







Monthly E-Newsletter

ANIMAL ASSISTED THERAPY

July 2025/Issue 53

RITA IS THE NEW CHAIR FOR RAG MENTAL HEALTH- GLOBAL

Kita Aggarwal has transitioned into a new role as Chair, Rotary Action Group on Mental Health Initiatives (RAG-MHI) Global (2025 – 2027). And rightly so!!

Pioneering Psychology in Central India

Rita is a senior consultant Psychologist at Nagpur City, India, in private practice, since 1992. She established the first Psychological Clinic named 'Manodaya' and pioneered the thought and practice of Psychology in Central India when it was an unknown profession. Equipped with an M.Phil in Clinical Psychology from Bombay University and a gold medal in both M.A and B.A Hons, Psychology, from Ranchi University, she was interested in applying psychology to help people.

From a young age her strong values were logical thinking, truth, justice, empathy, compassion, cooperation. She values self-autonomy, self-discipline and ownership of behavior and choices. Being a straight -talker she believed that 'I will preach only what I can practice'! She roughed out some years in social work initiatives at grass-root levels in rural India for experience, leaving the comforts of her life. She gained insights into the powerful dynamics of the socio-economic-political complexities of rural society and how it determines the strengths and threats to the mental health of people. She later worked on research projects, on 'Women Prisoners', 'Domestic Violence'; Coordinated a Centre on 'Deaddiction Counselling and Rehabilitation' and Coordinated Child Adoption Agencies.

A regular weekly column was initiated by her, named 'Emotions' in Central India's leading daily English newspaper 'The Hitavada' in 1994 which is still running in its 31st year! As a psychological counseling column which answers personal psychological queries of the general audience is extremely popular even today, which is evident from its continuity.

A Behavioral Trainer, Speaker and Mentor she has lectured on mental health in colleges, schools, Institutes, industries and forums. She spoke at TEDx at BITS Pilani, in 2016. Her signature workshops on "Personality Development" for kids and college students conducted in her own center were in huge demand for 26 years till she discontinued them in the year 2020 during Covid.

Rotary Journey

She is a Co-Founder of RAGMHI that was chartered in the year 2016. Since then she has been a Director on the Board. In the last nine years of its existence it has grown into an influential Action Group in Rotary International with a strong membership base, global grants projects and a dedicated Board of Directors.

Invited to join the Rotary Club of Nagpur in 2000, she worked on several mental health programs. She also served in many positions in her Club and District winning awards. During the Covid pandemic in 2020, she formed a District Committee on Mental Health with 65 members which got chartered as the first District Chapter with the Rotary Action Group on Mental Health Initiatives (Global) in April 2021. Today there are 12 District Chapters in India and 39 globally. At the same time, she initiated the monthly newsletter Mind Matters.

With the help of the outgoing Chair Bob Anthony, she ran a Global Grant project named "Wellness in a Box -Peer Leadership Development Program", based on the RAGMHI toolkit with the same name. The project ran for 4 years from 2021 to 2025 in 5 schools of Nagpur, benefitting thousands of children and parents



and creating an impact.

Rita says 'not many Rotarians know that Action Groups are experts focused on a specific cause and offer guidance and resources to interested Clubs and Districts. Action Groups are open to Rotaractors and non-Rotarians besides Rotarians. The day we decided to form RAG-MHI I knew this is the best platform which will offer opportunities for global networking and for conducting large -scale projects on mental health. I love RAGMHI' she states with pride.

International Recognition

For her project 'Wellness in a Box', she was honored with the two highest awards in Rotary International - **Service Above Self** and the **People of Action- Champions of Impact.** The awards were given at the Rotary International Convention at Singapore in May 2024 at the hands of the Rotary International President Gordon R McInally at a gala dinner.

Rita has a vision, a mission and a passion- what more can you aspire for!!

From launching Central India's first Psychological clinic to influencing global mental health initiatives, her journey has been nothing short of transformative!

DAGMHI 3030 is proud of her. Congratulations and all good wishes Rita!!

-Team Mind Matters





ROTARY INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION-CALGARY JUNE 21st -25th, 2025

Rotary Action Group on Mental Health Initiatives (RAGMHI), was in full action!!







RAGMHI had a booth no. 259 in the House of Friendship, displaying banners of Toolkits, Membership and Chapter formation. Our officers were enthusiastically attending to the continuous crowd of Rotarians, eager to know more about mental health and how to add projects to their clubs. The booth was manned by Chair Bob Anthony, Vice Chair Alan Turner and Treasurer Bonnie Black. Around 200 plus visitors filled in the contact form. It was indeed a very busy and exhausting four days!





RAGMHI also sponsored a HUB and secured 27 presentation slots. "Attendance was great! There were many excellent, well attended presentations. Of course, the 40 minute session with PRIP Gordon McInally and Bob Anthony was packed. The Hub had 50 seats, and we had to extend the boundaries for all the people standing", says Alan excitedly. Alan also says, "We had another very delightful presentation by a young lady presenting on Nutrition and Mental Health."

Chair, Bob Anthony held the Annual General Body meeting, which went houseful with extra members barred from entering the room as per rules.







EDITORIAL

ANIMALS AS CO-THERAPISTS!

As trained mental health professionals, we are used to conventional methods of counselling and psychotherapy to help clients with mental health issues. But the field of psychology and mental health has been flooded and invaded, if I'm allowed to say, with alternative methods of different varieties and hues, which is surprising, baffling and shocking. In our earlier issues, we have talked of art therapy and music therapy, which are unconventional methods, but are beginning to get recognition. Each time we talk of an



alternative method, it's a learning experience for us. There is so much going on in the world, which we are unaware of!

According to Rtn. Rita Aggarwal, Chair-RAGMHI and Editor-Mind Matters, "At any given point, 20% of the global population suffers from some mental health issues. But ironically, the ratio of mental health professionals to patients is acutely inadequate, which poses a challenge for us to meet the demands for quality care." Perhaps, due to this, a lot of people are turning to these unconventional forms of therapy, to relieve pain and emotional disturbances at the earliest.

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT), introduced by **Dr. Boris Levinson**, is emerging as a niche in therapy- evolving and backed by science, where animals play an important role in therapeutic settings. AAT makes me recall the times I've been around pets at my friends' places. Be it a cute little labrador or a fluffy persian cat, I've observed that I've been quite mindfully present in those moments- it was almost as if I forgot about the stressful things going on in my mind because of their gentle yet playful presence!

The scientific and legal approach behind the human-animal bond helps us understand what makes this form of therapy impactful. The research study shows us some real transitions observed in clients, mentally as well as physically. The **'Pet Pyramid'** helps us understand the levels of the human-animal interactions, from casual contact to use in therapy in a structured form.

While AAT is still emerging in India, it is important to note that AAT can be effectively used only as a prelude or adjunct to conventional psychotherapy and not a comprehensive model of therapy. While training in counselling, we're taught that building rapport with your client is the first and the most important step before moving forward. However, a lot of times we have clients who might be hesitant to open up during sessions, due to various reasons. Children from special schools or individuals from juvenile homes or remand centres with a history of traumatic experiences, might not be able to explain their emotional disturbances in words. In such cases, unconventional methods like AAT can work effectively to help the clients destress and make them comfortable in the therapeutic set-up. This, however, needs to be followed up with conventional psychotherapy approaches to bring out best results.

While AAT has its benefits, it also has its limitations. Not everyone responds positively to animals, some people may have fear or phobias around them. It may also not be so suitable for people who might have allergies or weak immune systems.

However, it seems AAT is here to stay!

-Devika Gokhale Counselling Psychologist Reviewer, Mind Matters

ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY

'Until one has loved an animal, a part of one's soul remains unawakened.'

- Anatole Fran

Animal-assisted therapy involves using trained therapy animals by a professional to motivate and help an individual learn or improve various skills and work on emotional and behavioural issues.

Our four-legged therapists assist us in helping people cope with life's day-to-day challenges, such as loss, stress, loneliness, and illness, learn new skills, and speed up their recovery process.

There is a difference between therapy animals and emotional support pets. While they both provide comfort and companionship, therapy animals have undergone formal training to provide emotional support to multiple people in varied surroundings. Emotional support pets, on the other hand, don't necessarily have to be formally trained and they provide comfort to their owners helping them manage their mental or physical disability. All therapy animals have to be health screened by a veterinarian and pass a skills, aptitude, and temperament screening test.

The benefits of animal-assisted therapy have been researched and documented in hospitals and rehabilitation centres around the world. Therapy pets help in satisfying the human need for connection or companionship, it seems to be well-known. Loneliness and depression can be devastating to a person's health and well-being. Connecting with another living thing - especially one that returns affection – improves the quality of a person's life. Besides, stroking an animal for just about ten minutes has been proven to reduce blood pressure and heart rate, lowering anxiety and increasing client comfort levels.

This makes them more relaxed and co-operative in therapy (Katcher.A. et al, 1977). Moreover, research done by the American Heart Association (2005) found that a 12-minute visit with a therapy pet helped heart and lung function by lowering pressure, diminished release of harmful hormones and decreased anxiety among hospitalized heart failure patients. The benefits exceeded those that resulted from a visit with a human volunteer or from being left alone.

AAT has proven to be beneficial especially for *children* as it has been observed to enable them to get up, move, walk, leave their room and play, along with reducing and, to an extent, forgetting their pain, encouraging interaction between them. AAT in general, leads to an improvement in mood and interactions. The presence of a therapy pet also encourages more participation during therapy (physical, occupational and speech).

As George Elliot; "Animals are such agreeable friends who ask no questions; they pass no criticism."

Therapy animals have a way of accepting people without qualifications. They are not concerned with looks, caste, creed or any external factors. When people get such unconditional love from an animal, they feel more equipped to deal with stressors. The mere presence of a therapy pet can lighten the atmosphere in a room. That's what animal-assisted therapy does; it gets the people to do tasks which have in some way been a struggle to them.

Radhika Nair Co-Founder Dear Oliver Therapy Services http://www.dearolivertberapy.com



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CONNECTION BEYOND WORDS: AND JUVENILE HOMES

Some places carry silence - not because they choose to, but because of pain or struggle. These are places where childhood has been interrupted, misunderstood, or denied the space to simply be. These spaces, though different in structure, often hold one thing in common: children and adolescents who have not been met with safety, patience, or unconditional care.

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) steps in- not as entertainment, but as a structured, evidence-based therapeutic approach, guided by trained professionals and therapy animals.

In neurodiverse learning environments, children may be living with autism spectrum conditions, intellectual disabilities, ADHD, Down syndrome, or other neurodevelopmental differences. Many struggle with emotional regulation, sensory overload, or social connection. Traditional therapy, especially talk-based approaches, might not always reach them. But a therapy dog sitting nearby, a rabbit being gently petted, or a horse calmly walking beside them- it becomes a different kind of conversation. A quiet one, but deeply felt.

In juvenile homes or remand centers, many young people who have grown up in unstable or unsafe environments, carry the weight of early trauma, broken trust, or choices made from pain- not malice. They might have experienced neglect, abuse, or systemic failure. Some act out in anger, others shut down completely. Labels like "delinquent" often follow them, when what they really need is to be seen as hurt, not hopeless. Animals don't see their criminal record or diagnosis. They don't expect perfection. They offer presence. A soft nudge from a dog. A bird that perches near without fear. And for many, this becomes the first safe relationship they've had in a long time.

Interactions with therapy animals have been shown to increase oxytocin- the bonding hormone- and reduce cortisol, the stress hormone. This physiological shift helps calm the nervous system, which in turn makes emotional connection and learning more possible. Children become less anxious, more focused, and sometimes- for the first time- able to trust.

In both settings, AAT helps with more than just behavior. It supports attachment repair, builds empathy, encourages self-regulation, and restores a sense of agency. Importantly, these programs are not unstructured or random. They are guided by trained mental health professionals who understand the emotional complexities of each child and the ethics of working with animals. Goals might include improving motor skills, reducing aggression, building attention span, or simply experiencing healthy touch and relationship- many for the first time.

The beauty of AAT is that it doesn't always feel like therapy. It feels like a real connection. It meets children where they are- not where we expect them to be. These moments, though quiet, are powerful. They are beginnings.

In the corners of society that are often overlooked- whether due to disability or past behavior- Animal-Assisted Therapy becomes a soft, steady rebellion. A quiet act of saying: You are not broken. You are worthy. And healing is still possible.

Because sometimes, the most important things don't need to be said aloud. Sometimes, they arrive on four legs, with a heartbeat and a tailand remind us of something we all need to hear: You are safe now. You are not alone. And you can begin again.

-Aditi Sethi

Counselling Psychologist & Certified Psychotherapist

AAT AND THE SILENT THERAPY ANIMALS IN SCHOOLS TRANSFORMATION OF ADULTS WITH **AUTISM: A RESEARCH PROJECT**

 ${
m V}$ ellore, India – In a quiet room filled with gentle paws and even gentler intentions, a Labrador named Loki was doing something that textbooks and traditional therapies had often struggled with: helping adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) communicate, connect, and flourish. Four adults, each on the unique spectrum of autism, were part of a carefully designed animalassisted therapy intervention aimed at improving social competence—a crucial area often impacted in individuals on the spectrum. What emerged from the sessions was more than just numerical evidence—it was a story of eye contact where there once was none, of smiles exchanged without words, and of therapy that wagged its tail.

The intervention unfolded at the Autism Residential Community in Vellore as part of my PhD journey. Over the course of four weeks, twice a week, participants interacted with Loki under the guidance of a therapist (myself). The baseline phase recorded low levels of social engagement. However, the moment Loki was introduced in the intervention phase, a clear shift was observed, at least in two. Participants began making eye contact, smiling more frequently, and even initiating gentle touches—non-verbal gestures often challenging for individuals with ASD.

One of the participants, Mohit (pseudonym)(18 years), known for his intellectual disability, initially struggled with conversations. Yet, as therapy progressed, he began following instructions, sustaining conversations, and even completing tasks, motivated by the chance to interact with Loki. Amit, (22) with minimal verbal ability, didn't develop speech, but his body language spoke volumes. There was an increase in gestures, touch, and facial expressions. John, (36) a high-functioning adult, had the verbal skills but struggled with social context. Interestingly, discussing Loki's emotions during conflict resolution helped him develop empathy and modify his behaviour. Loki was no longer just a dog—he was a mirror, a bridge, and a silent teacher. However, Ravi (24) with severe intellectual disability with moderate Autism did not show much of an improvement except for increased sitting tolerance while in session with Loki. This also indicates a need for a tailored approach of animal-assisted therapy suiting the requirement of the clientele.

While the primary focus was on social competence, reports from caregivers hinted at reductions in self-harm, aggression, and repetitive behavioursareas often linked with emotional regulation difficulties in autism. These behavioural changes offered hope and direction for future interventions. Importantly, the findings echoed the global literature: therapy dogs can act as social catalysts, helping people initiate, sustain, and enjoy social interactions. They don't judge, they don't rush, and they don't expect reciprocation—an ideal companion for someone learning the delicate dance of human connection. In a world that often underestimates adults with ASD, this intervention reminded everyone that social skills are not taught—they are felt. And sometimes, the most profound therapy doesn't come from spoken words or structured settings. Sometimes, it walks in on four legs, wags its tail, and says nothing at all.

-Dr. Hemangi Narayan Narvekar Assistant Professor (Psychology), CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bangalore



"My therapy is quite simple: I wag my tail and lick your face until you feel good about yourself again."



HEALING HAPPENS IN SMALL MOMENTS: HOW AAT HELPS AT EVERY AGE

One of the most profound lessons I've learned in my profession is that: healing often begins quietly, in unexpected ways. Sometimes, it's not a conversation or a diagnosis that shifts something in a person, but a therapy dog lying silently beside a child who hasn't spoken in weeks. That small moment does not need words. It speaks in empathy, in presence. That is the heart of Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT).



I've seen the powerful ways AAT can help children, teens, adults, and elders navigate grief, anxiety, trauma, and loneliness.

With Toddlers, It Begins Before Words: Young children don't always have the language to express fear or sadness, but they instinctively recognize comfort. I recall a therapy dog lying beside a young girl on the autism spectrum. Her posture softened. Her gaze returned. That silent interaction told us more than any assessment ever could.

For toddlers, therapy animals create a sense of emotional safety. They encourage expression, ease sensory overload, and provide calming presence—without expectation or judgment.

For Teens, a Trust That Isn't Forced: Teenagers may resist adults, but they often open up to animals. I've seen nervous students settle before exams while petting a calm Labrador, and withdrawn teens light up with joy when a cat curls up beside them.

Amid the noise of school, peer pressure, and social media, therapy animals offer what teens crave: unconditional connection, without the pressure to talk before they're ready.

Adults, Finding Stillness in the Storm: In the chaos of adult life-managing roles, expectations, and emotional weight - simply sitting with a therapy animal can be grounding. In rehab centers and counseling rooms, I've watched people find peace just by being with an animal that doesn't need explanations.

One woman in recovery from depression told me, "The dog didn't need me to explain. He just sat with me. That was the first time I felt okay in months."

Animals don't replace therapy, but they amplify it - especially for those who have lost faith in people.

For Elders, Memory and Meaning: In dementia care or hospice, therapy animals spark connection and comfort. I've seen elderly patients recall the name of a childhood pet or smile after weeks of silence, simply from the touch of soft fur. These animals provide peace. A quiet hand resting on a calm dog's back can ease fear more than words or medicine ever could.

Why It Matters Now: Mental health support must be expansive, inclusive, and compassionate. Animal-Assisted Therapy is not a gimmick. It's science-backed, deeply human, and rooted in empathy. In a world often too loud and fast, animals show us how to pause, connect, and feel again.

Sometimes, healing doesn't come in a breakthrough. It begins with a tail wag, a quiet presence – and the comfort of knowing you are not alone.

-Dr. Jinal Joshi Ph.D (Psy)

Dean of English and Communication Skills, KSV Director of International Relations, Schools, and Mental Health & Wellness, KSV-SVKM

THE HEALING POWERS OF DUDE: A REVIEW

The slow paced, heartwarming family series narrates the story of 11YO Noah who is a bright and creative boy with **Social Anxiety Disorder**. After a few years of homeschooling, he decides to attend middle school (a stressful and triggering environment for him). But he faces challenges with basic things like walking into the school, finding his home room and even presenting oral assignments. To support Noah, his parents get him Dude, a lovable dog who is an **Emotional Support Animal (ESA)**.

As Noah faces challenges of school, friendships, and fitting in, Dude serves as both a comforting presence and a therapeutic tool, helping Noah manage his anxiety, regulate his emotions, and build social confidence. Through this supportive relationship, the series sheds light on how animals can contribute to mental health treatment, especially in young populations. The therapeutic themes that are highlighted here are 1. Emotional Support and Grounding 2. Confidence and Exposure Therapy and 3. Social Bridging.

While 'The Healing Powers of Dude' promotes a positive message about empathy, mental health and introduces the concept of animal-assisted support in an accessible way; it should not be viewed as a comprehensive or clinically accurate model of mental health care because it lacks of clinical disclaimers and realistic portrayal of certain aspects of anxiety, therapy and emotional support animals.

1.It is a simplified depiction of anxiety disorder and its treatment, without discussing the role of therapy, medication, or formal diagnosis.

2.Lack of professional guidance - no mention of therapists, psychologists, or school counsellors as part of Noah's support system.

3. The show often blurs the line between ESA and service dog behaviour

which may lead to public misunderstanding of legal rights and limitations.

3. It does not clarify whether the animal is part of a structured Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) program (guided by professionals), or simply an ESA for personal comfort.

Having said that, the series has received good ratings because it successfully humanizes mental health struggles, underlines the value of emotional support systems in a way that is relatable, age-appropriate, and filled with heart

-Dr. Aabha Pimprikar Co-Editor



Netflix 2020

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A SCIENTIFIC, LEGAL & ETHICAL LENS ON ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY

In today's new age of innovative therapeutic interventions, Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is quietly making its impact. AAT is the intentional inclusion of animals in therapy settings to achieve specific physical, emotional, or psychological goals.

The Science Behind

Scientific research in psychology and neuroscience has shown that therapy animal interaction reduces cortisol levels, increases oxytocin, and normalizes blood pressure and heart rate (Beetz et al., 2012), succeeding in the management of anxiety, depression, trauma, and social withdrawal.

Therapy sessions are goal-directed and facilitated by trained, licensed professionals specializing in human psychology and animal behaviour. The therapy animals are typically dogs, horses, and sometimes cats or rabbits. They undergo 6 to 12 months of species-based, treatment-objective-driven behaviour modification. Training includes obedience, medical environment desensitization, and socialization to different populations.

Animals are also tested based on personality and temperament exams such as the Canine Behavioural Assessment and Research Questionnaire (C-BARQ) and Temperament Test for Therapy Dogs (TTTD). Client outcomes are, however, measured based on standardized assessments such as the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI), Children's Global Assessment Scale (CGAS), and PTSD Checklist (PCL-5).

Operating in the Legal Landscape

In India, therapy animals do not receive protection under laws such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPwD), 2016. Service animals have public rights of access (e.g., access to public places, transportation, etc.). This means they can only enter into establishments or therapy centres that have made a special arrangement for their access, and are not covered by Section 2(u) of the RPwD Act.

Therapists must operate within ethical standards and global codes to ensure legal compliance. Pet Partners, a U.S.-based nonprofit organization, provides credentialing, training, and strict standards for AAT teams worldwide. Assistance Dogs International (ADI), a global coalition, establishes standards for training and caring for service and therapy dogs.

The Ethical Responsibility

Ethically, AAT requires a mutual focus: the client's and animal's welfare. Therapy animals cannot be overworked or exposed to stressful environments. Therapist-animal interactions are required to undergo periodic veterinary checks, under-supervision sessions, positive-reinforcement training, and rests (Ng et al., 2021).

Therapists must screen the client for allergies, trauma history, phobias, or cultural sensitivities before bringing an animal into a session. Informed consent must clearly outline the purpose and limitations of the animal. Above all, clients always have the right to withdraw.

And insurance: AAT is not yet insured under health insurance schemes in India. However, professionals are advised to have professional liability insurance, and therapy associations would generally require handlers to insure against damage from the animal to a client during a session.

Finally, if done responsibly, AAT can reunite clients with themselves and the world through trust, touch, and tail wags.

-Akanshaa Hirraani

Founder & Head Psychologist, **CALMFIT COUNSELLIING (https://calmfitcounselliing.com/)**

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LIST OF **CENTRES OFFERING** AAT IN INDIA:

1.Animal Angels Foundation, Mumbai and Pune: Animal Angels Therapy Center is India's first organisation to introduce and develop animal assisted interventions in India. They offer services to individual adults children. and Contact-+919987509102, websitewww.animalangels.org.in

2.Manav Foundation, Mumbai: Manav Foundation enables development and inclusion of individuals living with mental illness and emotional disorders. AAT is also a therapy that is provided here, facilitated by Animal Angels Foundation. Contact-+918097083518, websitewww.manavfoundation.org.in

3.Wag-Ville, Bangalore: Though primarily a boarding and day-care centre for dogs, they offer a course of AAT under the "Paws and Hooves Project", where both canine-assisted therapy and equine assisted therapy is provided for individuals with special needs like autism, cerebral palsy, Down's syndrome, Contact- +919449929024, websitewww.wag-ville.com

4.Fur-Ball Story, Gurugram: This centre offers AAT along with a range of services such as Dog Boarding, Pet Therapy, Dog Café, Dog Training, Pet Taxi, Dog Walking, and Ayurvedic Medicines for the dogs. Contact: +919582112979, www.furballstory.com

5.Qi to Happiness, Ahmedabad: Through their Essential Supportive Interventions (ESI) programs, they provide AAT, Arts Based Therapy, Music Therapy, Sports and Life Skills Training for mental health and disability. Contact- +917383636524, website- www.qitohappiness.org

6. Shaping Therapies, Thane & Powai: Along with occupational therapy, speech therapy and remedial education, they also provide AAT at their Websitecentre. www.shapingtherapies.com

7.Tail Clan, Chennai: Along with AAT, they are also involved in a number of awareness campaigns on responsible pet ownership and benefits of animal companionship and other holistic programs. Contact- +919940260141, website- www.tailclan.com