Empathy in Animal Assisted Therapy: Considering the Animal’s Point of View

Last night I watched a video that impressed me. It was from a person who will soon be attending an advanced workshop with me. She had submitted the video so I could see how her dog behaved in various situations, and so I could be sure the dog would work well during the workshop. The video showed her with her dog on leash in a department store. Another dog came by. Her dog is not reactive to other dogs, but she didn't know the dog who came by. She calmly asked her dog to step into an aisle with her which prevented the dogs from meeting head-on in the narrow space they both had occupied. She kept her dog behind her as she talked with the owner of the other dog. They decided that their dogs would not
meet, and everyone went on their way without incident. Both dogs remained calm in the situation, as did the owners. What I liked most was how well this individual looked out for the needs of her dog in the midst of a situation in which she could easily have gotten caught up in the social interactions with the other person.

In our Animal Assisted Play Therapy-TM training programs and certification process, we emphasize the importance of learning to read body language fluently for any species with whom we live and work. The purpose of this is to ensure that the animals have choices at all times, especially in terms of items or situations that might be stressful for them. A therapist who is attuned to the animal will recognize discomfort and then take appropriate action to remove the source of stress or move the animal away from the situation. It's important that, as their caretakers, we constantly watch to see how our animals are doing in the work we have conscripted them to do!

Learning to read animals' body language gives us clues about how they are reacting to items or situations.
The ability to attend to and understand accurately what our animals are communicating is about **empathy**. We make a real effort to see the world through their eyes, watch to see what they seem to be feeling (body language), and take action accordingly. Very often, this empathy comes into play after the animal has had some sort of reaction, although the aim is to notice those reactions as early as possible before they become full-blown negative events for the animal or for our clients. It's also important that this way of paying attention does not occur only in the therapy setting--it needs to become a way of life. In general, I think that if we all paid more attention to our animal companions in this manner we could avoid many emotional and behavioral difficulties with our dogs, horses, cats, and other companion animals. What is described here thus far is the first skill needed to develop an empathic relationship with an animal: **listening**. We must first learn their language and then watch for it and respond to it.

Listening, or learning to understand body language, is a skill that requires educational information and then lots and lots of practice. First we learn to recognize all the different parts of the body and what they are doing or signaling at any given moment. Next we consider all of the parts of the body, all the different signals, in combination. Finally, we look at the context in which they are occurring. When we put those three pieces together we are in a better position to interpret what the animal might be experiencing. We need to engage in careful observation and avoid jumping to conclusions or projecting our own thoughts and feelings onto the animals. We simply have to listen carefully, put all the information together, and then draw tentative conclusions. We can never be completely sure, but practicing this can enhance our ability to understand, and consequently, make better decisions about our animals. It's a lot of work, but the good news is that it is fascinating to watch our animals and to begin to understand their worlds a little better, from *their* points of view.
Paying close attention to all the different body signals as well as the context, while putting our own thoughts and expectations aside, helps us see the world through our animals’ eyes a little better.

The second skill related to empathy that helps us stay in touch with our animals is **being proactive**. Here, we look at the situation around us or ahead of us, and we try to see it through the eyes of the individual animal with whom we are working. We anticipate how this unique animal is likely to respond. If we know our animals well, we can keep their needs and sensitivities in mind to avoid putting them in situations that might be difficult for them. For example, if a dog reacts nervously to the high pitched screams of children running and playing, we might avoid exposure to school recess periods. If a horse typically shows uncertainty around new objects, we might introduce new items gradually and during relaxing periods before any clients are involved.
This AAPT training group helps the pony very gradually become comfortable around the parachute.

One easy way to be proactive is to ensure that animals have an escape route during any therapy work you ask them to do. Space is very important to animals, and having a way to move away from something uncomfortable provides choice to the animal. If leashes are used, as is required in many animal visitation programs, they should always be kept loose and the dog allowed to move away freely. In Animal Assisted Play Therapy-TM, which involves a rather different type of interaction and environment, we typically do not use leashes, leads, or other equipment, and animals can remove themselves as needed. The skill of being proactive requires us to be aware of space or potential triggers or threats from the animal's point of view, and then to take action when we see something that could cause stress. This takes precedence over everything else, including the therapy itself. It takes a very short time to help the animal reach a more comfortable place, and the therapy can resume right away. This is far better than a situation in which we allow an animal to become stressed and show the client that we are not concerned with another's welfare!
We need to provide space or escape routes, and then the animals can make their own choices about how close they want to be. This approach adds to the genuineness of the interactions with the animals!

These two skills that relate to **empathy** -- *listening* and *being proactive* -- seem straightforward and easy enough when we talk about them, but they are rather complex to implement. We must pay close attention to the animals at the same time we are working with clients. We must apply what we know about reading body language and stay alert for things in the environment that could cause a stressful reaction. Since our work usually requires that we pay close attention to our clients as well, this is far more difficult to implement than it seems. This is one reason that it's good to adopt this type of relationship with our therapy animals during our home lives, too. It's a way of being together, at home and at work, and it is well worth the effort. Our therapy work is enhanced and our animals' welfare is ensured.
By staying attuned and proactive with our animals, we can ensure that they truly enjoy their work with us.

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Note: The author has an online course about body language for those who work with their dogs—Canine Communication in Animal Assisted Play Therapy. It is designed primarily for therapists who involve dogs in their professional work, but others can benefit from it, too. It’s a 10-hour course and mental health continuing education credits are available. www.risevanfleet.com/shop, then click on Online Courses.

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