

# Clinical Interaction with Anthropomorphic Phenomenon: Notes for Health Professionals about Interacting with Clients Who Possess This Unusual Identity

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Furries, self-identified fans of anthropomorphism, report feeling significant social stigma. As a result, furries rarely reveal their furry identity to mental health professionals, for fear of judgment or disapproval. Improving health practitioners' familiarity with the furry identity may improve the quality of care for furries seeking treatment for unrelated conditions. Six focus groups were conducted over three days at a furry convention in the Midwest United States to study the furry identity (59 self-identified furries ages 18 to 41). The authors define and describe the demographics of important distinctions within the furry community and discuss the furry identity and liken it to sexual orientation, noting that the stigma furries face—worsened by media that exaggerate fringe and rare behaviors—has made it challenging for furries to live authentically for fear of ostracism, violence, and discrimination. These factors have resulted in furries' reluctance to disclose their identities. Highlighting communication challenges, the authors discuss strategies for health professionals to engage with furries in a clinical setting and to uphold unconditional positive regard.

KEY WORDS: *clinical care; furries; furry fandom; mental health; youths*

The International Anthropomorphic Research Project (IARP) has conducted nearly a dozen quantitative studies on a group known as *furries*, defined as people with a self-proclaimed interest in anthropomorphism and zoomorphism—the ascription of human traits to animals and animal traits to humans, respectively (Gerbasi et al., 2008). The term *furry* describes a diverse community of fans, artists, writers, gamers, and role players. Most furries create for themselves an anthropomorphized animal character (*fursona*) with whom they identify and that functions as an avatar within the community. A small subset of furries, called “therians,” go beyond the interest in developing a fursona and believe they are spiritually connected to animals, are less than 100 percent human, are an animal trapped in a human body, or were an animal in a former life (Gerbasi et al., 2008).

*Furry fandom* (Gerbasi et al., 2008) is an inclusive term that describes the community of furries that span online, local, and international settings. The furry fandom is global, with hundreds of local groups existing worldwide and dozens of conventions held annually. Its makeup is approximately 80 percent

male, with approximately 90 percent of the fandom under the age of 30 (Plante, Gerbasi, Reysen, & Mock, 2011). One of the fandom's defining characteristics is its inclusivity and acceptance: Previous studies have found that nearly 80 percent of furries believe acceptance is a fundamental component of the community (Plante, Gerbasi, Reysen, & Scaletta, 2011). Consistent with this inclusivity, nearly 15 percent of the fandom self-identifies as exclusively homosexual, with 25 percent to 40 percent identifying with varying degrees of bisexuality (Plante, Freeman, Gerbasi, Roberts, & Reysen, 2012). The community represents a culmination of diverse ethnicities, religious beliefs, socioeconomic statuses, and political viewpoints.

Furry interests manifest in multitudinous ways: the creation or appreciation of anthropomorphic art, enjoyment of television and literature featuring anthropomorphic characters, role playing as an anthropomorphic character (both in person or in online communities such as Second Life), or, in its most visible manifestation, through the wearing of ears, tails, and even mascot-style *fursuits* (Plante et al., 2012). Although these activities may be engaged in

individually, the vast majority of furrries participate collectively in the furry fandom, primarily online, at local gatherings, and at large-scale conventions, to create and exchange artwork, information, and skills relevant to furrries.

### **Implications for Social Workers**

In the last three years, the IARP has collected survey data from over 8,300 furrries from more than 70 different countries worldwide. Recently, the IARP conducted the first qualitative, focus-group studies on this largely unstudied population. During these focus groups, furrries disclosed personal information about their lives as furrries and their membership in such a highly stigmatized community.

Because so little is known about furrries, the IARP wishes to present some of the recurring themes that were extracted from audio recordings of the interviews. To date, no article exists that covers these issues in a social work or clinical journal. Although this represents only a preliminary step in the understanding of furrries, clinicians and social workers may benefit from some exposure to this phenomenon that is tailored to their needs in practice. First, we describe what being furry means to those who participate in the fandom. Specifically, we will describe how furrries view their social group and receive social support from the fandom. Second, we discuss the benefits of the fandom for identity exploration and social skills. We also discuss the stigma and fear that many furrries face as a result of possessing this unusual identity. One particularly important theme that came to light in these interviews was the reluctance of many furrries to disclose the furry aspect of their identities when visiting a clinician's office. From these preliminary, qualitative findings, we wish to present to the clinical community a collection of furrries' voices that desperately need to be heard. As researchers, we wish to present information that may directly help medical and mental health professionals understand what to expect as they come into contact with furry clients.

### **METHOD**

The furry convention organizers gave permission to the research team to attend a five-day convention in a state park. A two-page interview guide was developed with the insight from the convention organizers and ethics permission from the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. These guides were available to all convention goers as part of their

convention registration package, so that convention attendees were made aware of the study at the beginning of the convention. The research team set up a table in the Dealers' Den area of the convention, where furry artists and merchants work. The research team also made copies of all questions available at their research table for the duration of the convention. Sign-up sheets to participate in focus groups were available (no real names were used). This allowed for participants to reserve a spot in a focus group at a time of their choosing. Participants convened at the research table at the agreed-on time according to sign-up sheets. Participants were asked to confirm that they were 18 years of age before the focus groups commenced. Each participant was given an informed consent, a debriefing letter, and ballot slips to enter a drawing for convention merchandise. Small thank-you prizes were also distributed at the beginning of the focus groups (bracelets, stickers, ribbons).

In total, six focus groups were conducted—each with seven to 14 participants. Over three days, 59 self-identified furrries, ages 18 to 41, participated. Two of the groups were composed of men only, and the remaining four groups had between one and three women in them. In total, the focus groups consisted of 49 men and seven women. Some participants chose to wear their fursuits, but most attended in casual clothes. The gender of three of the participants who wore fursuits was not clearly identifiable.

Each focus group was held in a field or a small wood cabin and lasted for approximately 1.5 hours. All focus groups began with an overview of the research team and an icebreaker session in which each participant was asked about his or her fursona, length of time in the fandom, and connection to the convention and fandom. Two facilitators from the research team were present at each focus group; the team leader ran the focus groups, and the other facilitator took detailed notes. All of the focus groups were recorded using a small voice recorder. The second facilitator completed transcriptions. Data were coded and themes extracted using an iterative process.

### **RESULTS**

#### **Social Group and Support**

Past research on social groups in general (for example, Haslam, Jetten, Posmes, & Haslam, 2009; McKenna & Bargh, 1998), and on leisure groups specifically (Jones & McCarthy, 2010; Mock, Plante, Reysen, & Gerbasi, in press; Wann, 2006), has illustrated that

the groups people belong to are important for their well-being because of the social support that these provide. It is unsurprising that many furies describe their participation in the fandom as a social leisure activity—an activity that fulfills both social and recreational needs—and a source of social support (Plante, Gerbasi, Reysen, & Mock, 2011; Plante et al., 2012). For many furies, conversing with the community in online forums, at local meets, or at large conventions constitutes a significant portion of their social interaction (Plante et al., 2012).

For many furies, an interest in anthropomorphism predates their discovery and eventual joining of the furry fandom; past research has suggested that the average furry has a strong, fanlike interest in anthropomorphism two years before the discovery and joining (Plante, Gerbasi, Reysen, & Scaletta, 2011). Given the unusualness of anthropomorphism, many furies may feel isolated in their interest. For these furies, discovery of a community of like minds is described as being exciting, providing them with a sense of acceptance. For this reason, many furies take great comfort in and embrace the fandom's inclusive and accepting ethos. Furies regularly describe the furry community as being one of the few places they can truly be themselves without fear of stigma or ostracism (Plante, Reysen, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2013), so the furry fandom is a source of positivity for them. Research on stigmatized groups, such as sexual or ethnic minorities, has found that such communities can foster well-being and provide a supportive environment, free from discrimination (Jones & McCarthy, 2010; Outley & McKenzie, 2007; van Ingen, 2004). Identifying with stigmatized minority groups can counteract the detrimental effects of prejudice as a result of perceived rejection from the dominant group (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001). Furies speak of the important functions that the furry community serves in terms of providing a social group. For many, it is the place where they get to feel like they can be themselves. It is not surprising, then, that these convention goers describe their experiences being at furry events as positive: "I've been part of the fandom [for] about six to seven years. First [convention] was... the best thing I ever did, best decision. Met lots of awesome people."

Furies' use of the furry community as a source of social support can manifest itself in a variety of ways. Some furies focused on the familial nature of the fandom, where, for a number of furies, the fan-

dom has replaced their biological families in terms of their major sources of support.

You can be in a room with anyone and say nothing and feel a sense of being yourself. ... It is what it is. They [other furies] fulfill a family role because they give me complete comfort with who I am, acceptance, and they give me support. People will support you.

The fandom is second nature. ... It's how I got out of the house growing up. Mom wasn't okay with my bisexuality [and thought] it was a "phase." For seven to eight years now.

Other furies relayed the importance of feeling free to be themselves without fear of ostracism or judgment while at furry conventions. Such opportunities allow them to be accepted for who they are, rather than being accepted based on their conformity to an expected norm.

In my own situation, I like to escape. I'm expected to conform, which doesn't always match up with my personality. The fandom doesn't have any expectation of what I have to be.

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This place is the most amazing and fun place I've ever been because, usually, I don't talk to people, but I got here and have fuzzy people I want to hug.

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Normally, you have a wall when you're around society, those set rules. But as soon as a furry comes up, and you light up, and your guard goes down, and you're yourself and comfortable.

A number of furies in our focus groups illustrated some of the different ways they relied on the furry community for social support. Often, this support was material: "I lost my insurance and house and had to come back to [the city], and the only support I had was furry friends."

[Furies] have also helped me throughout the years. When I was about to go out on the streets because I couldn't pay rent, someone gave me \$200. [Getting paid within the fandom to be an artist] is overwhelming but awesome. For me, this is my job.

More often, however, social support was nonmaterial, manifesting itself through emotional support

in difficult times. Past research has shown that close relationships and the support they provide contribute to resilience in the face of adverse or stressful life events (for example, Cohen & Wills, 1985; Holahan & Moos, 1981). For many furrries, members of the furry community were some of the few people to help them through trying times: “Last year, one of my family members died and I was sad. A [fursuiter] saw me, gave me a hug, and talked to me, and saved me.” “It saved my life, being in the fandom. After I was only in for a few months, I met life-changing friends that helped me through a dark time.” “I was depressed and lonely. Met friends that cheered me up. I made a social group of local furrries. I went from depressed and lonely to a lot better.”

### Identity Exploration

Identity formation (Erikson, 1968) is a crucial part of development. In contemporary Western society, youths struggle with the transition to adulthood, even in the best of times and under the best of circumstances (Roberts, 2007; Roberts & Côté, in press). For furrries, who, on average, perceive significant prejudice from the world around them for their socially deviant interests (Plante et al., 2012; Plante, et al., 2013) and who report greater instances of bullying during the transition to adulthood (Plante et al., 2012), development of a stable and coherent sense of identity may be more difficult. For many furrries, one step in this development is the active creation and evolution of their fursona. A fursona is a furry’s unique avatar or representation of oneself, usually composed of one or more nonhuman animal species anthropomorphized to varying degrees, with an accompanying name. A furry’s fursona plays an important role in two different aspects of identity formation: social identity and representation of possible selves.

Research on social identity theory has shown that people are motivated to create and maintain positive and distinct social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Put another way, one particularly meaningful component of an individual’s overall identity, including beliefs, attitudes, and behavior toward others, is the group association. For furrries, people who self-identify with their interest in anthropomorphism, belonging to the furry community is an important component of their identity; more than half of furrries strongly identify with other furrries, and approximately 90 percent of furrries strongly identify with being a furry (Plante, Gerbasi, Reysen, & Mock, 2011; Plante et al.,

2012). Given the stigmatized nature of the fandom, furrries are often known to other furrries only by their fursonas, with little to no information about their real name or occupation. Therefore, it follows that furrries place tremendous importance on their fursona as the face within fandom.

Based on where I am in my life, I have to be very careful. In my field in contracting, anything I do reflects on the company and the government. . . . Only two people here know my real name because of that.

Self-discrepancy theory offers insight into a second aspect of identity formation that relates to the development and maintenance of a fursona. The theory proposes that there are three different domains of the self: the *actual* self, a representation of traits actually possessed by a person; the *ought* self, a representation of traits a person feels he or she should possess; and the *ideal* self, a representation of traits an individual would ideally like to possess (Higgins, 1987). Discrepancies between the actual self and the ideal self are found to be associated with feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction. Given that people are motivated to reduce discrepancies between the actual self and their actual and ought selves (Higgins, 1989), it should not be surprising to find that many furrries imbue their fursonas with traits that symbolize the aspects of themselves they strive for, such as outgoingness, confidence, playfulness, physical fitness, and strength. By doing so, furrries, through their fursonas, reduce the perceived discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves, which fosters the development of a positive sense of identity and personal growth:

I always knew what my character was. . . . I knew the different features on it, it came out like that [snaps fingers]. It really represents who I truly am on the inside, main interests, what I like to do.

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I [developed a] fursona four years ago. It’s a wolf with orange eyes that glow. I chose a wolf. . . . I’m noble and everything. I’m a cancer survivor of over 23 years, so the orange eyes are the fire that keep me going.

Past research can help researchers to understand the importance of fursonas to identity formation, whether as their face or as a way of traversing the gap between who they are and who they want to be.

There is, of course, tremendous variation in the function and meaning of a furry's fursona. For example, evidence suggests that approximately 20 percent of furies report having a fursona that is a different gender than their nonfursona self, whereas other evidence suggests that the average furry's fursona is more likely to be bisexual than they are (Plante, Gerbasi, Reysen, & Mock, 2011); both of these findings suggest that some fursonas allow exploration into characteristics that may be socially undesirable to express:

A fursona is 90 percent trying to represent their own personality in a way that they feel comfortable. . . . So generally the development of a fursona in terms of sexuality [is included] . . . how sexuality affects someone's personality. It can mean that they find safety in furry and escape those confines by creating a fursona that embodies those personality traits.

There is also variation in the extent to which a furry's fursona differs from his or her nonfursona self: "There is no difference of who I am as a person and who I am as a furry."

The furies are kind of like the new age Native American where they have the spirit animal or connection, or like, they take on that personal animal. . . . And whatever you put on, [you] take on those characters [and] aspects, and, for some people with social stigma who can't interact, they put on the suit and they're a completely different person.

My fursona is a representation of myself. Sometimes what I do with my fursona is put him into a situation I'd like to see and think about how I'd react and how my fursona acts. My fursona does personify me—mostly.

Regardless of the motivation for having a fursona, for many furies, identifying with their fursona and with the furry community represents a potential way to experiment with and form a coherent and stable sense of identity (Plante et al., 2012).

### Social Skills

In addition to the foundational development of core identity, many furies observe that people in the fandom often experience difficulties expressing themselves in everyday lives. Through experience

interacting with others in the fandom, with upward of 80 percent of furies using instant messaging programs and furry forums to interact with one another, often on a daily basis (Plante, Gerbasi, Reysen, & Scaletta, 2011), many furies begin the process of learning and developing crucial social skills. Several layers of learning take place within the fandom. Furies not only are able to express themselves in a positive, diverse, and nonjudgmental environment, but also learn about the appropriateness of behaviors through social learning (Bandura, 1977). In what is described as a *self-correcting environment*, many furies develop social skills through their interactions at fandom conventions and in online communities. "I used to get nervous around people in real life, so the Internet was a great way to be social." "I can't talk face-to-face with people, but at the cons I have the suit, and that's awesome." "I've always loved the fandom. It's where I can let loose and be more of myself, and it's helped me get out there more and become more of a personable person." "I also got to see, observing other people, what did not work. Not doing what they did also helps you with social skills." "My friend has bad social anxiety, so when she's in big groups of people she breaks down and cries. But here she's been talking to people."

### Stigma, Ostracism, and Discrimination

Because of the visual nature of furies and the relative lack of scientific study of the fandom, furies experience stigma, the societal application of negative stereotypes to members of a group (Goffman, 1963). One of the primary sources of this perceived stigma is the many sensationalist media portrayals of furies in the last decade (for example, *CSI*: "Fur and Loathing in Las Vegas") (Zuiker, Stahl, & Lewis, 2003). The television show, *1000 Ways to Die*, for example, described furies as "people who like to put on animal costumes and get together for 'fun things' like group sex" (McMahon, Arnarson, & Miller, 2009). *Vanity Fair* sensationalized furies as being particularly interested in sex, effectively reducing being furry to a kink or fetish (Gurley, 2001). It is common for non-furry online users to characterize being furry as a sick sexual fetish or to associate it with bestiality or plushophilia (a type of paraphilia associated with stuffed toys and animals). For example, some have demanded that furies "yiff [derogatory furry term for sexual intercourse] in hell, furfag" (Brookey & Cannon, 2009, p. 159). Furies are a marginalized sexual minority, and instances of online violence

against furies include incidents in the virtual world of Second Life, where a furry death camp was set up and where there were a number of graphic incidents in which “a Furry avatar had been tied to a bed, murdered, and disemboweled” (Brookey & Cannon, 2009, p. 159). Thus, public media and on-line incidents have stigmatized furies and made it difficult for them both to identify as furry and to participate in the furry community for fear of the potential repercussions if discovered.

My mom found out both things [being gay and a furry] at the same time and she Googled *furry*, which was not a good idea. I told her I’m going to a place out in the country to spend time with people, and she thought “oh no, you’re going to have group orgies.”

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My parents are divorced so I’ve been living with my mother and sister and I’ve come out to them as a furry and a bisexual. My mom accepts it, but my sister has some misconceptions. She keeps saying “do what you want to do,” but I keep getting a vibe that she’s not really liking it too much.

Although the popularity of science fiction conventions has ameliorated terms like “nerd” or “geek”, furies still experience stigma, in part because of the existent incendiary, sensationalist media portrayals (names like *furfag*) that cast furies as sexual deviants. This portrayal, combined with unfamiliarity of the fandom, makes many furies fear discrimination, and conventions may be the only acceptable public venue to come out. Indeed, up to 90 percent of furies report being selective about disclosing their identity for fear of negative repercussions (Plante, Gerbasi, Reysen, & Mock, 2011). A number of furies that we spoke to indicated that they feared discrimination if they were to be outed as a furry in public.

I already came out to my parents as being gay. The furry thing, there’s lots of misconceptions. I work at the U.S. Air Force. What I do can reflect on the U.S. government, and I’m very careful. I’m scared of coming out at work because of it, and it’s hard to come out to family. I have a nice family, but I don’t know if I feel comfortable coming out to them.

Our research on furies suggests that in spite of the stigma furies perceive from the world around

them, and despite greater experience with bullying in their youth, they are relatively indistinguishable from the general population with regard to self-esteem, life satisfaction, psychological well-being, or relational well-being (Plante et al., 2012; Plante, Gerbasi, Reysen, & Mock, 2011; Plante, Gerbasi, Reysen, & Scaletta, 2011). Similar to the general population, some of our participants spoke of experiencing social and psychological problems: sexual orientation stigma, family discord, weight issues, low self-esteem, depression, self-acceptance challenges, histories of abuse and sexual violence, and posttraumatic stress disorder. However, furies often encounter additional discrimination—harassment, violence, and rejection—as a result of being furry. “I’ve gotten into fights and had someone pull a knife on me because I’m a furry. We don’t accept your kind and you should be hung up in the streets and been made an example of.” “I haven’t experienced anything like that yet. That worries me, that, when I come out.”

### Suggestions for Social Workers and Other Clinicians

Many furies acknowledge the difficulties of communicating and fitting in with members of their everyday lives. Most furies selectively conceal their furry identity (Mock et al., *in press*), a strategy requiring denial of important facets of their identity, which past research has shown to be associated with stress-related health problems as a result of the need to be constantly vigilant (Pachankis, 2007; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; Smart & Wegner, 1999). This need to conceal can be particularly problematic if experienced in a clinical setting, where it may undermine the unconditional positive regard that is so crucial to the counseling process (Joseph & Linley, 2006; Rogers, 1951). Some furies have stated that they would not disclose their furry identities to a clinician for fear of the clinician’s ignorance or judgment, which may include worrying about having their interests trivialized, about being associated with the negative caricatures of furies portrayed in the media, or about having their engagement in the furry fandom be perceived as the source of the problem when, in fact, it may be the only source of positivity for the client:

If I have a condition that needs treatment, then it may or may not have anything to do with me being [a] furry. For a successful treatment, I need to embrace the treatment, be invested in it, and want to get better. In order to do that, I need to

have a very close, personal relationship of confidence and trust with that clinician, and a part of that, for me, [will be sharing] this aspect of my humanity. This is a part of my life. If [the furry part of me] is not understood by that person, [if the clinician does not understand] that there are positive aspects [of me being a furry] that they can help me focus on, then I'm not going to be able to continue to dialogue.

Other furies shared sentiments regarding the potential for suicide within the furry community and the challenges that they have faced with clinicians and counselors:

The suicide rate among furies is a serious problem. If I have a problem, and it ever got escalated to something like that, I don't know that I can accept the help if the counselor cannot accept that there are positive aspects of what I am [furry] and what I do.

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I attempted suicide once. I'm not suicidal now. It won't happen again. It might not have happened. ... It would've been nice to have someone who had an inkling of an idea of what I was going through. ... It would've prevented it if someone had known.

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If you feel unaccepted, contemplated suicide ... I've had these dark times. I was seriously contemplating it, and once I found the fandom, it saved me. I want people to know that we may seem weird, but there's always someone to help and accept you here.

For many furies, a clinician who is aware of the furry fandom and who demonstrates unconditional positive regard would help to address their concerns. Acknowledging a furry client's fursona, recognizing the potentially central role it may play in the client's identity, and allowing the client to discuss it, should he or she wish to, should prove beneficial, as would allowing clients to bring in material objects that represent them. Permitting furry paraphernalia to be worn during sessions, and recognizing that, far from being trivial, it may be the most veracious form of self-expression for the client may also foster trust and communication with clinicians. Furry disclosure is seen by many furies to be analogous to disclosing one's sexual orientation. As furies themselves

have stated, suggesting that the furry part of them needs to be treated or abandoned is a sure way to lose the trust of someone who is already feeling lonely, distraught, or perhaps even suicidal. The *furry* should be accepted as a part of a client's personality in the same way one would accept a client's sexual orientation. "I would not respond to any counselor or anyone who was telling me in general that my part of being furry is unhealthy. ... I would shut down and not take treatment if I needed it." "I've been to a counselor and told them about my human problems and about being a furry. They instantly told me to get away from it. It's not healthy. I only went to two sessions."

It would have been cool if the doctor who I went to ... if I had a package that [guides the counselor] asks what is his fursona. ... Have a little role play with me and say "hey, fursona name." Talk to me as a character and see what's going on.

Understanding the furry identity includes recognizing that for a subset of furies, approximately 20 percent, who self-identify as therians, an interest in anthropomorphism can mean a felt psychological or spiritual identification with a particular species, not unlike the spirituality experienced in some indigenous cultures, and a desire to be not human. This should again be recognized as an integral part of the client's identity and system of meaning, as one would recognize a client's religious beliefs. Such acceptance could be symbolized through the use of *safe space* signs (for example, a paw print sticker), such as those used to indicate nonjudgmental attitudes about sexual orientation. It may also benefit furry clients to learn how to deal effectively with normative social situations. Some furies describe feeling isolated, with the furry fandom representing the only nonjudgmental space they know:

If a counselor were to try and make someone a more successful furry instead of trying to get rid of it [the furry part of the identity] ... If you help them gain skills with interaction and relationships inside the fandom, they have a better chance outside the fandom. If you make them a successful furry, they'll be able to use the same skills in real life.

Clinicians can explore the positive changes in clients' social interaction while at conventions and

discuss the skills involved, such as communication with others. Clinicians should ensure that fandom participation is a source of positivity for the furry client while monitoring the furry carefully for signs of extreme escapism. Finally, clinicians should recognize that many furry clients will experience *post-con depression*, a sense of loneliness felt after the conventions and returning to reality, where they struggle for acceptance (“Post-Con Depression,” n.d.). “A lot of people experience post-con depression, general feeling of wanting to still be there. You want to go back because you had fun and you get shoved back into the real world.”

Clinicians could assist with this transition from the convention high to a place of reintegration into mainstream culture. Moreover, the clinician’s role could help furies create a balance in their lives. Furies recount that communication with other furies taught them how to be social and ultimately interact with nonfuries. By making them a successful furry, they are able to use these skills in real life.

## CONCLUSION

This article represents the first academic, qualitative publication on furies that addresses the clinical community. Furies are in the perilous position of having their interests form an integral part of their identity while simultaneously experiencing stigmatization from the world around them. For many, the fandom is their only source of social interaction and social support. A bit of information about the furry community, coupled with an open-minded and unconditionally positive, nonjudgmental approach to their furry identity, may go a long way to helping retain furry clients and ultimately help them through their problems, which are no different than the problems experienced by any other client. Furry clients may also benefit from the development of social skills and practice interacting with nonfuries in a positive and accepting environment. It is important that clinicians overcome the initial tendency to assume that being in the furry fandom is the cause or indication of dysfunction and instead recognize that the fandom may be a source of resilience for a furry client and, coupled with effective clinical practice, may improve outcomes for furry clients. **HSW**

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Original manuscript received January 28, 2013  
 Final revision received June 17, 2013  
 Accepted June 28, 2013