

## FELINOTHERAPY IN NURSING HOMES

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### Abstract

Felinothrapy, which is the positive and therapeutic effect of cats on human health, is an important part of the complex health and social care in nursing homes. Felinothrapy is one of the options to make seniors active and support them in this in nursing homes. The goal of this study was to describe the methods and forms used for providing felinothrapy in nursing homes and to analyze its positive effects. This systematic study includes the secondary data analysis – monographs, academic articles and publications found in databases (PubMed). Although many authors have studied the effect of animals on human health, no long-term study proving the effect of felinothrapy on the health of seniors in nursing homes was found. We used the secondary analysis and the author's experience with zoo therapy to identify the positive effects of felinothrapy in nursing homes in the following domains: (1) emotionally positive experiences, positive mood and the decrease of stress; (2) psychosocial support and physical contact with a cat; (3) positive relationship with animals and the ways of handling a cat; (4) training cognitive functions and reminiscence; (5) relaxation and training concentration; (6) social contact and the assistance in adaptation to nursing homes; (7) cats and caring for them as a conversation topic and a common interest; (8) stimulation and training of the senses; (9) movement, exercising the motoric system; (10) supporting autonomy and independence, gaining the feeling of security.

**Keywords:** *Felinothrapy; Nursing home; Activities; Residential social service, zoo therapy; Cat assisted activity and therapy; Cat assisted intervention*

## INTRODUCTION

Felinothrapy is one of the types of zoo therapy, which utilises the positive and therapeutic effect of cats on human health. According to Hypšová (2007), felinothrapy uses a positive interaction between humans and cats in the treatment or support of human health. The founder of felinothrapy in the Czech Republic is, among others, the Independent Breeding Club, which is managed by Daniela Hypšová, who deals with the protection and breeding of pedigree cats and the provision and development of felinothrapy

(Independent Breeding Club, 2018). This organization also works on methods, tests and education in felinothrapy. It ensures teams of volunteers who work not only for the organization (Independent Breeding Club, 2018).

Poskocil (2012) states that more and more nursing homes and households with care services prefer cats because they are not demanding. Nursing homes in the Czech Republic provide a residence service to people with low independence, especially because of their age, and when their condition requires permanent assistance (§ 49 of the act No. 108/2006 Col. on

social services). According to this act, nursing homes provide the following: accommodation and food; assistance with caring for oneself; assistance with personal hygiene or provision of the conditions for personal hygiene; contact with a social environment; socially therapeutic activities; activation activities; assistance with exercising one's rights, interests and management of personal issues. Felinotherapy is one option for making seniors active, maintaining their activity and supporting them in being active in nursing homes.

The goal of this study is to describe the methods and forms used for providing felinotherapy in nursing homes and to analyze its positive effects.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

We used the secondary source analysis, which we searched for in the PubMed database. We used various combinations of keywords, such as: animal assisted therapy, animal assisted activities, pet therapy, cat assisted therapy, cats, nursing homes, seniors, elderly people, care of elderly people, health care, social care or social services. We found 824 sources and used 128 publications after the analysis of abstracts. We repeatedly assessed them according to the following criteria: language – English; full text availability; the years of issue – 2014–2018; the topic – felinotherapy in nursing homes regarding health and social care; study object – seniors who were 65+. In the end, we included 7 publications from the database.

### Methods and forms of felinotherapy in nursing homes

#### *Forms of felinotherapy*

Felinotherapy is an important part of the complex health and social care in nursing homes in the Czech Republic. According to the act No. 108/2006 Col. on social care, it is either an educational and activation activity or a socially therapeutic activity. Felinotherapy in nursing homes can be provided individually or in a group, which depends on the established short or long-term goals of individual plans for seniors. The Delta Society organization (2006) defined the forms of zoo therapy as follows: single or regular, visitation or residential. This terminology is glob-

ally used. Felinotherapy is provided once or regularly (Freeman, 2007). Single activities include single or short-term activities, such as talks or a cat assisted presentation of the activities. These activities can be individual or in a group setting. Regular activities are usually a part of activation activities and the visitation programme. The visitation programme can be individual or regular (Freeman, 2007), which corresponds with the terminology by the Delta Society (2006). The visitation programme can be conducted by volunteers, as well as the employees of a nursing home. There is also a residential programme, where a cat is always available to be used, and it is taken care of by seniors or employees who provide the felinotherapy (Freeman, 2007). In such cases, the cat may become the property of a senior or the facility (Freeman, 2007). The residential programme includes a single or regular stay, e.g. at the weekend or a weekly re-conditioning stay.

### Methods of felinotherapy

Up to 2013, felinotherapy used the same methods as other zoo therapies according to the terminology of the Delta Society (2006):

- a) cat assisted activities – AAA (Animal Assisted Activities);
- b) cat assisted therapy – AAT (Animal Assisted Therapy);
- c) cat assisted education – AAE (Animal Assisted Education);
- d) cat assisted intervention – AAI (Animal Assisted Education), this terminology has been used since 2013.

Nursing homes usually use AAA and AAT methods (according to the terminology of Delta Society from 2006). According to the current terminology by IAHAIO (2013, 2014), it is AAI (Animal Assisted Intervention).

### Cat assisted activities

Hypšová (2007) states that AAA is an activation method for seniors. Cat assisted activities (AAA) have more of a motivational, educational or relaxing goal than a therapeutic one, which is focused on supporting the quality of life of seniors in nursing homes. AAA is conducted mainly by volunteers (they are mostly from a non-state non-profit organization) or professionals, such as social workers. In such cases, seniors do not have a therapeutic goal.

The goal is to create psychological contentment, have emotionally positive experience (joy, satisfaction, success) or bring seniors new experiences and please them. According to the Delta Society (2006), cat assisted activities are provided either individually or in a group using the following forms:

- a) passive – seniors watch the cat but they are not active in the AAA; the positive effect of this form comes from the presence of the cat;
- b) active (interactive) – a senior and a cat interact;
- c) residential – a cat is permanently in the facility; it is taken care of by the personnel or the seniors;
- d) visitation – a volunteer or a professional regularly visits the nursing home.

Animal assisted activities are defined by the IAHAIO White Paper (2013, pp. 4–5) as “*informal interaction and visitation conducted by the human-animal team for motivational, educational and recreational purposes. Human-animal teams must have received at least introductory training, preparation and assessment to participate in informal visitations. Human-animal teams who provide AAA may also work formally and directly with a healthcare, educator and/or human service provider on specific documentable goals. In this case they are participating in AAT or AAE that is conducted by a specialist in his/her profession. Examples of AAA include animal assisted crisis response that focuses on providing comfort and 6 © IAHAIO 2014–2018 support for trauma, crisis and disaster survivors, and visiting companion animals for ‘meet and greet’ activities with residents in nursing homes. The person delivering AAA must have adequate knowledge of the behavior, needs, health and indicators of stress of the animals involved. Informal interactions/visitations are frequently carried out by volunteers from human-animal teams for motivational, educational or recreational goals. The treatment goals are not formed for intervention. AAA are generally conducted by people who are not formally educated in healthcare, education or humane services. To participate in the visitations, human-animal teams finished the minimum training, preparation and assessment. Human-animal teams can directly co-operate with the pro-*

*viders of medical, humane and educational services and set specific documented goals. In such cases, they participate in AAT or AAE, which are carried out by specialists. Examples of AAA include intervention which focuses on comforting and supporting the victims of trauma, crisis or a natural disaster, and ‘meet and greet’ activities with the residents of nursing homes”. The expression “meet and greet” is used for time spent together, talks with seniors etc.*

### **Cat assisted therapy**

Animal assisted therapies are defined by the European Society for Animal Assisted Therapy (ESAAT, 2011, p. 1) as follows: “*Animal-assisted therapy is based on the relationship and process structure within a triangular relationship between the client, animal and therapist. Animal-assisted therapy involves methods by which clients interact with animals, communicate via animals or are active for animals. Implementation is goal-oriented and based on a clear process and topic orientation taking into account animal-ethical principles with subsequent documentation and professional well-founded considerations.*”

In the Czech Republic, the expression “felinotherapy” is used to describe the use of cats for therapy. It includes cat assisted activities as well. According to Matoušek (2003, p. 241), therapy in the helping professions is usually recognized by the following factors: therapeutic relationship between the client and the assistant; using psychological or socially therapeutic methods to affect the client. The therapist must have special authorization. The word therapy is defined as follows: “*It is usually used to describe treatment or a treatment programme whose goal is moderating or removing a person’s or a family’s negative condition*” (Matoušek, 2003, p. 240). “A therapist is a person who not only provides a service but takes the load of care. They are reliable and supportive” (Matoušek, 2003, pp. 240–241). Freeman (2007) points out the word “therapy” as well. She sees this concept as inaccurate because zoo therapy (felinotherapy) uses other methods as well, such as AAE or AAA.

AAT (Animal Assisted Therapy) in nursing homes is an intervention with a certain goal. A cat is part of a therapeutic process, where

the goals of felinotherapy are set. AAT, as well as AAA, is provided individually and in a group setting. Compared to AAA, the results are measurable and noticeable. Seniors are set specific goals and methods for their achievement. The goals are continuously assessed. The most important is the management of the documentation about the progress and the results of AAT. It is necessary to co-operate with the personnel, especially social workers, nurses and therapists. AAT is focused on the cognitive, physical, mental and emotional areas, as well as the support of the social area. The goals of a cat assisted therapy in nursing homes should correspond with the following general therapy goals by ESAAT (2011, p. 1):

- a) *“the restoration and maintenance of physical, cognitive and emotional functions;*
- b) *the support of capabilities and skills by carrying out activities and treatments;*
- c) *the support of inclusiveness in the particular life situation;*
- d) *the improvement of subjective wellbeing.”*

### **Cat assisted education**

Animal assisted education (AAE) in the Czech Republic mostly includes canistherapy, but it is also possible to use AAE as part of felinotherapy. An example of good practice is puppet show stories with live animals (cats), which are conducted by the Independent Breeding Club in Mladá Boleslav (Kohoutová and Gardiánová, 2013).

### **Cat assisted intervention**

In 2014, the IAHAIO White Paper (2013) was reviewed and the changes included a change in the used terminology, i.e. animal assisted activities were completely left out. The definition of animal assisted activities is entitled: “Definitions for Animal Assisted Intervention and Guidelines for the Wellness of the Animal Involved” (IAHAIO White Paper, 2014) and they are one of the types of animal assisted interventions (IAHAIO White Paper, 2014). Animal assisted interventions in this document are defined as *“a goal oriented intervention that intentionally includes or incorporates animals in health, education and human service (e.g., social work) for the purpose of therapeutic gains in humans. Animal assisted interventions incorporate human-animal teams in formal human service such as Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) or Animal As-*

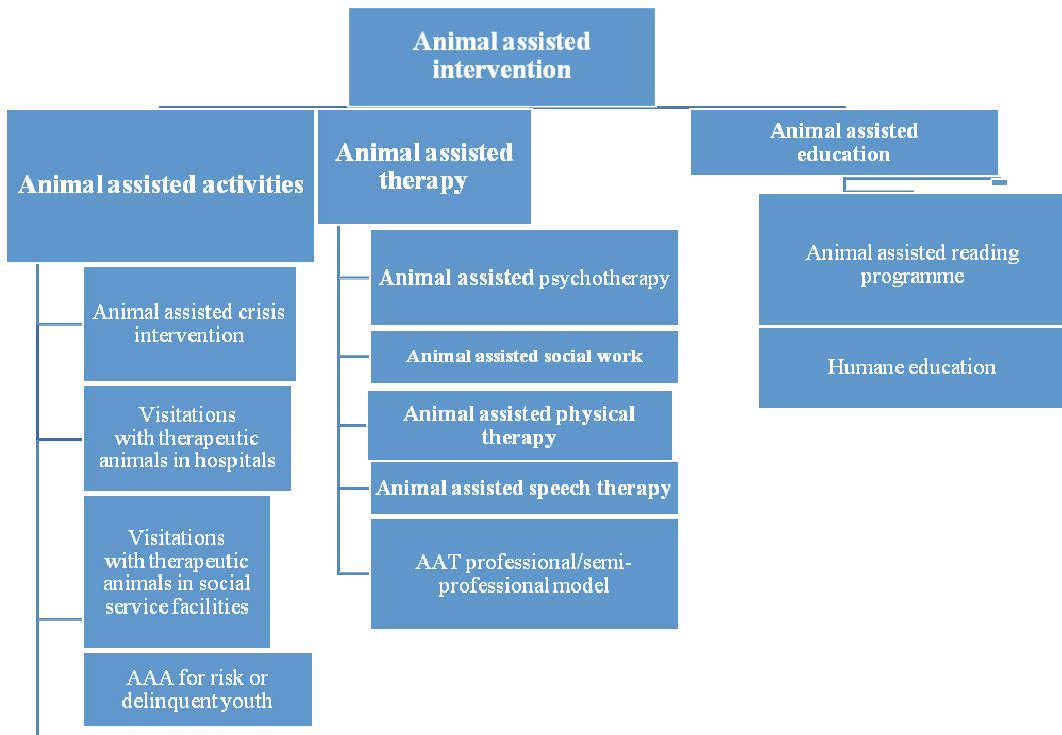
*sisted Education (AAE)”* (IAHAIO White Paper, 2014, p. 5).

In the interest of completeness, we include the change by the IAHAIO White Paper from 2014, which deals with animal assisted activities: *“... AAAs are informal interactions/visitations often conducted on a volunteer basis by the human-animal team for motivational, educational and recreational purposes. There are no treatment goals for the interactions. AAAs are generally facilitated by individuals who do not have a health, education or human service degree. Human-animal teams have received at least introductory training, preparation and assessment to participate in informal visitations. Human-animal teams who provide AAA may also work formally and directly with a healthcare, educator and/or human service provider on specific documentable goals. In this case they are participating in AAT or AAE that is conducted by a specialist in his/her profession. Examples of AAA include animal assisted crisis response that focuses on providing comfort and support for trauma, crisis and disaster survivors, and visiting companion animals for ‘meet and greet’ activities with residents in nursing homes.”* The change is in the first line of the definition, and the second and the third lines were also erased. This means that there was an exclusion of the voluntary aspect and the formulation of therapeutic goals.

In the interest of completeness, we use the elements of animal assisted intervention in Fig. 1, including the used terminology according to Fine et al. (2015).

### **Positive effect of felinotherapy on seniors in nursing homes**

The positive effect of animals on humans has been confirmed by many authors: Chandler (2012), Greiffenhagen and Buck-Werner (2011), Hahsler (2011), Machová et al. (2017), Poskocil (2012) or Serpell (2010). Kårefjård and Nordgren (2018) mention the positive effect of dog-assisted intervention on the quality of life of people with dementia in nursing homes. Ein et al. (2018) studied the physical effect of animal assisted therapy and its effect on stress. After the therapy, no differences in blood pressure were monitored, but the reactions to stress were significantly reduced. The study which was carried out by Pérez-Camargo and Creagan (2018) confirmed the effect



Source: Fine et al. (2015, p. 23)

**Fig. 1 – Elements of animal assisted intervention**

of animals on the health and wellbeing of patients and families, especially in medical environments. Šoltésová and Skyba (2015) state that the relationship between humans and animals has an existential, biologically ethological and psychosocially evolutionary history. Šoltésová and Skyba (2015) see a positive effect of human-animal interventions (HAI) on human health regarding the bio-psycho-social model. This model emphasizes the interactive aspect of individual systems in the life of a client/patient. It also clarifies the momentary social functioning, where any change in any system affects all the systems as well as the client's/patient's health condition. Based on the secondary data analysis and the author's practical experience with providing activation activities regarding zoo therapy in nursing homes, the positive effect of felinotherapy can be divided into the following areas:

**1. Emotionally positive experience, positive energy and stress decrease**

Poskocil (2012) states that animals have a very positive effect on human physical and mental health and wellbeing. Direct physical contact with a cat brings seniors positive energy and the individual contact, which the seniors usually seek. The cat may spontaneously contact them as well. When seniors are not in physical contact with the cat, they can watch its behaviour and the felinotherapy, so the cat's presence can be very positive in this way, too. An emotionally positive experience is evoked when seniors stroke the cat, comb its fur, look for objects in their fur, etc. Hahsler (2011) believes that cats have an antidepressant effect – they provide an everyday happiness in the life of seniors. According to Ein et al. (2018), animal assisted therapy can be an effective programme for decreasing

stress. Peluso et al. (2018) studied the effects of animal assisted interactions on aggression and anxiety and the improvement of the quality of life, including relationship skills. Their research showed that, in psychiatric patients, AAT increased motivation and self-respect. It improved social behaviour and decreased behavioural problems.

### **2. Psychosocial support and physical contact with a cat**

According to Hypšová (2007), felinotherapy is a pleasant change for seniors who are aware of their lack of social contact. The physical contact with a cat (touching, combing, stroking or playing) brings seniors an emotionally positive experience; they are in contact with a companion who likes them. A cat can be a companion and a confidant who understands them and they can tell it anything they need to.

### **3. Positive relationship to animals and treating with a cat**

During the interaction and the contact with a cat, the senior's need for social contact and communication is satisfied. Speaking about the animal, stroking it, employees' stories about the cat, etc. – all of this strengthens the senior's relationship towards the cat. If seniors had previously been cat breeders or owners, it would be possible to use their experience to increase their confidence, speaking skills and support their independence and share their joy of success. A cat, in a similar way to other animals, reacts to positive or negative behaviour and seniors experience its reaction as a reflection of their own behaviour. A cat, like a dog, does not distinguish people by their appearance but by their behaviour and attitude. A cat shows its affection and seniors experience a positive reaction to their own behaviour, which increases their confidence.

### **4. Training cognitive functions and reminiscence**

Klevetová (2017), Preiss and Křivohlavý (2009) and Suchá (2017) mention the importance of training cognitive functions and memory at older age. During felinotherapy, people train their memory, thinking, speaking and vocabulary (they communicate about and with the cat). The cat can also help people

with their orientation in space and time. Felinotherapy does not include only direct contact with a cat, but pictures or calendars with cats on them as well. They can also speak about the cat's daily regime, say names and breeds, or play Kim's game and easy cat quizzes. They can train their long-term memory by singing songs about cats, repeating their names, etc. They can remember cats and talk about photographs and pictures of cats if they once had a cat at home. Felinotherapy can be interconnected with reminiscence, the positive effects of which are mentioned by Janečková and Vacková (2010) and Špatenková and Bolomská (2011).

### **5. Training concentration, relaxation and soothing**

Cats help seniors to warm up their hands. Touching the fur also stimulates the sense of touch and positive experience. It also warms and relaxes the body (Hypšová, 2017). Růckerová (2012, p. 1) states: *"In our experience, seniors prefer cats to dogs. They are calm, warm, cuddly and not too big or small."* Felinotherapy is an opportunity for slow activities, in which we can talk about cats and, in the meantime, seniors can stroke or watch the cat. A cat can also be soothing (when a senior is stroking and combing it). When they are in contact with a cat, seniors can concentrate for longer. Cat assisted activities of the "here and now" can help decrease affective disorders and mood swings. Switching between cat assisted slow and locomotive activities appears to be very useful – watching a cat, cuddling it, or taking a walk with it in the hall.

### **6. Providing social contacts and helping to adapt to a nursing home**

According to Odendaal (2007), animals provide people with social stimulation. The group form of felinotherapy is an opportunity for seniors to meet, get acquainted with one another and grow closer. A cat can help seniors to adapt to change, a new environment and the regime in a nursing home. It can motivate seniors to engage in group activities. The participation in a group form of felinotherapy provides seniors with social contacts and it can be a way to prevent feelings of loneliness, sadness and isolation.

### **7. Cat and cat care as a conversation topic and a common interest**

According to Hrozenká and Dvořáčková (2013), workers in the helping professions should be able to analyze the client's experiences, i.e. express and describe their feelings, experiences and behaviour. As conversation topics are difficult to find, a cat can be a conversation topic between seniors and the employees of a nursing home. Malíková (2011) describes the importance and the specifics of different types of communication with seniors and offers recommendations for the employees of a nursing home on how to communicate with clients of an older age. A cat is often a conversation topic of the "here and now", or provides the motivation for an activity. It is also a psychological support because it understands the non-verbal communication. A cat is often a seniors' object of interest. They can communicate with a cat as they please and the cat reacts to this. The employees can choose talks about cats as part of other activities, such as reminiscence or memory training.

### **8. Sense stimulation and training**

Activation of senses is crucial to the seniors' abilities and sources (Institute of sensory activation, 2018). Its positive effect in the care of seniors is mentioned by Vojtová (2014) and Wehner and Schwinghammer (2013). A cat can be the source of stimulation of visual impulses (movement, behaviour, the cat's body language, satisfying the cat's needs), hearing impulses (breathing, purring, etc.), touch (contact with the cat's soft and warm fur, hand-licking, the cat's breathing or distinguishing materials on the cat's collar).

### **9. Locomotive activities, training the motoric system**

The importance of active training in seniors is mentioned by Bowman et al. (2017), Da Fonte et al. (2016), Klevetová (2017) and Neviani et al. (2017). There are multiple options for training the motoric system during felinotherapy, such as opening/closing the box with treats when the senior wants to reward the cat, giving treats, hiding treats (under dishes, in the room, on the senior's body), manipulating the snap-hook on the leash, combing a cat with various types of combs, taking toys and other objects out of a bag, looking for clips and pieces of paper in a cat's fur, fas-

tening and unfastening collars or tying up a bow. A cat can also motivate a senior to move and actively train (a walk in the hall/ward or from their room to the hall, accompanying the worker with a cat to the exit/lift after a therapy). A walk with a cat on a leash is also an option (if the cat is used to it), as well as in the form of slalom or an easy obstacle course, where the cat is the goal to which the senior must walk. A cat can also motivate seniors to train with and use compensatory aids, i.e. a cat can motivate a senior to walk with a stick or use a wheelchair – it can be waiting at the end of the hall or at the door of the room as a reward, or it can sit in the senior's lap or walk next to the wheelchair.

### **10. Supporting autonomy and independence, gaining the feeling of security**

The importance of maintaining a senior's autonomy is mentioned by Dvořáčková (2012), Sýkorová (2007) and Žumárová and Tesková (2008). According to Sýkorová (2007), seniors associate autonomy with physical independence. In felinotherapy, a cat can motivate independence. During independent activities (dressing, personal hygiene, walking, eating) and others, a cat can be a motivational factor (training cognitive functions, revising colours, distinguishing body parts, etc.). A cat helps seniors to be active and evokes positive and negative reactions with its behaviour. Seniors can be actively included in the care, e.g. the senior can bring a bowl with water or prepare the aids for felinotherapy. Watching a cat's behaviour, and reacting to it and other participants' behaviour bring seniors the feeling of security regarding their approach towards the cat and the feeling of security regarding communication as well. The seniors' need for identity and the recognition of their own self by themselves and others are also mentioned by Klevetová (2017).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Felinotherapy plays an important role in the complex health and social care of seniors in nursing homes. It forms an important part of activation activities or socially therapeutic activities. This article has outlined the forms and methods used in felinotherapy. It has also

described the actual changes in the used terminology by the current documents and used the secondary analysis to identify the positive effect of felinotherapy in ten areas. Although a number of authors have studied the effect of animals on human health, we did not find any long-term study which would prove the effect of felinotherapy on the health of seniors in nursing homes. In conclusion, it is necessary

to say that, in the Czech Republic, no research regarding felinotherapy in nursing homes has been carried out (as it has for example, in Austria).

### **Conflict of interests**

The author has no conflict of interests to disclose.

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