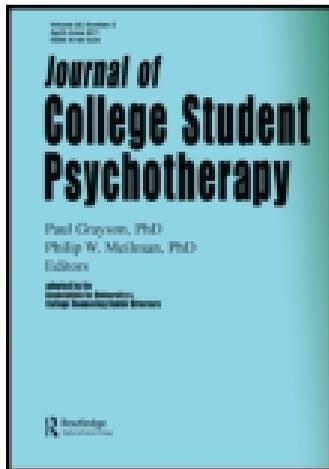


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Therapy Dogs on Campus: Recommendations for Counseling Center Outreach

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This article describes the design and implementation of a dog therapy outreach program through the counseling center at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. Two main goals were identified for this program: (a) provide stress relief and comfort to students across campus, and (b) increase potential access to counseling services and improve perceptions of the department by providing students with the opportunity to interact with department members outside of the office. Collected student responses appear to support the stated goals. Recommendations for other counseling centers are provided in developing this type of outreach programming.

KEYWORDS college counseling, outreach programming, therapy dogs

University counseling centers provide various important psychological services to the campus community, such as psychotherapy, consultative services, and outreach programming. Outreach programming is a common method by which counseling centers serve in an educative and preventive capacity on campuses (Marks & McLaughlin, 2005; Sanchez & King-Toler, 2007), collaborate with professors, staff, students, and other campus organizations (Sanchez & King-Toler, 2007), and reach students who may otherwise be hesitant to access counseling center services (Marks & McLaughlin, 2005). This role within the university community is important, allowing the counseling center to survey, assess, and address the psychological and social needs of the campus community to help create a more equitable and comfortable workplace and learning environment for faculty, staff, and students

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(Sanchez & King-Toler, 2007). The current article describes the design and implementation of a dog therapy outreach program that was oriented toward these purposes. Specifically, two main goals were identified for this program: (a) provide stress relief and comfort to students across campus, and (b) increase potential access to counseling services and improve perceptions of the department by providing students with the opportunity to interact with department members outside of the office.

Research demonstrates that animals can be a major source of comfort and support with various populations. In a study that compared ratings on the Stress Response Scale-18 (SRS-18) for adult volunteers in the absence and presence of their own pet dogs, there was a significant reduction in scores during the dogs' presence, which suggests that animal interaction has an impact on the stress level of the owner (Sugawara et al., 2012). In another study that compared dog-assisted therapy to human-therapist-only therapy for residents of aged-care facilities with dementia, those who received the dog-assisted therapy demonstrated significantly improved scores for depression and quality of life (Travers, Perkins, Rand, Bartlett, & Morton, 2013). Animal-assisted therapy was also found to decrease physiological arousal in hospitalized children, specifically a significant decrease in systolic blood pressure after the intervention (Tsai, Friedmann, & Thomas, 2010). In a particularly relevant study for this article, college students who held a cat or dog that was unfamiliar to them were found to experience a significant decrease in diastolic blood pressure immediately after holding the animal (Somerville, Kruglikova, Robertson, Hanson, & MacLin, 2008). These findings suggest that the simple presence of and interaction with a dog can positively influence one's physiological and emotional well-being.

There has been limited research overall investigating the influence of animals for the college student population. However, two important studies have examined the relationships that college students have with their pet dogs. Kurdek (2008) examined the role pet dogs play as attachment figures: secure base (they are viewed as sources of support), safe haven (they are sought during difficult times), proximity maintenance (touching them is pleasurable), and separation distress (one misses them). Although they were rated lower overall than human figures, pet dogs were rated highly by their college student owners and were found to be as strong of an attachment figure in terms of proximity maintenance as fathers and siblings. In the other study, Kurdek (2009) found that although college student participants were less likely during difficult times to turn to their pet dogs than to their mothers, friends, and romantic partners, they were more likely to turn to their dogs than to their fathers and brothers and just as likely to turn to their dogs as their sisters.

Many college students are separated from their animals upon arrival at college and, thus, lose access to this source of comfort. Incorporating animals into outreach programming allows students to obtain benefits from

associating with other animals. Indeed, research has suggested that students are interested in pet therapy opportunities. In a study of first-year students, 96% expressed interest in having a pet therapy program on campus, and it was concluded that such programming could promote the formation of interpersonal relationships and provide comfort during a time when students are not readily able to access previous support networks (Adamle, Riley, & Carlson, 2009). The presence of animals may also influence student perceptions of college personnel. Wells and Perrine (2001) randomly assigned college students to examine a photograph of a professor's office that had a dog, a cat, or no animal. The authors found that students rated the office as more comfortable and the professor as friendlier when there was a dog in the office than when there was a cat or no animal in the office. However, they also viewed the professor of the office with the cat to be less busy than the professor who occupied the offices with a dog or no animal.

In the design of our own outreach program, we hoped that these findings would translate to members of our department—namely, that the presence of therapy dogs would encourage students to perceive counseling department representatives as friendly and welcoming, as well as increase their comfort with accessing our clinical services if needed.

OUR PROGRAM

The dog therapy program at West Chester University began as a small outreach activity through the counseling center. This outreach was designed to help reduce students' stress by giving them the experience of spending time with Tucker, a golden retriever and certified therapy dog, at the end of the semester. Tucker visited an area of the student union center for two hours while students came and went as they pleased, some stopping for a quick pet and others sitting and spending a bit of time petting, hugging, and playing with him. Since students seemed to really enjoy and look forward to this end-of-semester program, we decided to have Tucker visit campus on a more frequent basis throughout the year. We also determined that this program might be helpful in advertising and educating students about the counseling center and its services, and would give them an opportunity to meet representatives from the center. When Tucker came to campus, he was accompanied by both his owner, who is also his certified and trained handler, and at least one representative from the counseling center. The counseling center also set up a table with brochures and giveaways (Stress Ball Rams [for the school mascot], Stress Ball Paws, and pens) containing information about our center's services.

Thanks to the popularity of this program, the counseling center began receiving requests from people in the community who wanted to participate. Soon, the counseling center added another certified therapy dog named

Darla, who is a Bernese Mountain dog, brought by her owner/certified handler. At the current time, each therapy dog visits the campus once per month as well as during the last week of classes and final exams, for a total of approximately 15 events per academic year. Additionally, the counseling center fields numerous requests throughout the semester from different student organizations (e.g., Animal Behavior Club; fraternities) and university offices (e.g., New Student Orientation) for the dogs to participate in other campus events and assist in attracting students to them.

The certified therapy dogs the counseling center uses have had to go through extensive training and pass temperament and behavioral tests. The dogs are tested on whether they can follow commands, are comfortable around other dogs, people, children, and medical equipment, and can tolerate unusual situations. Given that the events take place in a noisy and busy student union, the counseling center has wanted to ensure that the dogs were comfortable and able to behave appropriately in this setting.

At the start of each semester, each dog is scheduled for monthly visits. To advertise these dates, flyers are posted in the dorms and student unions and on the university TVs that are placed throughout campus. Given the popularity of social media, we created a Twitter account for the dog therapy program, which announces upcoming dates and posts pictures of Tucker and Darla with students. The students seem to really appreciate the Twitter account, frequently interacting with it through the “favorite” and “retweet” functions and posting their own pictures of the dogs.

Over time, dog therapy has become the counseling center’s most popular and well-liked outreach activity. Students schedule and plan around the dates the dogs will be on campus, often coming early to the student union center to wait for their arrival, and not uncommonly shouting the dog’s name when one enters the building. As many as 15 to 20 students will sit in a large circle, talking and socializing with one another as the dog makes his or her rounds with each one. It has been a pleasure to see the variety of students that stop and interact with each other, many not having done so before or seeming to have much else in common. This common interest of the therapy dogs allows the large, diverse group to talk about their own family pets or the stress they are experiencing with school. This outreach also brings attention to the existence of the counseling center, allows students to ask questions about its services, and lets them meet and interact with counseling center representatives—all of which, it is hoped, helps break down the stigma associated with mental health, counseling, and the counseling center itself.

FEEDBACK

At the start of the Fall 2013 academic semester, feedback was randomly collected from students through a paper-and-pencil evaluation form during the

first two dog therapy outreaches. Fifty-four students participated, 81% female and 91% Caucasian, ranging in age from 18–32 years, with 72% stating that they have a pet dog at home. About half the students (53%) just happened to see the dog in the student union and decided to stop by, 32% heard about it via a paper flyer or advertisement on the campus TVs, and 9% heard about it from a friend. Clearly, having these events in the student union center was a good choice; many students were passing through and were able to stop by when they saw the dogs.

These events helped students gain awareness and knowledge about the counseling center. 19% of the participants did not know before there was a counseling center available to all students, and 17% learned about counseling center services they were unaware of before. Even more important, 70% of the participants stated that they were now more likely to contact the counseling center, 17% stated that they were neither more nor less likely to contact it, 0% said they were less likely to contact it (13% stated they were already counseling center clients). Also, 94% stated that if the therapy dogs were not there, they would not have stopped at the counseling center information table. We can conclude that this outreach program made a significant contribution to how students viewed the counseling center and its services.

Participants also commented on how much value the therapy dogs brought to their day, based on a scale of 1 (*no value*) to 5 (*exceptional value*). The overwhelming majority (79%) stated that the dogs provided “exceptional value,” and most of the rest (20%) rated the experience a 4. On a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*high*), participants rated their degree of stress relief; 72% gave a rating of 5, 21% a rating of 4, and 8% a rating of 3. Asked to provide open responses to their experience with the therapy dogs, students stated this experience was the best part of their day, it brightened their day and made them happy, it reduced their stress, and they loved the dogs and this program. Student shared that they often miss their dogs at home, and it was nice to visit with these dogs to bring some of that comfort to school. Students also expressed gratitude towards the counseling center for having this program. When asked about their experiences with the counseling center representatives, respondents often utilized the words “helpful,” “friendly,” “welcoming,” and “informative,” suggesting further that the dog therapy events contributed to a positive perception of the counseling center.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although our data collection was gathered in an informal manner, it provided encouraging initial feedback about the dog therapy outreach program. From the responses, it seems that this program met the goals of providing stress relief and comfort to the students and campus community, and

increasing the visibility and overall acceptability of the counseling center. With the therapy dogs having become quite well known across campus, the counseling center and its services, which are associated with the program, have received favorable advertising. We have noted that each time the dogs are on campus for an outreach event, at least one student tells the counseling center representative how much they enjoy this program and how thankful they are that the counseling center provides it. From all indications, this outreach program is quite valuable in providing services to a large number of students and increasing the awareness about the counseling center and its services.

As a result of the success of this program and the ease of implementing it, we would recommend other university counseling centers consider creating similar programming. However, we believe it is important that other programs use certified therapy dogs rather than regular pets, given the training and certification therapy dogs have. We would also encourage conducting this outreach in a student union or other high-traffic areas on campus, where students are likely to pass by. Despite the success we have had with using social media and other advertising efforts, many students visit the dogs just by happening to pass by. While the extremely popular social media have assisted in spreading and distributing information about when the therapy dogs will be on campus, students have to be “following” that particular media outlet to get this news. A final recommendation is to get buy-in from both counseling center staff members and other relevant administrators on campus (e.g., head of the student union building). As with any programming effort, support from those conducting and housing it is extremely important if it is to run smoothly and effectively.

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