

Case Notes, Techniques & Anecdotes

This section of the Journal is a forum to which readers are invited to contribute brief items drawn from their own experience. These may be vignettes of case situations, unusual or ingenious devices and techniques, or simply thought provoking experiences. Correspondence regarding these items is also invited.



The Creative Use of Cats in Hypnotherapy

by Susan Lee Body

Director of the Hypnosis Institut of
the Park Slope Centre for Mental Health



SUSAN LEE BODY, LCSW, BCD, is a former board member of the New York Society of Ericksonian Psychotherapy and Hypnosis; Board member and past President of the New York Society of Clinical Hypnosis. She is also an instructor with the Center for Spirituality and Psychotherapy.

Introduction

This paper will describe my experiences involving my two male cats in my psychotherapy and hypnosis practice. Five years ago a policewoman found Boots and Tiger, age 4 ½ weeks, lying on the ground between the paws of a dog. She took them to a local Veterinarian's office and when I heard about them through a friend, I rushed to their rescue. (I don't know what happened to the mother cat, the other kittens or the dog).

When I first brought the kittens home, I planned to keep them separate from my therapy office. I felt it would be unprofessional and distracting for patients see them. However, on their first day with me, those two tiny balls of fur somehow opened the door of my bedroom, wandered into the waiting room of my home office and endeared themselves to the patients sitting there. From that moment on Boots and Tiger have been my co-therapists in all my psychoanalytic, hypnotic and EMDR work.

Although this presentation will describe my work with "therapy cats", my experiences can apply to other pets as well, be they dogs, rabbits, birds or the whole range of animals included in what is called Animal Assisted Therapy.

Many persons have already written about Animal Assisted Therapy. However, most of it applies to work in institutions, i.e. nursing homes,

hospitals, prisons, centers for disturbed children, or to crisis situations like the World Trade Center disaster. Thus far few people have discussed the value of including animals in psychotherapy and hypnosis.

Theoretical formulation

Animal Assisted Therapy is based on the human-animal bond, a connection that goes back to ancient times when animals were hunted, feared, worshipped and then domesticated to become our helpers and companions. It began about 50 years ago when psychologist Boris Levin observed his dog Jingles help a withdrawn ten year old boy to talk. As he and others developed this therapy form they noted anecdotally the many benefits animals offer to humans' physical and emotional well being. Many of these have been confirmed by research. (See web-site of the Delta Society listed in the bibliography, especially the fact sheet "Healthy Reasons to Have a Pet").

Animals relax you and lower your blood pressure. They offer an unconditional love that we cannot realistically expect to find within a human relationship. They provide life-enhancing tactile stimulation so often missing from our lives, and certainly absent in the therapy room where most therapists follow a no-touching rule. They

live joyfully and in the moment and reconnect us with the natural world that our technological society alienates us from. In addition, animals are social lubricants, facilitating human interaction and emotional expression.

Research also shows that people recovering from a serious illness or children adjusting to illness or death in the family do better when they have an animal. Married couples with a pet report better communication and greater marital satisfaction than those without pets. The implications of these facts for psychotherapy seem obvious. Furthermore, when we note that many of the benefits of Animal Assisted Therapy are similar to those of hypnosis such as increased relaxation, and enhanced physical and emotional healing, it seems very valuable to combine the two.

In the next section I will illustrate these ideas with clinical examples. I will also show other benefits to using pet facilitated therapy in hypnotherapy. Animals serve as role models for desirable behavior. Animals act as projective screens. Two animals with as distinctly different personalities as assertive, outgoing Boots and shy, timid Tiger provide concrete representations of ego states and enhance the power of ego state therapy.

Clinical Examples

For didactic purposes I am placing my clinical examples in specific categories. In practice, however, these categories often overlap. Some of these examples involve creative interventions from the therapist, utilizing the presence of animals in the room. Others illustrate actions stemming from the animals themselves. These indicate a far greater emotional capacity in our pets than they often receive credit for. I saw this personally following the World Trade Center disaster. One night when I was particularly upset both of them crawled into bed with me, under the covers, curling up on either side. Then Boots got up and lay across my chest the entire night. This has never happened before or since, with both cats in bed under the covers. Usually they get jealous and one chases the other away.

Clinical examples with my patients follow.

Animals induce a sense of calm and increased emotional responsiveness in both patient and therapist.

Betty requested hypnosis to help her to talk about her operation for breast cancer. I started an induction, but she was too afraid to relax into it. Then she asked me to put Boots on her lap. As she began petting him, Boots began purring and Betty went into a deep trance. She began to talk of her sense of pain and disfigurement following her mastectomy. The intensity of her feelings elicited my own fears of bodily injury, and I began to space out. I tried to relax myself with self-hypnosis but it was not effective. I took hold of Boot's paw while she talked. This centered me so that I could remain responsive to my patient.

Gary often came to sessions early in order to play with the cats. One day when I entered the waiting room he was sitting on the floor petting Tiger. The cat seemed very distraught and I brought him into the office with me and held him in my lap. As I began petting Tiger, Gary began speaking of his suicidal feelings. While I talked with Gary I continued petting the animal until he lay limp on my lap with relaxation. His relaxation calmed me down enabling me to respond more easily to Gary's pain. By the end of the session Gary looked calmer. As he left he looked at Boots sitting on the floor and said, "Don't worry Boots. I'm not going to do anything to hurt myself".

Animals Mirroring and Healing Emotions

Mary came to session very drunk. Tiger was hiding under the table when she entered. Mary told me she had tried not to drink before therapy, but she had important things to say and she simply could not express her feelings sober. She spoke of the pain of her abusive childhood. She began crying hysterically as she talked about watching people jump off the World Trade Center. Tiger came out from the table and began wandering restlessly around the room. Mary cried out "These people made decisions about how they wanted to die - by fire or by jumping. And here I am, stuck in my life, unable to act!" The inten-

sity of her screams increased. Tiger opened his mouth and in a beautiful example of Ericksonian pacing gave a great big MEEEEOWWWW! Mary began laughing. "That centers me," she said. She began talking about moving on in life and ended the session saying, "I think it is time I start to take control of my drinking problem." And since then she has been doing just that.

The Value of Touching an Animal

The opportunity to touch Boots and Tiger, especially when they sit on our laps is an ever-present benefit to both patients and myself. Sometimes the touch of a cat moves patients to even deeper levels.

Boots stretched out on Carol's lap as we began hypnotic exploration with her four-year-old self. She had been sexually abused and was shut off from her pain. The adult Carol wanted to comfort the child and felt distressed that she (in imagery) could not respond. Suddenly I noticed that both Carol and I were petting Boots. It seemed to me that we were petting the four-year-old through Boots in a way neither of us could do directly. The following week my patient reported the work had been helpful. She felt more in touch with and accepting of her early trauma.

Another time Boots sat on a table and maintained constant eye contact with a patient who was sobbing about her guilt over abandoning her dying mother. Boots looked at her as intently and empathetically as any master therapist would. Both she and I stroked him as we talked. The tactile contact helped us – certainly me – manage intense emotions as we used hypnosis to enable the patient to talk with her deceased mother. My patient reported that her mother said she understood why the daughter had to separate herself when she was dying. The mother said she forgave her and wanted her daughter to get on with her life and be happy. My patient said that Boots was "a sweet cat" and he made it easier for her to forgive herself.

Animals as a Projective Screen

My cats serve as a projective screen in many ways. Patients note them scuffling together on

the floor. I think they are playing, but some patients think they are fighting and begin talking of their own aggressive feelings. If a cat refuses to stay on their lap we discuss their response to rejection. "He doesn't like me. He thinks I'm not good enough," some patients say. Often patients express their feelings through the cats, as Gary did with Boots or as Sheila did as she watched Boots and Tiger cuddling together. She is a very schizoid young woman who was brutally abused by her family and could never verbalize feelings towards me. However, this day she said, "They are so loving. That's because you are a very nurturing person to them."

Cats as Concrete Representation of Ego States

Other opportunities for patients' projections as well as ego state work arise from the cats' totally different personalities. Boots is intelligent, outgoing and regal. He evokes a confidant, centered feeling when he sits on your lap. Tiger in contrast is a beautiful, shy creature who curls up in your lap in a fetal position, eliciting a feeling of nurturing and being nurtured. When they were kittens, Boots dominated Tiger. Perhaps through my encouragement, perhaps from his own abilities, Tiger has become more outgoing and assertive with Boots, even though they remain distinctly different personalities.

Many patients identify with Boots, saying they want to be like him. I create hypnotic suggestions around him. "Look how he holds his head high, with tail and ears alert. Notice his vitality, curiosity and the way he races after that fly and grabs onto life." Sometimes this leads to dramatic results.

A 17-year-old youth came for hypnosis to help him stop biting his finger and toenails. We identified his nail biting as related to his fear of aggression. At the end of the session when his father came to pick him up he was playing with Boots. "Stop playing with the cat!" his father said. "You know you are allergic. Your whole face is going to blow up." "No it won't!" the son responded. "I like this cat. I want to be like him. I won't have an allergic reaction." And he didn't! (I tell this story anytime a patient reports an al-

lergic response. This, plus hypnotic suggestion, almost always stops the allergies).

Tiger elicits a range of responses in people. Many shy patients identify with him. Several say they admire him for the changes he has made. "If Tiger can do it, so can I," one person stated. Other patients dislike him because he reminds them of their own painful shyness. However, one young woman who felt this way allowed him to sit on her lap during a hypnotic trance she requested to help her become more Boots-like. She began crying in trance. She said that holding Tiger felt like holding her newborn child and also like holding her own baby self who had suffered so much. She felt sad the cats had been cast out on the street as babies just as she had felt abandoned in her own childhood. She said

she was glad she had been able to cry and feel compassion for herself in a way that she never had felt before.

Another patient illustrating both projection and ego state integration said, "I want to be like Boots but without the (projected) nasty aggression. I want to strengthen the frightened Tiger part of me without losing his sweetness."

And the patient who had once been suicidal spoke of his despair over the time lost in his life struggling with emotional problems. Then he noticed Boots sitting on my lap. "Boots is so dignified and outgoing," he said. "I envy him. But Tiger has a greater wisdom than Boots can ever have because of his suffering and this is a wonderful gift he and I both own."

Correspondence Address:

E-mail: SusanBady@aol.com

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