

Using Alpacas as Therapy Animals
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I am the first to admit that I find sitting in a field with my alpacas very therapeutic after a stressful day, and I know that I am not on my own in enjoying their company. Recently, however, I have heard a number of people mention that they are planning to use alpacas 'therapeutically' in a more systematic way. In this article therefore, I would like to examine the use of alpacas as therapy animals in a bit of detail, as alpacas might not be the first animals that spring to mind for therapeutic work and to look at the issues of working with them without some careful thought and planning.

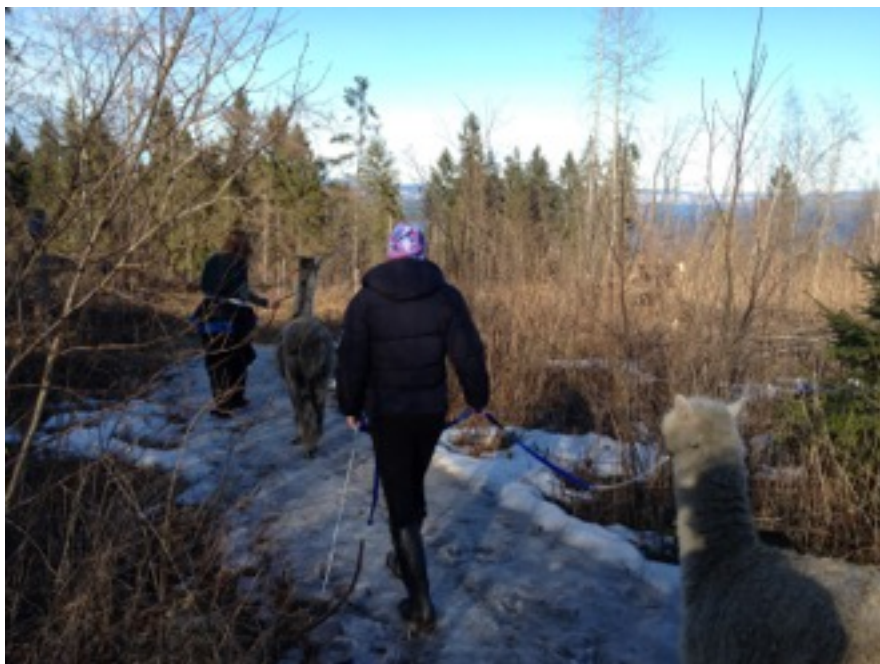


1. *A bit about definitions:* The three general areas where alpaca and llamas could be used are Alpaca Assisted Therapy (AAT), Alpaca Assisted Interventions (AAI) and Alpaca Assisted Activities (AAA). **Animal assisted therapy (AAT)** is a goal-directed intervention in which a trained animal has an important role in the treatment process of an individual. A health professional such as an occupational therapist administers AAT. Specific goals are identified for each client. These goals can involve **physical, social, emotional or cognitive functioning**. Progress is measured and documented.

"AAT is a goal-directed intervention in which an animal that meets specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process. AAT is directed and/or delivered by a health/human service professional with specialized expertise, and within the scope of practice of his/her profession. AAT is designed to promote improvement in human *physical, social, emotional, and/or cognitive functioning* [cognitive functioning refers to thinking and intellectual skills]. AAT is provided in a variety of settings and may be group or individual in nature. This process is documented and evaluated." (From *Standards of Practice for Animal-Assisted Activities and Therapy in Krugerrand & Serpe, 2006*).

So if you are working in AAT with your alpacas you will be working with a health and/or education professional in a specific therapeutic framework. You will collectively set goals for the work to be undertaken, and outcomes are usually measured.

On the other hand, **animal assisted activities (AAA)** is much more general and may involve ‘meet and greet’ activities such as taking animals to visit people in hospitals, nursing homes or hospices. These activities don’t need to be carried out by qualified people and the benefits can involve stress reduction, increased trust and socialisation opportunities. They may also include activities such as agility, general animal care and husbandry. There is usually no paperwork involved (although you may be asked about your public liability insurance) – just, hopefully, fun for everyone.



Between these two areas lie **Alpaca Assisted Interventions (AAI)** which involves the use of specifically chosen animals in a range of activities, or interactions with people, that are designed to meet individual goals or objectives. These interventions usually form part of an integrated approach to care, and are delivered alongside health care professionals. Progress is monitored and reviewed as part of a planned series of activities. Animal assisted interventions have been said to bring positive results when other conventional therapeutic approaches have not worked, for example working with troubled adolescents, who are involved with social and/or probation services.

In all three types of therapy there are likely to be health and safety issues, child protection issues and insurance considerations. For example, there may need to be hand washing opportunities, or protocols for locking away sharp objects such as knives used for chopping carrots. Safety briefings may need to be given on how not to get kicked or knocked over.

2. *What is already being done?* Quite a bit of work and research has been carried out using dogs and horses, and there are well defined and well regulated protocols for this work, by existing organisations such as the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL), Riding for the Disabled (RDA), the Delta Society (now Pet Partners) and PAT (Pets As Therapy). The Blue Cross Society run courses in the UK with the Society for Companion Animal Studies, including a distance learning course (see www.scas.org.uk). If you just want to get a flavour of the ability of animals to affect people’s lives, I recommend Rupert Isaacson’s Horse Boy books about working with his autistic son and horses. As an example of work with camels in the UK have a look at Mary Harvey’s work at her CHAT project. (<http://chatchylowen.vp-web.co.uk>)

3. *Why use animals for therapy?* Much has been claimed for animal assisted programmes. For example a programme that works with adolescents notes:

Many studies have been done to show the effects of building relationships with animals and horses. Endorphins are released into the body and decrease chemicals which cause stress and arousal when sessions with horses are experienced by troubled youth. Troubled teens are typically in a state of aggression, defiance, or anger. Using horse therapy with these teens helps maintain a constant and healthy chemical balance. Not only do horses provide therapy as a result of chemical connection between the human and horse, they also provide troubled youth with an opportunity to learn how to control and work with animals. Learning how to work with horses will help them in their day to day lives as they deal and work with humans.

Horses can often times be stubborn, reluctant to follow orders, and have to learn how to get along with a team. Members of horse therapy groups will learn how to properly lead, groom, and take care of the animals. These teens may realise that they exhibit some of the exact same behaviours as the horse. By learning how to get along and work with the horse they will better understand their own emotions and body language. Horses cannot speak like humans, and careful attention must be placed on their body language. They will let you know if they are nervous, relaxed, frustrated, excited, or dangerous by their body language. Learning how to recognise this language is key in learning how to train and become one with a horse. (Animal-Assisted Interventions in Mental Health: Definitions and Theoretical Foundations Katherine A. Kruger and James A. Serpe: Handbook on Animal Assisted Therapy. (2006) Elsevier)

Being around animals and caring for them is said to be beneficial both physically and mentally. It is well documented that holding and stroking animals can reduce blood pressure and alleviate feelings of tension and anxiety. It is said that animals are non-judgemental and give unconditional love, and, for survivors of abuse, may be the first form of 'safe touch'.

Animals can be an aid to communication as they are not just always a good talking point, but they are also useful in assisting with non-verbal communication and have been used when working with people with autistic spectrum disorders and attention deficit disorder.

Some benefits of Animal Assisted Intervention are said to be that it:

- Combats loneliness and encourages social integration
- Promotes a sense of responsibility and empathy with others
- Encourages nurturing traits
- Promotes self-esteem, independence and self-confidence
- Reduces stress
- Encourages mobility
- Animal assisted interventions can act as a catalyst for change and help people through transitional life stages
- Animal assisted interventions can assist people in finding alternative 'coping strategies' to face challenges and support personal growth.



4. *What actually happens during a session?* Obviously the activities undertaken depends on the client or learner..... In cases of learning disabled people and those with autism, tasks may focus on improving coordination and motor skills, focus and staying 'on task'. For troubled adolescents, following instructions, working in a team, learning patience and how to work quietly around animals may be the focus of the intervention and activity. For those with mental health difficulties, working with an animal can help them to verbalise the difficulties they are having, and they may ascribe to an animal thoughts or feelings they may be experiencing and through this, begin to be able to communicate with a therapist.

Typical activities include mucking out, tacking up, grooming, feeding and leading animals. By focusing on husbandry tasks, goals can be clearly defined and monitored and are open to a wider range of client groups. The use of positive reinforcement is included, so if the husbandry tasks are performed successfully, the client and the animal can be rewarded by moving on to more 'fun' activities such as riding or taking the animal for a walk.

5. *Are alpacas suitable?* This is an interesting question, and to answer this we have to consider what we need the animal involved to do. Probably, the fundamental requirement of them is to interact with people in some way. However, we are well aware that an alpaca is a herd animal, that they shouldn't be kept on their own and that being separated from their companions is usually a cause of stress. So for some types of work, llamas may be more suitable because they have been selectively bred for their willingness to work one-to-one with humans.

Alpacas and llamas do not lick their cria when they are born, nor do they clean them, groom them or mutually groom each other, unlike horses and dogs. Cuddling and being cuddled are alien behaviours to them which only a minority will accept or tolerate. Taking them to venues where many people are going to want to stroke them is not going to work for all animals. Their toleration of being stroked although initially accepting may be limited. For example, some of my camelid boys did a morning stint at a local mental health facility and after two hours were very, very ready to come home.

However, we can teach our alpacas to trust us, and through repeated interactions they can become extremely trusting of the work we want them to do and very sensitive to clients and their needs. The fact that they are smaller and less intimidating than horses, for example, makes them more approachable (and often, more easily transported....)

Not all alpacas are going to be suitable for this work. Ex-stud males who have been gelded have normally been extensively handled (especially if they have been shown) and can be ideally suitable for this work, whereas pregnant and nursing females usually do not. Animals who have been 'rescued' and rehabilitated

may have a function in enabling clients to talk about their experiences of being excluded or marginalised. I took on one male who was going to be euthanised after attacking other males, his cria and at least two sets of owners. After I had him gelded and retrained him he turned into a lovely animal who went to a new home as a therapy animal. Clients may 'choose' the animals they want to work with on the basis of perceived shared experience, and the animals too, may express a preference by picking a client to work with. This particular animal was very popular as his history struck many chords with clients. Adult geldings, in my opinion, are ideal and avoid the problem of over friendly, over handled babies. I have selected a number of these (from 3-8 years old) for this type of work and they have proved to be wonderful and tolerant animals. Older, non-breeding females may also



be suitable. I remember choosing one of my girls to work with an autistic young woman. The alpaca was superbly calm, but would only walk on when given the correct signal, in effect she taught the young woman how to handle her!

6. *What do we need them to do?* Very often we need them to do nothing, while things are done to them, such as stroking, haltering or toenail trimming. We may also want them to go for a walk or go over obstacles. Clients (and probably the professionals working with them) are going to need instructing on how to get alpacas to behave in appropriate ways, and it is up to us to elucidate the 'house rules' on how to work with our animals successfully.

At my farm, for example, visitors are informed that:

- alpacas like to be stroked on their necks, not the top of their heads and that it is polite to do this with the back of your hand first;
- we approach the animal from the side, not from the front;
- we use the the midline catch and halter helper when handling or haltering the animal rather than grabbing it round the neck;
- when leading, we always clip the lead rope to the frontmost side ring rather than underneath. Being led from there is a much more pleasant experience for the animals;
- that alpacas prefer it if we try to speak with a low volume and to keep hand gestures to a minimum.

These are all useful points to show clients and are about making the alpaca feel safe, something to which



clients may be able to relate. When I teach courses, I often talk about alpacas being prey animals and how they perceive us acting like predators and how we can stop doing it. Teaching this to some client groups may also be of benefit. I remember being surprised and impressed when one young man informed me that alpacas didn't like to be grabbed by the neck because it was a very vulnerable area.

The other important thing we want them to do is to act safely. Learning about the 'kick button' and when and why camelids spit are very useful pieces of information. Alpacas, like horses, are 'spook monsters'. Alpacas can exhibit challenging behaviours such as rearing and there needs to be an awareness of when this might occur. When leading, a healthy distance from the animal helps both participants feel safer. Use a longer lead

than you think you need to, this will allow the person leading to drop most of the length of the lead and still keep the animal under control. This sets both parties to the leading exercise up for success, not failure.

7. How can we train alpacas to be suitable therapy animals? I have found that some people have the idea that we need to make our alpacas 'bomb proof' before they will be suitable as therapy animals, they also believe that they should be very friendly and take food and receive stroking and petting happily from people. I am sympathetic to this, but only to a degree and would argue that if we want such an animal we would probably be better off using a Golden Retriever or a Shetland pony. I believe that we should not be trying to change alpaca nature too much, nor should we risk getting over-friendly animals, an issue with which many petting zoos have had to contend.

There are many, many animals who have been rehomed from petting zoos who have become 'too difficult'. This is as a result of isolation from the herd and normal social alpaca behaviour, from over handling and too much hand feeding and treating. I have two rejects from this type of zoo at my farm. One loves being stroked by everyone, but is very difficult to handle and the other one spits at all the other alpacas because the public were encouraged to hand feed the animals at 'carrot time'. Without an awareness of the risks, this could happen to our therapy animals. I recently took on two Icelandic ponies from an special school and had to retrain them. An over-reliance on food treats meant that when I acquired them they were like the crocodile in a Punch and Judy show. To say that they liked to bite was an understatement....

I believe the keys to success include:

- Train the animals using non-coercive methods e.g. CamelidSense/Camelidynamics and/or clicker (operant conditioning) work. Clicker training gives us such an effective means of communicating with our animals. There is also TagTeach (www.tagteach.com) which is an excellent way of teaching new skills to humans, and might be well worth investigating for your therapeutic enterprise.
- Don't let your animals get stressed or jaded with overwork. Balance a lot of hanging about in their field with bouts of therapy work. I notice that when I bring my animals in too often for work on my clinics they are less well behaved than when I alternate using 'the girls' with 'the boys'.
- Train your client group in the correct methods of handling.
- Desensitise your alpacas to everything you can think of before you start taking them anywhere new to do work. Take them to lots of places and expose them to lots of stimuli in a neutral setting. I thought my boys were bomb proof but on a visit to a nursing home on a hot day they were completely terrified of the large parasols on the patios!
- Don't overhandle your youngsters! Work with your cria in the ways I have elucidated before in this magazine and others, but don't do any extra work. Leave introducing them to therapy work until they are older, I would say about a year at the earliest. Hopefully they are going to have a long and fulfilling working life, you need to ensure you don't put too much pressure on them at this early age, before they are mentally and physically developed. Some of the easiest horses I ever worked with were Arab horses who had had some early training and handling and who were then turned away to mature and brought back into work at 4-5 years old.

Good luck with your ventures and I wish you all success, and hope that you, your client groups and your alpacas all enjoy this work. Sadly, the jury still seems to be out on whether therapy with animals provides a lasting effect, but I feel that interacting with animals and learning about them without harming them or exploiting them can only benefit those involved.

How to find out more. See www.carthveanalpacas.com for details of courses, previous articles and our online store of equipment books and DVDs. Contact Julie Taylor-Browne at taylor.browne@clara.net