Research into Pet Therapy

“I have neither given nor received help on this work, nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code.” Elizabeth Stephens

Behavioral Health Staff’s Perceptions of Pet-Assisted Therapy: An Exploratory Study

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This article described the exploratory study performed to assess the psychological effect of pet-assisted therapy on behavioral health staff, to study how pet-assisted therapy affected the retention of behavioral health staff, explore whether pet-assisted therapy fostered a positive working environment, and to identify and describe how it affected the staff’s delivery of mental health patient care. Past studies on the effect of pet-assisted therapy on nursing staff were sited and referenced in this article, but this study explored more in-depth the effects of pet-assisted therapy and the personal feelings of the behavioral staff involved.

The study took place at a 100-bed, private psychiatric hospital in a Chicago suburb where 10 behavioral health staff members involved with the pet-assisted therapy program were interviewed. All staff involved had been participating in the pet-assisted therapy 3 months prior to the study, and a convenience sample of the behavioral health nurses and counselors were invited to an interview session. The data from each interview was analyzed and placed into categories of similar responses; five main themes emerged: self-awareness, morale, innovation therapeutic strategies, challenges, and future directions. Staff reported that time spent with the therapy dogs offered a positive impact on themselves and allowed for their own self-assessment. Many also reported that this opportunity enabled them to “see the patient holistically, and assistance in balancing the needs of self and others.” (30). Improved morale, stress reduction, and the overall positive effect of the dogs and how they made the staff feel better were reported in relation to the pet-assisted therapy. Pet-assisted therapy allowed many of the behavioral health staff to connect to their patients in ways not possible without the dogs. One nurse spoke about a catatonic patient who was refusing to eat or drink, but after 20 minutes with the dog she was walking around with it and began eating and taking her medications. Some challenges that were acknowledged by the staff was the extensive amount of time it took to prepare the dogs for visitation because each had to be bathed before entering the hospital, have current vaccinations and medicines to prevent parasites and heartworm, and had to be groomed before each visit to reduce shedding. They also reported that a challenge may be patient allergies or phobias of the animals. Despite these emerging difficulties, the author and the hospital staff found the pet-assisted therapy to be overwhelmingly positive for themselves, the patients, and the hospital environment.

I found this article to be interesting in that it studied not only the effects of pet-assisted therapy on the patients, but also the staff members involved. It is a very positive study in showing that pet-assisted therapy has great benefits for both patients and other people present such as the hospital staff. I believe that studies such as this one will greatly affect the incorporation of pet-assisted therapy into different healthcare settings because the minimal challenges and huge benefits are undeniable.
Evaluation College Student Interest in Pet Therapy

Kathleen N. Adamle, RN, PhD, AOCN; Tracy A. Riley, RN, PhD; Tracey Carlson, RN, MSN

This article’s purpose was to describe a preliminary cross-sectional study conducted to collect information from first year college students about their relationships with pets and their interest in a pet therapy program on campus. The study was performed on the basis that freshman year of college can be very stressful for students as they are trying to find a balance between success in academics and social integration, and that the change in family attachments and expectations of forming new social attachments can be very difficult for some students. There is a lot of evidence that pet therapy has been successful for managing stress in individuals with illnesses, but there is no information yet on whether pet therapy can have similar benefits on stress in healthy individuals like college students. This study did not involve testing the therapeutic effect of pet therapy, but just to test college student’s interest in pet-therapy and whether they thought it would be helpful.

The study was conducted at a large, public university in Ohio with approximately 3,800 first-time freshman. All new students were required to attend 2 self-selected orientation sessions each semester of their first year. The students attending the health session were told in advance that animals would be present. Each student was given a 2-part questionnaire at the beginning of the session; a total of 246 students were surveyed during five separate sessions. The questionnaire collected background information from the students about their pets, their knowledge of pet therapy, any experience with pet therapy, and their feeling towards a pet therapy visit on campus. A presentation on pet therapy programs and theories was given and all student participant and team interactions were recorded for future analysis. Then the students were allowed to have contact with the dog handlers and therapy dogs. The results to the questionnaires were reported and analyzed. The participants sample was predominantly single (98%), white (91%), and female (85%). Ages of the participants ranged from 17-25 years old, with the majority of them having a pet at home (91%); 75% had dogs, 46% had cats. A majority (92.5%) of the participants considered their pets an integral part of their lives, and 90.3% reported receiving support and comfort from their pets during stressful times. Only 41% of the participants reported having heard of pet therapy, with the majority of those having already had experience with the therapy. 96% of the students expressed interest in having a pet therapy program on their campus. Written comments on the questionnaire resulted in three themes: they missed their pets at home, were interested in a pet therapy program, and wanted the pets to visit their resident halls. One student wrote about her personal experience at Children’s Hospital and how “the visits were what I really looked forward to having each day.” (547). Limitations in this study were that the sample may not have been representative of the entire population; students self-selected to attend the health session knowing there would be animals, and most participants were single, white, young females. More studies would have to be performed to determine whether this study represented the average interest of all freshman students on campus. Despite these limitations, enough preliminary support was available to begin a pilot pet therapy program on campus. Further testing must be done to record the reported success of the program, and more understanding of the human-animal relationship is needed before use of pet therapy in larger scales with healthy individuals.

This article interested me because it was the first I have seen where the effect of pet therapy on healthy individuals, college students, was studied. Although it did not study the actual psychological effects, I believe that it is the first step to continue studying this theory. I am also very interested in this topic because I would love a pet therapy program on my college campus and believe that it would certainly provide many benefits, psychological and emotional, for students.
This article described the program and philosophy behind the Equine-Assisted Therapy Program for veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder. The Department of Veterans Affairs has offered this program to veterans since 2008 with multiple-week sessions throughout the year, and a 3 hour trial for veterans from the VA’s Adaptive Sports Program. The article explained why horse therapy is effective for working with individuals with PTSD and included interviews from some of their patients.

Each session at the Equine-Assisted Therapy Programs includes six veterans from different mental health programs. Each individual identifies one or two goals they would like to focus on and improve; common goals include decreasing anxiety, building self-esteem and confidence, improving verbal and nonverbal communication, handling frustration, and becoming more aware of their feelings. The patients groom their horses at the beginning of each session, this is important for bonding and building a relationship with the horse. Grooming is one of seven “Friendly Games” which are games used to train the horse and helps establish the veteran as the leader. These games also teach both the horse and veteran skills needed for when the patient mounts the horse. The program is not considered a riding program, but they patients may ride the horses if they feel ready. At the end of each session, there is group discussion between the veterans, the psychologist, and the recreation therapist where they help the veterans work on communication and other goals. Equine-Assisted Therapy is effective for individuals with PTSD because horses are such large animals that the veterans who often have issues controlling their impulses learn quickly that they must control themselves because sudden, unexpected movements can cause the horse to inflict significant harm. Horses are also hyper-vigilant until they believe they are not in danger and require work to gain their trust; these aspects are characteristics that most individuals with PTSD can relate to. Other symptoms include feeling emotionally numb and not aware of one’s body language. Horse therapy assists with this because horses communicate mostly through body language and so the veterans learn to be more self-aware of their bodies and expression of emotion. This helps them communicate with the horse as well as with human’s and becoming aware of others’ body language. Horses are also herd animals, meaning that they are looking for a leader to follow. In therapy, the veterans learn to gain leadership through confidence and assertive behavior without becoming aggressive.

Veterans reported learning different techniques for their personal life such as, “This is another way to communicate, and I can use it when communicating with my wife”, “…helps me relax. I learned to be more patient”, “I can feel the ground under my feet. I haven’t felt that in a long time”, “I’ve learned patience…I’ve learned trust, which I never had.” (xi).

This article was of interest to me because therapeutic horse-riding is more commonly used for physically injuries and I enjoyed learning about how this activity could be adapted for other purposes. This idea can be applied to almost every other activity. The Equine-Assisted Therapy Program is an excellent example of activity adaption for therapeutic purposes.

The Sounds of Healing: Unique Pet and Music Therapy Programs

Robin M. Lally, PhD, RN, BA, AOCN, CNS

This article introduced two new and innovative therapy approaches to cancer treatment. Four years ago at Ocean Medical Center in Brick, N.J., the Oncology Growth Team proposed a pet therapy group to promote the Cancer Rehabilitation Program for the patients. Today, they have eight therapy dogs that visit inpatients weekly through the Healing Paws Pet Therapy Program. Another therapy approach introduced in this article was the music therapy program at Park Nicollet Health Services/Methodist Hospital in St. Louis Park, M.N. Park Nicollet has four music therapists and has become a national training site for music therapy interns.

At Ocean Medical Center, the dogs and handlers are trained through Therapy Dogs International or a similar certification agency. Each dog’s health and vaccinations are monitored, and so is the health of the patients they visit. The dog visits are nurse recommended, physician ordered, and then scheduled through the Inpatient Rehabilitation Department. Patients in isolation, are immuno-compromised, allergic to animals, asthmatic, or have draining wounds are not available for visits. If patients cannot have in-room visits, accommodations are usually made so that the dogs can visit patients in alternate locations. ONS member Phyllis Begyn said that, “Patients’ faces light up, and we see an immediate difference in their temperament when the dogs make their visits.” (9). The music therapy program at Park Nicollet Health Services/Methodist Hospital began 12 years ago. The program is now training its 55th intern and continues to expand the opportunities and reach of its program. Park Nicollet offers music therapy for patients with cancer during inpatient and outpatient treatment, radiation therapy, and home and inpatient hospice. Patients report that, “Music therapy is a unique way to provide emotional and spiritual support, pain management, and stress and anxiety reduction.” (10). Park Nicollet now also offers the Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music, which is a form of music psychotherapy. These imagery sessions are effective for patients receiving ongoing chemotherapy and for those who have completed therapy. Cancer patients at Park Nicollet are eligible to receive this therapy for a year or more after completing therapy. Soon the hospital will also be able to offer music therapy not just before or after radiation, but during the radiation sessions.

This article introduced me to music therapy for cancer treatment, something I had never heard of. It also showed pet therapy being used specifically for cancer treatment, not just therapy for general hospitalized populations. The article explained that these innovative therapies could most benefit not just patients who like animals or music, but patients in specialized care for issues of depression, anxiety, pain, etc. This article opened my eyes to a brand new, unique form of therapy offered in select facilities and helped me aware that there are numerous forms of therapies available, each with their own purpose and benefits for specific care. This article taught me that new, innovation ideas are constantly being made and that therapeutic recreationists and other therapists alike need to continually educate themselves on these new and innovative treatments.
Using Animal Assisted Therapy With Children

Frances Weston

This article was about a counselor/therapist who trained a therapy dog to incorporate into her play therapy work with children. Frances Weston wanted to explore the benefits of AAT (animal assisted therapy) with children and young people. Therapy animals are widely used to help people of all ages with psychological and emotional disorders such as anxiety, depression, recovering from trauma, and neuroses. Weston raised and trained a chocolate Labrador puppy named Tilly to be a therapy dog.

Tilly took obedience classes through the Kennel Club’s Good Citizen Dog class and had to pass the Pets as Therapy Assessment. The testing included walking on a leash without pulling, how she acted when being groomed, her acceptance of being held by the collar and petted, examination of paws, ears, and tail; taking a treat gently, tolerating loud noises, and an overall health inspection. After being accepted by the PAT (Pet as Therapy) organization, Tilly began going to work with Weston 3 days a week. Tilly was then incorporated into the children sessions in Weston’s private practice. The AAT project was then evaluated through interviews with the children receiving AAT and their parents. All the children reportedly loved Tilly and being with her made them feel happy and helped relax them during the sessions especially if they got angry or upset. All the parents that were interviewed said that they believe their children benefited from the sessions with Tilly present, and some said that their children probably wouldn’t have attended if not for Tilly. In 2 years of AAT, Tilly has worked with over 50 children. Weston recalls times when Tilly’s loving nature really enhanced a child’s therapy experience. AAT helps children develop empathy because they learn to read an animal’s body language and try to understand what they are feeling. Animals also work as icebreakers and help initiate conversation as well as motivate children to attend therapy sessions. Children with mental health issues or low self-esteem can be taught to focus on what’s around them through interaction with an animal. Brushing an animal’s fur, feeding, or exercising the animal helps teach nurturing skills. Children are likely to project their feeling onto an animal and this can help form a relationship between the therapist and child. Animals offer unconditional love and acceptance and increase opportunities for laughter and entertainment. Touching an animal can teach children to give and receive physical contact because petting an animal is safe and pleasant and may allow the child to feel nurtured and affectionate. Studies have also proven that interaction with an animal helps decrease heart rate and blood pressure while releasing endorphins and decreasing cortisol.

I enjoyed this article because not only did it discuss the many various benefits of animal assisted therapy (AAT), it also explained the process of training and certifying a therapy dog through a first-person handler account. Because Weston wrote the article about her own experiences, she was able to express her opinions and beliefs towards the therapy she was providing and the reactions she observed. Although there is a chance of a little bias in this article, I found the information to be instructional and accurate, with true evidence of the benefits of animal assisted therapy.
Is There a Scientific Basis for Pet Therapy?

Salvatore Giaquinto & Fabio Valentini

This article described the study and research involved in asking if there is a scientific basis for pet therapy. Giaquinto and Valentini acknowledged that looking after a pet can put you in a positive mood, but what is the difference between pet therapy, animal companionship, and pet ownership and what are the benefits? They explained that therapy implies improvement and recovery of health, and although pet ownership and companionship don’t imply health benefits, the therapy must be discussing physical and psychological health effects.

For their research, Giaquinto and Valentini collected all the papers from the MEDLINE library and the Cochrane controlled trials registry under the terms: pet therapy, animal companionship, and pet ownership. An early study showed that the presence of a friendly dog significantly lowered the blood pressure of 38 children while at rest and while reading. In a one-year study involving 432 patients who had suffered from an acute myocardial infarction, pet ownership and social support were found to be significant predictors of survival. Dog owners were less likely to die within a year compared to those who did not own a dog. Another experiment gave dog owners with hypertension (experimental group) the drug Lisinopril, while the control group was also given the drug but they did not own dogs. After six months, the Lisinopril therapy had lowered the resting blood pressure in both groups, but the pet owners reported significantly lower levels of mental stress. The pet owning group also had reduced heart rate, lower diastolic and systolic blood pressure, and reduced plasma rennin activity. A possible explanation is physical exercise because dog owners engage in more exercise. Dog owners are also known to walk longer and have much lower serum triglycerides than non-dog owners. Dog walking is also known to promote social interaction between individuals because of their similar interests. Elderly individuals with chronic disabilities showed great improvements in depression symptoms and decreased blood pressure after animal interaction. Despite these studies that seem to support benefits from animal interaction, the psychological benefits of pets is still far from unanimous. In a study involving 995 individuals 65 years or older, no psychological benefits from pet ownership were found. A study of 2551 people aged 60-64 found that a higher incidence of depressive symptoms were found in male participants who were pet owners. The study also found that pet ownership was associated with poorer mental and physical health. Through all the studies investigated, Giaquinto and Valentini were not able to associate pet ownership with improved psychological health. There was significant evidence supporting protection against cardiovascular complications and pet ownership, but this was attributed to the physical exercise of dog walking rather than the interaction and support of the animal.

Although this article did not show significant support for pet therapy and the benefits of animal companionship, I thought it was important to read through studies that weren’t as one-sided or successful when describing animal assisted therapy. As with most studies, not all data will give one conclusion. Each individual is different and there are various variables present in every situation. This is very important to remember when trying to find a therapy approach for a particular patient. This is also why new and unique forms of therapy are important because some therapy approaches may not work for some people, but may be spectacular for others.

**Attitudes to Animal-Assisted Therapy with Farm Animals Among Health Staff and Farmers**

B. Berget, PhD; O. Ekeberg, DM; and B.O. Braastad, PhD

This article aimed to describe the findings of the study that determined the psychiatric therapists’ and farmers’ attitudes towards, knowledge, and experience with Green care. Green care is a therapy program that uses farm animals, plants, gardens, or landscape targeted for different groups of people. In this study, therapists and farmers were asked to what extent they believe animal-assisted therapy (AAT) with farm animals could contribute to the therapy of clients with psychiatric disorders.

To study the interest of AAT with farm animals in therapists and farmers, 60 therapists and 15 farmers who had little to no prior experience with Green care and had expressed interest in working with farm animals were sent questionnaires. The questionnaires asked their opinions on the extent animal-assisted therapy with farm animals could contribute to better mental health than other forms of occupational therapy and training for improved human interaction. These individuals were asked to what extent they believed AAT with farm animals would be effective for individuals with schizophrenia, affective disorders, and personality and anxiety disorders. The main animals on the farms tested were dairy cows, cattle for meat production, sheep, horses, rabbits, poultry, pigs, cats, and dogs. The results of the study showed significant sex-related differences; on average females we much more positive of the effect of animal-assisted therapy in general and with farm animals than males were. Females were more optimistic about the extent farm animals could contribute to increased human interaction skills and better mental health. All farmers believed that animals could be positive in therapy to a large or very large extent, while the therapists were less positive. The majority of therapists believed that farm animals could contribute to therapy in an addition to pets; 86% of female therapists believed this to a large extent while only 40% of males were that optimistic. In this study, therapists reported strong beliefs in animal-assisted therapy, and believed that farm animals could provide positive effects in addition to those of pets. The therapists also reported a strong belief in AAT being more beneficial to patients that other forms of occupational therapy and could contribute to improved interactions with other humans. The therapists also believed that AAT with farm animals would be beneficial to patients with a variety of psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia, personality disorders, and serious depression.

This article was interesting because it was the first to measure therapists’ and famers’ attitudes toward AAT with farm animals. In general, dogs are seen as the primary therapeutic animals and this study could lead to further experiments that test the effects of other animals in therapy. This study is important in relation to animal-assisted therapy because it shows that pet therapy may not be only restricted to therapy dogs and that other animals could have similar benefits to individuals with various disorders. As animal-assisted therapy becomes more popular and widely accepted, it is important to keep an open mind to new improvements and additions to this form of therapy.