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Pet Therapy and Reducing College Stress  
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## Introduction

Pet therapy is the interaction between an animal and person working to overcome physical as well as emotional issues. This type of therapy has been used in a variety of settings and populations including nursing homes and residents, hospitals and patients, residential treatment centers and substance dependence users, schools and children, group counseling and adolescents, universities and students. Many universities have begun using pet therapy on campus for student therapy and campus living. Leading news sources have reported that some campuses are now incorporating animal-assisted programs allowing students to have their pets be part of campus life and scheduled pet therapy days (Daeman, 2013; Herrman, 2010; Williams, 2011). The use of pet therapy on college campuses has increased significantly as a stress reducing technique for college students. College students' stress can stem from text anxiety, feelings of home sickness, adjusting to new experiences and campus living, fear of failing a class and pressure in deciding future career goals. Because stress is a major issue among college students, there is concern that stress can increase the likelihood of suicide. Courses of action taken by college students for reducing stress included a few that are unhealthy such as drinking and promiscuous behavior, but also include healthier options like religion, optimism, and spirituality (Burris, Brechting, Salsman, and Carlson, 2009). For college students, dealing with all of these issues can be overwhelming, especially because they are out of their comfort zone. Having an animal to interact with can create a new sense of home as well as community. This sense of belonging and community can help the student feel less stressed. Based on this, dogs used in pet therapy are an effective tool in reducing stress in college students because they provide comfort and temporary relief from academic and psychosocial problems.

### **Background**

In 1792 in a mental institution in England pet therapy was first observed to be a possible positive course of treatment (Altschiller, 2011; Lutwack-Bloom, 2005). A historical figure involved with the use of pet therapy was Florence Nightingale, a clinical medical professional who reported the benefits of animals with patients (Altschiller, 2011; Halm, 2008; Lutwack-Bloom, 2005; Pichot, 2007). In the United States pet therapy was first known to be used in 1944 to 1945. In that time pet therapy was used at the Pawling Air Force Convalescent Hospital with soldiers that had emotional disturbances (Altschiller, 2011; Lutwack-Bloom, 2005). In 1961 the term “pet therapy” was formally recognized by Dr. Boris Levinson, a psychologist, who gave a paper on using his dog, Jingles, in treatment with a child client (Altschiller, 2011; Lange, 2006/2007; Lutwack-Bloom, 2005). Animal-assisted therapy is a course of treatment where specific milestones are obtained during the course of therapy using the help of an animal (Lange, 2006/2007; Lutwack-Bloom; Pichot & Coulter 2007). This type of therapy has been included in treatment plans created by occupational, speech, and mental health therapists. Mental health therapists include an animal to help build up their emotional wellbeing. Animal-Assisted activities compared to Animal-Assisted Therapy are not milestone directed without any perceived expectations (Pichot & Coulter, 2007).

Pets can be helpful in adjusting to situations that might trigger psychosocial issues that children and adults endure (Pichot & Coulter, 2007; Halm, 2008). Children that interact with pets can strengthen their socialization skills, emotional empowerment, and the pets can help educate them on the death process (Pichot & Coulter, 2007; Urbanski & Lazenby, 2012). Adults can feel a sense of connection and a feeling of belonging when interacting with a pet. A pet’s presence can lift the spirits of an adult specifically when they’re stressed and the contact with a pet can

provide reduction in physical and emotional ailments (Pichot & Coulter, 2007; Halm, 2008). Pet therapy, support by the historical background described above, can imply that this course of therapy could be proven successful in treating people with stress on various levels.

### **Literature Review**

College students face a variety of new life challenges when attending college. These stresses can be caused by academic pressure like tests, assignments, time management as well as changes in family and social support, and finances (Miczo, 2006; Furr, 2001; Mirsa, 2000). A college student's psychosocial health can be affected by not having the same support systems that they had back home where they could talk to someone comfortably such as a family member or a counselor that they had a lifelong patient relationship with when stressed (Miczo, 2006; MacGeorge, 2005). College forces students to create new types of support to help them when stress is brought on by this new life chapter. Students may participate in unsafe behaviors in order to reduce stress they are feeling. Some of these behaviors that are unsafe include alcohol use, promiscuity, and suicidal attempts (Burriss, 2009; Westefeld, 2006). College students that participate in behavior that is unsafe have a greater chance of having stress increase rather than decrease (Burriss et al., 2009). Compared to the behaviors that are considered to be unsafe and that can lead to increased stress there can also be positive behaviors that result in stress reduction, including time management, religiousness, optimism, spirituality, and informational support (Burriss, 2009; MacGeorge, 2005; Mizra, 2000). Some groups of students might be better able to deal with this kind of stress. Upper classmen that have been in college for some time have often found techniques to deal with this stress from their experience (Misra and McKean, 2000). Students that are in a small college where its more close-knit are more capable of dealing with

stress than students that form part of a large university that feel lost and with a decreased sense of community (Furr et al., 2001).

College student stress overlooked can lead to suicide. Feeling the stress from academic and life pressures as well as a few risk factors including hopelessness, previously attempted suicide, physical/sexual abuse, depression, and lack of social support can impact the likelihood of suicide (Burriss et al., 2009). College campuses can provide psychosocial guidance and support for students when faced with stressful challenges (Furr, 2001; Westfeld, 2006). In order to address the issues of stress and suicide in college students, colleges may reevaluate the way they conduct their counseling programs for more opportunities related to counseling options. Those counseling options might include discovering occurrences of stress and suicide, making information on these topics more easily and regularly available to college students, or some types of options for therapy that have a community-focused model like pet therapy/animal-assisted therapy (Drum, 2009; Furr, 2001; Westfeld, 2006).

Pet therapy has been used with other populations. Interaction involving pets with the elderly in nursing homes has had a positive outcome with how people felt, excluding patients with depression (Lutwack-Bloom, Wijewickrama, and Smith, 2005). Pet therapy was more beneficial for reducing stress in adult inpatients dealing with substance abuse (Wesley, Minatrea, and Watson, 2009). Pet therapy has a positive impact for children in hospitals in their health overall and psychosocially (Urbanski, and Lazenby, 2012).

Pet therapy can benefit people with emotional problems by helping them deal with stressful situations they are experiencing. Social support and attachment theory has been shown to provide a social bond and connection between people and dogs. Pet therapy has been

beneficial to people who have drug and alcohol problems, help them stay healthy by having the pet interaction which offers them emotional support. This attachment theory discusses how physical contact benefits patients from using pet therapy. The attachment therapy benefits the patients' physiological and psychological problems including stress and anxiety. (Wesley et al, 2009).

Pet therapy also helps people who have or suffer from stress by making them less stressed like in the population of adult dog owners. Dog owners, like in the substance abuse population, find benefit in their physiological health (Barker et al, 2010). The interaction of a therapy dog can help people like adolescents receiving group counseling because having the dog makes the atmosphere feel normal. Group counseling with a therapy dog helps the patients open up to others in therapy, provides reduction in stress and more at ease (Lange et al, 2006/2007). It is shown to improve how a person feels especially those people like the elderly that live in nursing homes and might feel like their family has forgotten about them. Therapy dog visits with the elderly had an impact on how they felt overall (Lutwack-bloom et al, 2005). Other people like children and adults staying in hospitals it was shown to help them with their self-esteem and make them forget about the reason why they're in the hospital (Halm, 2008). A group specifically related to children where pet therapy has found to be beneficial is in pediatric oncology. The pediatric patients' parents mentioned them to be more cooperative when it came to medical treatment including less pain as well fear while a therapy dog was close by. Patients interacting with a dog have shown to provide great strides in their social skills for the population surrounding pediatric oncology. Dog interaction also had positive outcomes on hormones of the patients' brain such as dopamine and endorphins (Urbanski and Lazenby, 2012).

One other population is the military. Since 2007 occupational therapists have used therapy dogs with soldiers by traveling to where the soldiers were deployed and soldiers returning and becoming ready to reenter into civilian life (Fike, Najera, and Dougherty, 2012; Beck et al, 2012). The occupational therapists as part of “prevention programs” provide soldiers with education on dealing with “combat and operational stress reactions (COSR)” (Fike et al, 2012). Also, occupational therapists as well as assistants worked with soldiers using animal-assisted therapy as part of “Occupational Therapy Life Skills programs (OT)” (Beck et al, 2012). This animal focused therapy has been used with soldiers to help them adjust to being away from their families and familiar surroundings as well as a feeling of comfort. Interacting with therapy dogs helped the soldiers have a healthy and constructive outlet for them to express their feelings. Having this animal interaction helped motivate soldiers to discuss their emotional stress with others and open up about their family pet and other people that they cherish making them feel like they were among family. (Fike et al, 2012). Soldiers returning from war and having been away from their families can benefit from interacting with a therapy dog. Soldiers returning home found that they benefited from having contact with a therapy dog in stress relief and in overall exhaustion of the body and mind (Beck et al, 2012). Interaction with the therapy dogs helped soldiers feel more comfortable by having that close contact and an outlet when communicating with soldiers or family involved in the therapy (Beck and Fike et al, 2012).

### **Methods**

The setting was at University of South Florida, St. Petersburg (USFSP) Nelson Poynter memorial library. The pet therapy event was held at the campus library on Monday February 24<sup>th</sup> 2013 which began at 3:30 pm ending at 4:30 pm. The therapy dogs and their handlers who came to the library were from the organization called Therapy Dogs International of the Pinellas



County chapter. The dogs were located on the first floor of the library after entering the library. The population contained both sexes and was of college students. College students arrived at the library and interacted with the dogs. The college students were able to go around and interacting with other dogs or stays interacting with one that they had been with. The number of college students that attended the event was 80. This information was obtained from emailing the librarian at the library that is in contact with organization to arrange for the dogs to come to find out exactly how many students came since that information wasn't certain. As the college students were exiting the library they were asked if they would be willing to fill out a 6 question survey related to the pet therapy experience they had just participated in. College students were told that the survey was for a research class being taken by the student administering the survey. The title of the survey administered to the students was called "Pet Therapy Survey" and contained four yes/no questions, one scaled question and one open-ended question. The survey had no specific time limit of when a student had to complete it. Before administering the survey there had to be approval from the librarian to do so. Seeking approval to administer the survey to students was done by going to speak with the librarian and it was advised to email the dean of the library for further approval. After speaking with the librarian and obtaining approval, an email was sent to the library dean for further approval as advised. The dean of the library emailed back granting approval to conduct the survey. The pet therapy survey created was sent to the research instructor for feedback before handing it out to students.

### **Analysis**

In this paper the data, which come from four yes/no questions and one rating question was evaluated and entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and reviewed for quality of data input. The data was reevaluated descriptively setting up ratios into percentages. Additionally, the data

was broken down into three groups; one group represented the general population; then the general population was divided into two groups - one group for students who came for the purpose of the therapy dogs and one group for students who interacted with the therapy dogs but did not come to the library for that originally purpose. The final open-ended question from the survey where participants described their thoughts on the pet therapy experience was entered into a Microsoft Word document to review their gathered thoughts.

### **Results**

The exact amount of people who attended the pet therapy event in all was a total of 80 which was informed by one of the University librarians. The pet therapy survey was randomly handed out to 19 participants and 19 were completed. From the 19 participants who completed the survey, only 18 were students representing 94.74% of the students and one who was not a student representing 5.26% of the participants. Since the basis of this paper focuses on college students, the 18 surveys completed by students were used in the analysis and results.

From the 18 college students who came to the pet therapy event and participated, only 12 came for the purpose of interacting with the therapy dogs representing 66.67% of participants. Only six out of the 18 students did not come for that purpose representing 33.33% of the participants. The number of students who answered that this was their first time participating in a pet therapy experience was twelve representing 66.67% of the participants. The other students who answered this question reporting no were six representing 33.33% of participants. On a scale from 0-3 rating this experience as beneficial in reducing stress none of the students rated it as a 0 being no benefit as well as 1 being somewhat beneficial. One of these students rated the experience a 2 reporting 5.56% of the participants. Seventeen of the students from the eighteen students who completed the surveys rated this experience a 3 reporting 94.44% of the

participants. Eighteen of the students said that they would do it again after participating in this experience reporting 100%. None of the students said no which was zero.

The data was divided into two groups; one group were those who came to see the therapy and the second group were participants who came but did not come to see the therapy dogs originally. From the college students who attended the event 66.67% of the participants reported this being their first time experiencing this type of event. Whereas only 33.33% of the participants reported this not being their first time experiencing this type of event. No student rated the event a 0 meaning no benefit or a 1 showing it to be somewhat beneficial. College students who rated this event as a 2, for being moderately beneficial, were 8.33%. Students that rated this event a 3 as being greatly beneficial were 91.67%. It was shown that 100% of the students answered that they would participate in this experience again.

Out of the students who came to the event but not for seeing the therapy dogs originally only 33.33% reported it being their first time experiencing this. The percentage of students who reported it not being their first time experiencing this was 66.67%. None of the students rated the event a 2 as being moderately beneficial. All of the students rated the event a 3 as being greatly beneficial resulting in 100%. The students all said that they would participate in this experience again which was 100%. In this second group none of the students reported zero being no benefit and one being somewhat beneficial.

The survey that was handed out to the students at the pet therapy event related to this paper contained yes/no questions similar to the study by Adamle et al (2009) where most of the students mentioned feeling less stressed while interacting with the dogs. The pet therapy conducted in various studies and universities informed by Danemon (2013) in their article,

showed students to have positive feedback as it helped with stress. The pet therapy event in a study by Bell (2013) was also held in a library and a majority of students said that they would participate in this type of event again; these results are similar to those in this study, in which 100% reported that they would participate again. In Bells (2013) paper 82% of the students rated the event as being greatly beneficial compared to this study where 94.44% rated the event greatly beneficial. In other populations such as substance dependence, the elderly, children and adults in hospitals, pediatric cancer patients, dog handlers, the military, and adolescents in group counseling for anger management all of them showed to benefit from pet therapy just like this study.

The survey contained an open ended question where students were asked to “describe how it made you feel interacting with the dogs.” Most of the students who were interacting with the dogs reported it as being a positive experience. Fifty percent of the students who completed the survey reported feeling “happy” from interacting with the dogs. Students in addition pointed out feeling stress relief, which stated “I am now stress relieved! Thank you so much!” Additionally, a student mentioned feeling “more relaxed, eager to go back to study.” The survey showed reporting positive outcomes like in a USA today newspaper article by Matthew Daneman. In a USA Today news article by Matthew Daneman it talked about how pet therapy used with college students was beneficial in reducing their stress levels which was pointed out by comments from students. A paper by Allison Bell from the Gerstein Science Information Centre for the University of Toronto discusses the positive impact on students stress reduction as well as in terms of how it relates to academic stress from interaction with a therapy dog.

### **Conclusion**

This study contained a couple of limitations that if looked at could be used as future research. One limitation was it lacked the quantity of surveys completed. The second limitation was that they didn't focus on factors such as gender, year in school, and age. The third limitation was that not all of the participants who completed the surveys were students, which identified one of the participants under the category of non-student.

The information gathered from the study on dogs used in pet therapy showed to have a positive effect on decreasing college students stress levels. Students reported feeling excitement and warmth from interacting with the dogs. One of the student participants who completed the survey mentioned feeling "Very happy. I miss my dog from home so it is nice to be able to interact with such nice and loving dogs." which builds on the belief that the use of pet therapy can foster that memory of home. The study showed that a majority of the students reported the pet therapy experience as being greatly beneficial. The positive outcomes shown were also seen in other populations such as elderly nursing home residents, substance dependence sufferers, adolescents in group counseling, dog handlers, pediatric oncology patients, children and adults in hospitals, and military soldiers. Military soldiers shared some of the same emotional responses as college students such as feeling "calm" and "happy" while participating in the pet therapy experience. Military soldiers as a specific population is one group in particular that shares and deals with the same issues as college students do such as stress, fear, distance from loved ones, young adult age, and new life experiences just to name a few. These two identified as dealing with these same issues mentioned above have the likelihood of leading to suicide. Just as in the published literature about military soldiers, the college students in the present data, interacting with therapy dogs felt a family connection and sense of attachment. The literature used in this

study supports this study's initial premise which is based on this; dogs used in pet therapy are an effective tool in reducing stress in college students because they provide comfort and temporary relief from academic and psychosocial problems.

For the next study the researcher may think about administering a pre survey to the college students to find out their stress levels before participating in such an experience. The researcher may also want to include on the survey more background information to strengthen their research such as the students' age, level in school, and gender. In addition the researcher might decide to gather physical data such as cortisol levels, heart rate, and blood pressure.

## Appendix A

### Pet Therapy Survey

1. Are you a college student?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  
2. Did you come to the library for the purpose of interacting with the therapy dogs?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  
3. Is this your first time participating in a pet therapy experience?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  
4. How would you rate this experience as being beneficial in reducing stress on a scale from 0-3  
0 being no benefit  
1 being somewhat beneficial  
2 being moderately beneficial  
3 being greatly beneficial
  
5. After participating in this experience is this something you would do again?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  
6. Describe how it made you feel interacting with the dogs.

**Appendix B**

Are you a College student?	18	1	94.74	5.26	
Did you come to the library for the purpose of interacting with the therapy dogs?	12	6	66.67	33.33	
Is this your first time participating in a pet therapy experience?	12	6	66.67	33.33	
After participating in this experience is this something you would do again?	18	0	100	0	
	0 being no benefit	1 being somewhat beneficial	2 being moderately beneficial	3 being greatly beneficial	
How would you rate this experience as being beneficial in reducing stress on a scale from 0-3?			1	17	
			5.56	94.44	
Participant who Came to see the therapy dogs					
Participants	Question 2	Question 1	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5
5	Yes	yes	no	3	yes
8	yes	yes	yes	2	yes
10	yes	yes	yes	3	yes
11	yes	yes	no	3	yes
12	yes	yes	yes	3	yes



13	yes	yes	no	3	yes
14	yes	yes	yes	3	yes
15	yes	yes	yes	3	yes
16	yes	yes	yes	3	yes
17	yes	yes	no	3	yes
18	yes	yes	yes	3	yes
19	yes	yes	yes	3	yes
question 2	% of participants who came for the therapy dogs	100%			
question 1	% of participants who were students	100.00%			
	% of participants who aren't students	0.00%			
question3	% of participants being their first time experiencing this	66.67%			
	% of participants having not being the first time they experience this	33.33%			
question 4	% of students ranging benefit at 2 for moderately beneficial	8.33%			
	% of students ranging benefit at 3 for greatly beneficial	91.67%			

question 5	% of students who said they would participate in this experience again	100.00%			
Participants who came to it but did not come for seeing the therapy dogs originally					
Participants					
1	no	yes	yes	3	yes
2	no	yes	yes	3	yes
3	no	yes	yes	3	yes
4	no	yes	no	3	yes
6	no	yes	no	3	yes
7	no	yes	yes	3	yes
question 2	% of participants who didn't come for the therapy dogs	100%			
question 1	% of participants who were students	100%			
	% of participants who aren't students	0%			
question3	% of participants being their first time experiencing this	33.33%			

	% of participants having not being the first time they experience this	66.67%			
question 4	% of students ranging benefit at 2 for moderately beneficial	0%			
	% of students ranging benefit at 3 for greatly beneficial	100%			
question 5	% of students who said they would participate in this experience again	100%			

**Appendix C**

## Question 6 responses from Pet therapy survey

Question 6 Describe how it made you feel interacting with the dogs.

1. It made me smile.
2. I was happy and excited to see the dogs. They were so cute and well-behaved
3. Happy
4. happy
5. Happy
6. happy
7. I am now stress relieved! Thank you so much!
8. Happy. They are calming.
9. Uplifting. (Non-student comment which was not used)
10. I loved the dogs. it cheered me up.
11. Awesome
12. Awesome!!!
13. WONDERFUL!!
14. The dogs were soulful and relieved stress! Dogs have a gift that is truly amazing (especially w/stories).
15. Made me feel happy!
16. Very happy. I miss my dog from home so it is nice to be able to interact with such nice and loving dogs.
17. Feeling of Being loved and fuzzy
18. More relaxed, eager to go back to study.
19. I want them They are very cuddly and I was very excited and happy to play with then and pet them

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