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August 2, 2017

Therapy Dogs for Homesick College Students?

Harold Herzog, *Animal Studies Repository*

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New research examines the impact of dog therapy for homesick college students.

Posted Aug 02, 2017

"Funny enough, whenever I felt homesick, it was because I missed my own dog, not because I missed my [parents](#) or sister."

Leaving home and going away to college is stressful. Coping with dorm life, trying to make new friends, and meeting higher academic expectations can send students into a tailspin. No wonder between 20% and 70% of first year students experience homesickness. Increasingly universities are turning to animals to help students cope with the stresses of adjusting to campus life. Indeed, researchers at Yale University reported that over 900 animal visitation programs have been established on college campuses.

One of the most innovative of these is the [Building Academic Retention Through K9's](#) program at the Okanagan Campus of the University of British Columbia. Called B.A.R.K. for short, it is the [brain](#) child of Dr. John-Tyler Binfet. The goal of B.A.R.K. is to help students deal with homesickness and [stress](#), and, ultimately, increase retention rates. The program has been going on for six years and relies on nearly 50 community volunteers who regularly bring their trained [therapy](#) dogs to campus. The program is very popular, and each year about 30% of the student body participate in B.A.R.K. sponsored activities. (For more information, watch this brief video on B.A.R.K. [here](#)).

The program also offers an excellent opportunity for researchers interested in determining the effectiveness of animal assisted therapies, and Binfet and his colleagues have recently published the results of several of their studies in the journal *Anthrozoös*.

Can Dog Therapy Alleviate Homesickness?

In the [first study](#), Binfet and Holli-Anne Passmore recruited students who identified themselves as homesick. The students completed psychological scales designed to measure their degree of homesickness, their satisfaction with life, and their feelings of connectedness to the campus. The participants were then randomly placed into two groups. Students in the treatment group participated in eight weeks of Friday afternoon small-group dog therapy sessions. There were three or four students in each session along with a trained therapy dog and its handler. The therapy sessions lasted 45 minutes: 30 minutes of small group interactions with the dog and its handler followed by 15 minutes of free time to visit with other therapy dogs. After the last session, the participants retook the homesickness, life satisfaction, and connectedness scales.

The other students were assigned to a control group. They were told their therapy sessions would begin in two months. These participants also retook the psychological scales eight weeks later, before they started their sessions. This type of "waitlist control" design is common in clinical studies, and it allowed the researchers to compare the wellbeing of students who had completed the regime of dog therapy with those who had not started their sessions.



Source: Graph by Hal Herzog/ Photo by Susan Richey-Schmit/123RF

The results were promising. As shown in this graph, students in the control group became more homesick over the two months they were waiting for their sessions to begin. In contrast, the homesickness scores of the students in the treatment group declined considerably.

How Long Do The Effects of Dog Therapy Last?

The results of the study raised several questions. First, do students really need two months of canine therapy to obtain the psychological benefits from the session or would a single session do the trick? And, second, how long do the effects of dog therapy last? To answer these questions, 163 first year students were recruited from introductory psychology classes. They completed a questionnaire that included scales assessing two dimensions of homesickness ([attachment](#) to home and dislike of their university), perceived stress, and their sense of connectedness to the campus. The subjects were then randomly assigned to either the canine therapy condition or a control condition.

In the animal therapy condition, groups of three or four students interacted with a trained therapy dog and its handler for 20 minutes. The handlers were instructed to engaged in “empathetic listening” with the students during the sessions. They talked with the students about how they were adapting to college life, and they answered questions about the dogs. Students in the control group were instructed to go into a large room where they individually studied material from a course they were presently taking.

Immediately after their sessions, the students in both groups retook the psychological scales. Two weeks later, they returned to the lab and once again completed the scales. This design allowed Binfet to test if a single group session with a dog and its handler would have *immediate* effects on feelings of homesickness and stress. And it also addressed the question of whether these benefits were long-lasting.

The Results: First, The Good News

The sessions were a success. Compared to the control group, the students in the dog therapy groups showed reductions in all three areas of psychological distress. They felt less homesick, less stressed out, and more connected to the campus community.

The bad news is that the beneficial impacts of dog therapy was temporary. When tested again two weeks after their sessions, there were no differences in homesickness, stress, or belongingness scores of subjects in the treatment and control conditions.

Now The Complications

The study will be published in the September issue of *Anthrozoös*. How should we interpret the results? One conclusion is clear: Students who spent 20 minutes in a single group activity with a therapy dog were no better off two weeks later than students who just studied for one of their classes.

But what about the short-term effects of animal therapy? Students in the treatment condition did feel less stressed, less homesick and more connected to the campus community after their session. But here things get tricky. In an influential 2012 article ([here](#)), the neuroscientist and animal activist Lori Marino asked “*How important is the animal in animal assisted therapy?*” Her question is relevant to interpreting the short term effects of the B.A.R.K. study. Remember that the dogs were only one component of the therapy sessions. The participants also engaged in a small group discussion about college life with other three or four other students and with the handler.

It certainly possible that the dogs were responsible for the temporary psychological boost students experienced after their therapy session. But, as Dr. Binfet discusses in his article, it is also possible that these effects had nothing to do with the dogs. For example, the students may have felt better as a result of discussing their problems with the empathetic handlers or by sharing their feelings with other students in the group. It is also possible that simply being in a [novel](#) situation could have produced a temporary improvement in their morale.

The Bottom Line

The researchers initially found eight weeks of small group interactions with a therapy dog and its handler substantially reduced homesickness in first year college students. Their second study showed that a single 20 minute group session with a dog handler reduced homesickness, stress, and increased feeling of connections with the university community. But it also demonstrated that the impact of the sessions was transient.

Even transient relief from homesickness and stress, however, is better than no relief. The University of British Columbia B.A.R.K. program is impressive. Students enjoy the sessions, the program links the university with community volunteers, and it provides an unusual opportunity for animal assisted therapy research with large numbers of subjects. I certainly look forward to future studies by Dr. Binfet and his colleagues. They may even help answer Lori Marino’s question – “*How important is the animal in animal assisted therapy?*”

To learn more about the University of British Columbia B.A.R.K. program, click [here](#).

References

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