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Embedded Therapy Dog: Bringing a Therapy Dog into Your Counseling Center

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the design and implementation of an embedded therapy dog program through the counseling center at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. This program involves having a certified therapy dog present in the counseling center, in the waiting area, during counseling appointments, and during group therapy. It is discussed the function the embedded therapy dog can have in the counseling center along with the benefits of having such a program. Recommendations for other counseling centers are provided in developing this type of program.

KEYWORDS

Animal assisted activities; college counseling; therapy dogs

University counseling centers are using Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA) and Animal-Assisted Therapies (AAT) at increased frequencies. Counseling centers have been including certified therapy dogs in their outreach programming for a number of years now, where they bring therapy dogs on campus to visit with students throughout the semester as part of de-stress activities. Daltry and Mehr (2015) described the design and implementation of a successful dog therapy outreach program. They highlight how this program benefits students in providing stress relief and comfort, in increasing access to counseling services, and improves perceptions, visibility, and overall acceptability of the counseling center. Adamle, Riley, and Carlson (2009) found that 96% of 1st-year students expressed interest in having a pet therapy program on campus and 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. The current article looks to expand on this concept of using therapy dogs for outreach programming in university counseling centers by introducing the idea of an embedded therapy dog program.

Research on AAA and AAT continues to show the benefits of such programs on those experiencing distress and mental health difficulty. Animal assisted interventions have demonstrated psychological and physiological benefits that include improvement in depression, loneliness, blood

pressure, and stress (Krause-Parello, Tychowski, Gonzalez, & Boyd, 2012). Crump and Derting (2015) found that first-year female undergraduate students who engaged with AAA experienced decreased psychological stress and increased psychological arousal. They also concluded that AAA/AAT is a better method for reducing stress than some other forms of relaxation, where participants reported feeling more positive and fewer negative emotions after interacting with a therapy dog compared with drawing and other sedentary activities (Crump & Derting, 2015).

Therapy dogs also provide a way for counseling centers to educate students and promote their services. It is thought that therapy dogs can assist in motivating those in need of therapy to actively initiate, engage with, and participate in the therapeutic process (Fine, 2010; Henry & Crowley, 2015; Mallon, Ross, Klee, & Ross, 2010). While this research is not all based on college students and their experiences, the results can still be applied and generalized to the college student population. AAT can be considered a helpful way to reduce stigma around seeking mental health treatment and advertise counseling center services (Henry & Crowley, 2015), thus allowing students to be more willing to seek out services for their mental health difficulty. Students often have a positive association with dogs and may generalize these beliefs to the counseling center because of the presence of the therapy dog. Crossman (2016) talks about how the presence of a therapy dog can enhance the perception of psychotherapists and increase attendance and participation in treatment.

In terms of the clinical benefits of having therapy dogs present during therapy sessions, research is showing how it may assist in building the therapeutic alliance. Calvo and colleagues (2016) suggested that the therapeutic relationship may be strengthened by AAT and that it could improve the therapeutic atmosphere. Zilcha-Mano (2017) discussed how therapy dogs can play the role of a secure attachment figure and that “the trait-like attachment orientations of patients may be automatically projected onto their trait-like alliance component with both the therapist and the animal” (p. 37). The formation of a strong, stable alliance can help students see therapy as a safe haven and create the opportunity to developing a more secure attachment relationship with the therapist (Zilcha-Mano, 2017). Therapy dogs also help students feel more comfortable by providing a physical presence of safety and comfort through touch, which generally is not professionally appropriate for the therapist to do (Zilcha-Mano, 2017). This is important and valuable, as therapy outcomes have been predicted by the quality of the therapeutic alliance, with better therapeutic outcomes being associated with a stronger alliance (Arnow et al., 2013; Horvath, Del Re, Flückiger, & Symonds, 2011; Shirk, Karver, & Brown, 2011).

Thus, in the design of our own embedded therapy dog program, we hoped that by having a therapy dog present in our counseling center we could improve our services, outreach, and outcomes.

Our program

The dog therapy program at West Chester University initially began as a small outreach activity through the counseling center, where a certified therapy dog would visit once a semester to provide stress reduction to students. The program grew to involve three sets of therapy dogs that would each visit once a month throughout the semester. Given the popularity and success of this outreach program, the West Chester University Counseling Center decided to add an embedded therapy dog to their office.

Muddy Puddles is a chocolate Labrador mix, a rescue dog, and the embedded therapy dog in our Counseling Center. Muddy Puddles is a certified therapy dog, who went through extensive training to serve in this role on campus. He had to pass temperament and behavioral tests as well as had to learn specific skills (such as sitting in a chair or laying under a student's legs) to best serve in this environment. His owner is one of the psychologists in the counseling center and he accompanies her on campus several days a week. Muddy Puddles serves numerous roles in the counseling center: greeter, comforter, cotherapist, confidant, advocate, and publicist.

Waiting room

Muddy Puddles spends time at the front desk of the counseling center and in the waiting area with students. Here, Muddy is able to greet students and spend time with them as they wait for their appointment. This often serves an important function, as many students are nervous, uncertain, or uncomfortable, before their appointment. Muddy is able to provide some comfort, relief, and support by being present with them. He helps to break tension and creates a more welcoming environment with students. Students often hug and pet him or sit on the floor with him. Students often comment how relieving it is to see Muddy there, especially when they are new to the counseling center. Research has shown that the presence of a dog in an office can create a positive perception. Wells and Perrine (2001) found that students rated a professor's 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.

Clinical contact

Muddy Puddles is present during his owner's triage, individual, and crisis appointments. Muddy Puddles' presence helps to break down walls quicker

and build the therapeutic alliance, gives students something comforting in session, and provides calming support. He is often used as a cotherapist in teaching lessons about being present, having self-compassion, and implementing relaxation skills. Students have strongly commented through anecdotal feedback and anonymous satisfaction surveys that Muddy Puddles' company has been helpful and has enhanced their experience with the counseling center. They have also shared that he reduces tension, provides relief and affection, and helps them calm down. Henry and Crowley (2015) found that AAT increased client satisfaction, specifically their perception of therapist efficacy, their trust in the recommendation of the intervention, and their future participation in similar interventions.

In terms of emergency appointments, Muddy Puddles has been quite helpful for students presenting in crisis to the counseling center. If Muddy Puddles is available, the front desk staff will bring him to the student in a private room while the student waits to be seen by one of the counselors. Often times, Muddy is able to assist in calming the student and reducing their level of distress in the moment. This is consistent with the research that suggests how interaction with a dog can positively influence one's physiological and emotional well-being (Somervill, Kruglikova, Robertson, Hanson, & MacLin, 2008).

Muddy Puddles also participates in the group therapy program. He has been present during our Navigating Relationships group (a general interpersonal therapy group) and our Sexual Assault Survivors group. We also created a group specifically around Muddy Puddles called "No Mudd No Lotus: Finding Your Inner Muddy Puddles." This group focuses on helping students that struggle with perfectionism, are hard on themselves, who focus on helping others and not themselves, and struggle with emotion regulation and distress tolerance. Dogs have a way of teaching us to be more present and mindful, how to forgive others and ourselves, how to be compassionate with others and ourselves, and how to build connections with others. This group, with the help of Muddy Puddles, assist group members in embracing their inner, compassionate self by teaching ways to cope with difficult family and other relationships, learning ways to improve relationships and create deeper connections, address perfectionism, improve self-care, and how to better manage distress.

Feedback on postgroup surveys from students that have participated in this group has been overwhelmingly positive. Students have shared that they could better understand the material reviewed in the group because it was paralleled with Muddy Puddles and that his presence in the group increased the quality of what they gained from participating in the group. Group members also reported that Muddy Puddles helped provide comfort, particularly during harder subjects, provided an anchoring point to refocus

attention back onto, and helped remind them that they deserve love and happiness.

In addition to these closed therapy groups, we created a weekly, open, drop-in group for students struggling with homesickness and adjustment concerns called “Lunch with Mudd.” This group is typically scheduled on Mondays during the fall semester around the lunch hour, where students can come spend time with Muddy Puddles and other students experiencing similar difficulties. We have found that Muddy Puddles helps create a safe space for students to come and identify that they are having some difficulty and work to connect with other students with similar challenges. Students are also able to interact with a psychologist from the counseling center and learn some techniques and skills for dealing with transition concerns as well as learn more about the counseling center services.

Outreach

In addition to participating in our general dog therapy outreach programs (where he spends time with students in the student union), Muddy Puddles participates in our other outreach programs such as new student orientation, tabling events, our mental health screening event, and various de-stress programs. Students, faculty, and staff all know Muddy Puddles and look forward to seeing him and having him at events. We have found that students will come specifically to events in order to see Muddy Puddles. In addition to these formal, scheduled events, Muddy Puddles often interacts with those on campus when he is out for walks. Given that he has become quite well known across campus, students, faculty and staff often smile as he is walking by, greet him and say hi, and some run across campus for a quick hug and pet. All of this provides helpful advertising for the counseling center and creates a positive image of the counseling center and its services. Muddy Puddles presence not only helps the students but the faculty and staff on campus as well. We often get requests from staff to see him in order to get a little stress relief during their day. These interactions help to build relationships across campus and foster collaboration between offices.

Recommendations

In order to have an embedded therapy dog in the counseling center, a proposal was sent to the University Safety Committee seeking permission and approval. The greatest concern raised was around liability and liability coverage for having a therapy dog on campus serving in the role of embedded therapy dog. It is recommended that those who wish to have an embedded therapy dog in their counseling center consult with the necessary office(s) on their campus to gain permission to have the dog on campus and

inquire about liability coverage. Muddy Puddles is covered under his owner's professional liability insurance. There are also options to purchase separate liability insurance for the embedded therapy dog.

Another recommendation would be to have a professional staff member in the counseling center be the owner of the embedded therapy dog, rather than having somebody outside of the office bring their therapy dog. While it is appropriate to have volunteers bring their therapy dogs for campus outreach events, it does not seem appropriate to have volunteers in the counseling center due to privacy and clinical concerns. Having a professional staff member own the embedded therapy dog helps in protecting the privacy and confidentiality of those students coming to the counseling center. It also allows the embedded therapy dog to be involved in the clinical work of the counseling center, where a volunteer would not be able to be present.

It is important to be mindful of those students that do not like dogs, are fearful of dogs, or are allergic. We post signs throughout the counseling center alerting students to the dog's presence as well as having the front desk staff ask students if they are okay with dogs. For those students that do not like dogs, are fearful, or are allergic, we make sure Muddy Puddles does not interact with them by limiting his access in the waiting area in the counseling center. We also make note of those students on our electronic scheduling system by "flagging" them, so his owner knows to keep Muddy Puddles from freely roaming in the counseling center.

A final recommendation is to also consider the well-being of the dog. Providing stress relief, comfort, and care is really hard work and can be tiring for any dog. It is important to give the dog breaks and be mindful of how the dog is managing the stress of the environment. Also, similar to people, dogs sometimes have bad days and may be struggling or grumpy. It is helpful for the dog's owner to be attuned with the dog's needs and be aware of times when the therapy dog needs a break or needs to stay home from work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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