

Existential Humanistic Animal-Assisted Psychotherapy: A Relational Approach to Human-Animal Therapy

King, B., & Lac, V. (in press). Existential-Humanistic Animal Assisted Psychotherapy. In L. Hoffman (Ed.), *APA Handbook of Humanistic and Existential Psychology*. American Psychological Association

Introduction/Background:

- Animal-assisted psychotherapy (AAP) is an emerging field in mental health treatment and is differentiated from animal-assisted therapy (AAT).
- Traditionally, AAT has been task-oriented and focused primarily on human welfare, positioning the animal as a intervention-tool.
- Existential Humanistic Animal Assisted Psychotherapy introduces a relational and process-driven modality that considers animal welfare equally important and allows meaning-making to occur spontaneously.
- The authors share how they apply their shared EHAAT orientation in differing ways through Lac's HERD Model™ and King's Existential Humanistic Canine-assisted Therapy Model™.

Contact info:

Betz King: betzking@gmail.com

Veronica Lac: veronica@herdinstiute.com

Select References

- Buber, M. (1970). *I and thou*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- King, B. (2023). *Not it: Spiritually focused animal companionship*. American Psychological Association Division 32 – Society for Humanistic Psychology Spring Conference. 3.17.23, Albuquerque, N.M.
- King, B., Bowen, S. (2023). *A Christian and a Pagan walk into an Animal Shelter: Multifaith thoughts on interspecies justice*. Parliament of the World's Religions. 08.17.23. Chicago, IL.
- King, B. (2021). *Conducting canine-assisted psychotherapy*. In L. R. Kogan & P. Erdman (Eds.), *Career paths in human-animal interaction for social and behavioral scientists* (pp. 150–152). Routledge.
- King, B., McGlenn, M., & Duberstein, A. (2021). *Mutuality and well-being: The human-animal bond*. *The Humanistic Psychologist*.
- Lac, V. (2020). *It's not about the activity: Thinking outside the toolbox of equine-facilitated psychotherapy and learning*. University Professors Press.
- Lac, V. (2017). *Equine-facilitated psychotherapy and learning: The Human-Equine Relational Development (HERD) approach*. Elsevier/Academic Press.
- Lac, V. (2016). *Horsing around: Gestalt equine psychotherapy as humanistic play therapy*. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 56(2), 194–209

Existential Humanistic Canine-Assisted Therapy

Focuses on observable behaviors signifying the canine's willingness to participate in the spontaneously unfolding here-and-now therapy process, where meaning is made from whatever occurs.

Grounded in King's (2022) Spiritually Focused Animal Companionship (SFAC), which extends Buber's I-Thou philosophy to our treatment of:

Pets	VS	Animal Companions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speciesism – assumes human superiority leading to the exploitation of animals • A distracted and only partially present focus • Infused by past knowing and shortcuts • Objectifying another as a means to an end. • Control seeking. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sacred recognition of mutuality • A fully present encounter • Here and Now • Relational & Reciprocal • A spontaneous vulnerable encounter

The canine co-therapist is viewed not as a pet, but rather an 'animal COMPANION' (AC) by the human therapist, who:

- C=** Considers AC a sentient being with free will.
O= Observes & responds to AC's feelings.
M= Mindfully interacts with AC in the present here & now moment.
P= Pursues ongoing training in AC communication and body language.
A= Acknowledges commitment to AC as a protected promoted core value.
N= Nurtures ongoing enrichment activities with AC.
I= Integrates interdependency and mutuality of relationship is honored.
O= Oversees AC's body, body language, elimination and habits closely.
N= Nourishes AC's body (food) mind (enrichment) and spirit (love & wonder).

The HERD Model™

Based on 3 Key Principles:

Here-and-Now

What and How

I and Thou

Emphasizes the bi-directional nature of human-animal interactions.

Applicable to various animals, not just horses.



Discussion

EHAAP differs from traditional AAP by viewing animals as sentient participants rather than intervention tools, while

- Occurring in the present 'here and now' moment.
- Addressing ethical concerns regarding animal welfare in therapy settings
- Exploring existential themes such as death, isolation, freedom, and meaninglessness through human-animal interactions
- Offering opportunities for authentic connections and meaning-making in the therapeutic process

Conclusion

EHAAP provides a framework for integrating animals into psychotherapy that honors both human and animal needs

This approach can enhance therapeutic outcomes by creating rich, embodied experiences

More research is needed to fully understand the impact and effectiveness of EHAAP