders struggle and propositions of their solutions are being discussed.

One of the main obstacles in forming clear rules and principles of the therapeutic work with a dog is the lack of an official onomatology for this kind of therapy<sup>1</sup>. Therapeutic classes that use contact with a dog as a motivating and stimulating factor of the rehabilitation process, education, socialization, as well as other forms of work that are aimed at improving the quality of life, are called in Poland dogtherapy, kynotherapy, canistherapy, or a branch of animaltherapy.

An official, unified position is indispensable with reference to dogs being able to work in therapy, both in the scope of the requirements as to the breed of the dog and the characterological premises. Moreover, it seems necessary to create tests and regulations concerning the setting up and functioning of the certifying committee that issues permits and maintains determined standards of the therapeutic work.

The next step, which is essential for the development and an official acknowledgment of the therapy with the participation of a dog in Poland (also other forms of

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<sup>1</sup>It is difficult to estimate and give a precise number of organizations that are engaged in therapy with the participation of dogs, because there is no official listing of this kind of activity. The approximate data were taken from the website <http://www.dogoterapeuta.wortale.net>, on which a map with marked main dogtherapy and kynotherapy centers in Poland was posted [26 September 2009].

therapy with the participation of animals), is carrying out scientific research, confirming its effectiveness, even if through experiments and the evaluation of the rehabilitation process as well as supporting various accepted and functioning already in Poland forms of therapy, for example sociotherapy or addiction therapy.

As it results from the review of the scientific literature describing research on the usage and effectiveness of dogtherapy (Velde, Cipriani and Fisher, 2005), it is a dynamically developing field, first of all, in the practical sphere, but also in the scientific one. The main areas of the therapeutic work is the therapy of deficits and emotional, physical, social, and cognitive disorders. Such a broad spectrum of possibilities of applying therapy with the participation of animals, creates more and more social bases for its official acknowledgment as a therapeutic profession. In order to present the possibilities of applying therapy with the participation of a dog, below I will present a couple of examples that are described by the specialist literature.

The dog ensures the child, who was usually stigmatized in the past or experienced different trauma, the feeling of unconditional acceptance. During the session, the dog completely surrenders to the care treatments and play. During care activities, which the child makes towards the dog (it is usually combing the hair, feeding, or watering), the therapist talks to him/her on the subject of everyday matters and problems, which the therapist found essential. The next stage of the session, is training with the dog an exercise routine, which will be, after ending the program, presented by the child to his/her peer group, usually a school class. During the therapy process, which usually lasts from six to twelve months, an evaluation and documentation of its course is constantly kept.

The evaluation is usually multidimensional where many things are taken into account, such as insights of the therapist, parents, class educator, as well as pedagogue and psychologist. On its bases the therapist can change or modify the aims of the therapy. The effectiveness can be increased if it being led with constant contact with the parents of the child's caregivers. As a summing up of the process, the child presents his/hers abilities and knowledge on the subject of dogs in front of an audience during a display in class or gymnasium. The therapist, on the other hand, makes sure that the presentation runs without disruptions (Kogan, Granger, Fitchet, Helmer and Young, 1999).

The above mentioned form of therapy ensures the children the feeling of unconditional acceptance and work on a constructive way of expressing emotions in a comfortable and friendly environment, without a desk and a typical office, often on the floor through a conversation and practicing roles with the therapist. Moreover, children, relatively often, project difficult emotional states onto the dog and describe their real feeling by ascribing them to animals, which gives the therapist valuable diagnostic tools. Training in giving a command helps with developing the ability of clear and precise communication through paying attention to quality and readability of the given statements. Care activities made towards the dog help to develop empathy and the feeling of responsibility for others. Additionally, hugging and careless play decreases the level of tension and opens up children, who often experienced the disturbance of their boundaries, to close contact. Practicing and display of one's abilities teaches con-

sequence and values of positive support and builds the feeling of self esteem as well as the authority against the background of the peer group (Hart, 2000).

Therapy with the participation of a dog also finds application in work with the youth in the process of cognitive-behavioral therapy and learning to control and constructively express anger. While studying the etiologies of disorders in the emotional sphere in the youth, therapists paid attention to the attitude towards domestic animals in the families of the members of the therapy. They noticed that oral and physical aggression, which was present in the behavior of young people in relation towards their animals at homes, was closely linked with their own experience of aggression from the side of other household members, from whom they were dependent (Hanselman, 2002). The author of the cited article had conducted a peculiar compilation of therapeutic cognitive-behavioral theories and attachment theory with the theory and practice of the therapy with the participation of animals, especially dogs and cats. According to this idea, people are fitting into the role of the child and /or parent in attitude towards the animals, thanks to which they experience the feeling of mutual love and devotion. Animals with reference to the person, who is in relation with them, can possess the attributes of a mother – caregiver or a child, after whom the subject is looking after, and also the attributes of one's own I subject. In the case of caring for the animal and fulfilling its needs, the person takes care of one's own inner child and through this supplements emotional deficits that ensued in childhood. If however, one focuses on experiencing unconditional love from the animal, he is feeling and in a specific way experiencing a mythical "boundless motherly love" (Hanselman, 2002), which he/she could not get as a child. In this case, the therapy is oriented towards compensating deficits in the emotional sphere and a relatively smaller, than in the previous case, attention is paid to exercises and therapeutic scripts. However, a definitely bigger role here plays the contact with the animal in a safe environment.

A different possibility of using contact with a dog in improving the quality of a person's life is "using" a dog therapist in physiotherapy and motor rehabilitation. The actions of the therapist – a guide dog focus mainly on the motivation sphere and the organization of a laborious and exhausting process of physiotherapy to the play conditions, what reduces resistance and decreases the feeling of pain (Braun, Stangler, Narveson, Pettingell, 2009). The factor that supports the therapeutic process, is the influence, which the contact with the animal has on the person's physiology during the therapy. Through the contact with a therapeutic dog, in people, blood pressure decreases, the pulse slows down and the level of muscle tension decreases (Jorgenson, 1997).

All of the above mentioned factors support motor therapy, but the planning and ac-customing of the adjusted exercises to a given disease is an essential complement. The achievement of the recent years, to which also Polish promoters of the therapy with the participation of dogs have contributed, is the elaboration and publication of many detailed class programs that are adjusted specially to the therapy of particular diseases or developmental disorders.

An example of an application of dogtherapy in the rehabilitation and physio-therapeutic practice, can be, for example, the improvement of big and small motorics through arranging specific play and games with the participation of a dog. Common

play of fetching stimulates the child to grab a particular object, for example, a ball and taking it from the dog's snout, when he brings it. Small motorics can be exercised in many ways, for instance, through zipping up and tying the dog's vest or stuffing in small pockets, which are prepared on the vest. Children usually approach these kind of classes with joy, enthusiasm, and internal motivation. However, children who are feeling anxious before the contact with the dog are an exception (Pawlik – Popielarska, 2005). For children with, the so called, kynophobia, additional exercises are expected. They depend on a gradual accustoming with a particularly calm animal through a gentle passing through to next phases of the contact, from looking and giving commands from a distance, to patting, hugging, and lying on the dog.

Therapy with the participation of a dog is also applied in the rehabilitation of the ill suffering from diseases of the cardiovascular system, and especially from a coronary disease, mainly because of the psychosomatic cause of these disorders. It is interesting that patting a dog lowers blood pressure both in the animal and in the person (Wolf and Frishman, 2005). In Western countries, plans of introducing government programs supporting motor activity through promoting long walks with a dog are being inculcated. Millions of savings have been estimated, for what the introducing of these initiatives could bring to the Australian economy. The savings would result mainly from fewer visits to the doctor and a smaller number of expensive treatment connected with treating cardiovascular diseases (Cutt, Gilles and Knuiman, 2008).

Also, in the scientific world, news on the subject of results of research conducted at social care homes in the United States, Australia, Canada, and Japan on the effects of therapy with the participation of a dog at work with older, lonely, ill people, had wide repercussions. It turns out that taking part in therapeutic classes improves and levels apathetic states in people suffering from dementia (Motomura, Yagi and Ohyama, 2004). Moreover, the contact with the therapeutic dog helps in treating patients with aphasia. It has been also proven that the presence of a dog stimulates interaction with the surrounding in people in the advanced age, who are in danger of social exclusion (France, Garcia and Labreche, 2007).

Social exclusion is one of the main problems with which deaf people have to struggle. Studies have been conducted on a group of not-hearing individuals, who received at their disposal a specially trained dog, informing them about sound signals and potentially dangerous situations. The studies have showed that the presence of a dog significantly influenced the quality of people's lives. First of all, the improvement of the quality of life was pointed out, because of the increase of the feeling of safety. The dog's company in everyday activities reduces the feeling of loneliness and also has influence on the improvement of relations between the not-hearing person and his closest community (Hart, Zasloff and Benfatto, 1996).

Independently of the kind of disability, the appearance of a dog accompanying the disabled person improves the quality of life. In the case of motor disabled people, mainly considering giving the possibility of mobility and what comes with it the independence from the help of other people. However, there are visible differences in the level of satisfaction in the studied individuals. In spite of the fact that everyone emphasizes the improvement of life quality, attachment to the dog and the improvement of

the feeling of kinship and social integration, the people who by themselves strived for a dog declare a bigger satisfaction from possessing one compared to those who received a dog without their own initiative (Lane, McNicholas and Collis, 1998).

Specially prepared and trained dogs also take part in the improvement of reading and writing skills. Among others, in the United States, Australia, Canada, and Great Britain, institutions have originated that specialize in this type of practice. One of them is the Intermountain Therapy Animals and the program R.E.A.D.<sup>2</sup> that is pursued by it. The process of supporting writing and reading depends mainly on the dog's motivating behavior, which is licking the hand of the child at the moment in which he/she has a problem with articulating a word or simply is silent for a longer time. Moreover, reading in the presence of a therapist and a dog gives conditions to overcome resistance from showing weaknesses. Also in this case, not without a meaning for the effectiveness of the therapy, remains the fact that the presence of a dog is linked with giving the child the feeling of unconditional acceptance.

Summarizing, the therapy with the participation of animals, especially dogs, is currently a dynamically developing field, both in the theoretical and practical dimension. However, there exists a justified need for introducing particular standards concerning the profession of a therapist, as well as the demands with reference to the working animal. In order to lead to an official acknowledgment of the contact with animals therapist profession, likewise dogtherapist, kynotherapist, indispensable is the formulation of unified rules coming from the initiative of institutions that are functioning in the range of the third sector. Organizing conferences and scientific symposiums, at which the representatives of various organizations that unite enthusiasts of the discussed field could share their experiences, would certainly speed up the process of unification. Also, essential is the theoretical and practical involvement of the scientific individuals, at least because of the experience in the cooperation between different institutions, and an easier access to scientific resources. The last essential factor, which may be considered as favorable for the unification and standardization of the problems connected with the therapy with the participation of animals, is using the experiences of other countries. Through establishing a partnership with institutions that have found approval and have many years of experience in this field on the international arena, a permeable and in accordance with modern standards system can be built.

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<sup>2</sup>Information about the pursued program is posted on <http://www.therapyanimals.org/read/> website (26 September 2009).

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1. <http://www.therapyanimals.org/read/> [26 September 2009].
2. <http://www.dogoterapeuta.wortale.net> [26 September 2009].