



Zorgbeest

Guidelines for therapy cats in care environments with a focus on animal welfare

“The field of Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) lacks formal universal guidelines on the ethics of human-animal relationships (Antonites & Odendaal, 2004). It is presumed that most HAI organizations emphasize that animal welfare be protected and enhanced where possible (Preziosi, 1997; Santori, 2011). However, it is understood that specific guidelines are difficult to formulate because research has not identified the precise criteria necessary to guarantee welfare. Consequently, AAA (Animal Assisted Activities) and AAT (Animal Assisted Therapy) organizations each set their own guidelines and regulations, making standardization of the field difficult.”

Applying guidelines for Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) in practice is not always easy. Various factors, such as the financial aspect, internal regulations, support from management, staff motivation, the existing infrastructure, the type of patients, the animals' health, etc. can make following the guidelines difficult. With these guidelines, we hope to create a basis for starting a project that comes as close to the ideal situation as possible. Once the project is up and running, the guidelines can be used as a support for ongoing evaluation and determining where, if necessary, modifications must be made. Each project is unique and “the perfect AAI project” does not yet exist. The goal is to strive for the best possible circumstances in your specific care environment.

Starting up an AAI project on your own is impossible. Various actors must be invited to a meeting to review these guidelines. According to experience, education, interest and the role each would like to play, the guidelines will be progressively allocated (as far as possible). For this reason, the guidelines have been categorised per subject:

1. Selection of the cats
2. Medical screening and behaviour monitoring of the cats
3. Introduction of the new cat in an AAI-programme
4. Competences of the involved actors
5. Training the cats
6. Human-cat interaction
7. Hygiene
8. Therapy room and design
9. Insurance & responsibilities
10. Information distribution
11. AAI & AAT sessions
12. Stress
13. Safety
14. Contraindications for the implementation of an AAI programme with cats



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Contrary to the guidelines for dogs that visit various care settings with their handler, the guidelines for cats have been drawn up for residential cats who permanently reside in the care institution and who are regularly called in in AAI sessions in the presence of a therapist (AAT) or a patient counsellor (AAA).

Cats have difficulties adjusting to new environments and relocation is stressful for cats (with a few exceptions). Therefore, should you wish to implement an AAI program with cats, we strongly recommend permanent accommodation at the care facility (a few exceptions aside depending on the cat's personality). Responsibility for the cats should be allocated to one or a few fixed persons in the care facility.

In line with the considerations above, a patient's wish to meet its own cat in the care facility should always be considered exceptional. Patients must be warned about the stress it is likely to inflict on the cat and that the visiting cat may display stress behaviours instead of enjoying interaction with its owner.

The more all of those involved are taken into account, the better the chance that both the people and the animals will benefit, and the more sustainable the project will be.

GOOD LUCK!