The Latest Review of the Potential Benefits of Animal-Assisted Therapy

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ABSTRACT
During finals week, college students’ report high levels of stress, due to the heavy course load of assignments and exams. Unfortunately, during this period, many students become anxious, upset, overwhelmed, and depressed. However, there are several approaches students can use to better handle their emotions during finals week. Developing study strategies, time management skills, and breathing techniques, as well as exercising can aid in relieving stress. One approach in particular that can positively assist students is the inclusion of animal-assisted therapy (AAT). AAT is a complementary intervention that uses animals trained to be obedient, calm, and comforting, for therapeutic benefit across a broad range of medical conditions (Marcus et al., 2013, p. 43).\(^1\) In fact, animals are frequently used in helping treat individuals who suffer with anxiety and depression. During a recent study, researchers concluded a 60% decrease in anxiety and stress among college students after attending a two-hour pet therapy session (http://www.ahchealthenews.com/2014/11/10/pet-therapy-helps-reduce-anxiety-in-college-students/).\(^2\) Further research suggests that AAT shows improvements in human physical, social, emotional, and cognitive function (Macauley, 2006).\(^3\) Also, AAT improves empathy, rapport, socialization, acceptance, and outward focus. This paper will highlight the importance of AAT, describe the process of bringing therapy dogs to Iona College during finals week, and report on the potential benefits to having dogs on campus as per the investigators’ observations.

KEYWORDS
Animal-Assisted Therapy; Therapy Dog; College Students; Finals Week; Stress; Anxiety; Upset; Depressed; Overall Mood

INTRODUCTION
AAT occurs in a variety of settings, such as hospitals, libraries, counseling agencies, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, and schools. Universities have increasingly turned to animals to help students cope with the stresses of adjusting to campus life (Herzog, 2017).\(^4\) College students frequently experience homesickness and stress when trying to make new friends, adjust to life in the dorms, and meet high academic expectations. However, researchers reported that students felt less homesick, less stressed out, and more connected to the campus community after interacting with therapy dogs (Herzog, 2017).\(^4\) Visiting the therapy dogs helped the campus feel more like home for several students.

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA), students experience stress and anxiety in startling numbers. ADAA found that 30% of students were dealing with stress, 85% felt overwhelmed by expectations, and 41.6% experienced anxiety (https://adaa.org/finding-help/helping-others/college-students/facts).\(^5\) As a result, colleges such as Yale University, Kent State University, Mercy College, the University of Connecticut (UCONN), and the University of Minnesota have implemented animal-assisted therapy, in order to provide students the opportunity to diminish experiences of anxiety and depression.
Due to the numerous benefits of therapy animals, Yale Law School has a therapy dog located in their library, Kent State University offers more than twenty pet therapy sessions on campus per semester, and Mercy College has a certified therapy dog on campus providing comfort to students on a daily basis. Also, UCONN’s program, “Paws to Relax” brings nearly two dozen therapy dogs to campus during finals week, and the University of Minnesota offers a program that brings therapy pets to various parts of campus during finals. Research suggests the students’ emotional well-being to be positively influenced after interacting with the therapy dogs (Daltry & Mehr, 2015).6 One particular study suggests college students’ diastolic blood pressure to significantly decrease after holding an animal for five minutes. The students’ blood pressure readings were taken with an automatic digital blood pressure monitor before and after the 5-minute interval (Somerville, Kruglikova, Robertson, Hanson, & MacLin, 2008).7 Other short-term effects of animal therapy include improving the immune system, producing an automatic relaxation response, and releasing calming endorphins (Chelsee, 2016).8 According to many scientists, the hormone, oxytocin, which is responsible for stimulating social bonding, relaxation, and easing stress, is released due to the positive interaction between humans and dogs (Cimons, 2016).9 As a result, the majority of students respond to the dogs in a positive way, and truly enjoy interacting with the therapy dogs on campus. One study in particular found that 96% of college students were in favor of having a pet therapy program on campus (Adame, Riley, & Carlson, 2009).10 Thus, therapy dog programs continue to be implemented among college campuses due to the growing demand from the students, and the positive research findings and theories.

The latest findings on AAT, suggest therapy dogs to be empathic listeners and catalysts for human communication. In the field of communication, specialists, such as speech-language pathologists understand the importance of effective communication between the clinician and the client. It is necessary for the clinician to invest the appropriate time and energy into each client, while building rapport, providing support, and offering patient-centered care. Patient-centered care includes the consideration of the clients’ cultural traditions, personal preferences, family situations, and lifestyle. Developing effective listening skills is a critical component in order to fully inform and involve the client in his or her care. Dogs serve as compassionate listeners because they offer a nonjudgmental and accepting environment. Individuals with communication disorders that include difficulties initiating speech, become more active conversational participants throughout the speech therapy session, due to the mere presence of a therapy dog. For example, a participant with aphasia increased both his social-verbal and social-nonverbal behaviors when the therapy dog was present (LaFrance, Garcia, & Lebreche, 2007).11 Also, the participant’s sense of cheerfulness was improved, he became more outgoing, and he willingly introduced the therapy dog to strangers. Mirror neuron activity may play an important role in the participant’s cheerful behavior, as well as help humans and dogs connect during therapeutic encounters. According to Dr. Marcus, humans who witness cheerful behavior in a friendly dog, such as its tail wagging or attentiveness to the subject might result in empathic imitation of cheerful behavior (http://doglawreporter.blogspot.com/2013/03/the-scientific-basis-of-therapy-dog-work.html).12

Recent research examines how dogs process language and how they show empathic traits. The findings suggest dogs to be more similar to humans than we initially thought. Behavioral studies have shown hemispheric lateralization, with a specialization in the left side for words and in the
right hemisphere for processing intonation and emotionality as seen in humans (https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/07/150720-dogs-animals-science-pets-evolution-intelligence/). A recent study suggests the possibility of dogs demonstrating empathy and recognizing emotions in humans. When volunteers were asked to pretend to cry, they were nuzzled or licked by the dogs. However, when volunteers were merely humming, the dogs paid little attention (https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2012/12/121221-comfort-dogs-newtown-tragedy-animal-therapy/). Research is still evolving in this area and although we know that humans’ communication skills in our lifespan exceed that of our four-legged friend we cannot deny that they can be amazing listeners, show empathy, respond to eye-gaze and touch and possess an amazing ability to bond.

Dale Needham, a professor of medicine and rehabilitation at John Hopkins University School of Medicine believes patients’ psychological status to be improved by non-pharmaceutical interventions, such as music therapy, relaxation training, and animal assisted therapy. In fact, experts at John Hopkins rehabilitation and ICU conclude therapy animals to help ICU patients become active and engaged in their recovery (https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/media/releases/johns_hopkins_brings_therapy_dogs_into_icu). An example of therapy dogs offering an alternative to ingesting invasive medications is shown throughout a report released by researchers at Monmouth Medical Center in Long Branch, New Jersey. Patients undergoing magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) are provided anti-anxiety drugs to suppress feelings of anxiety or fear. However, therapy dogs offer a safe solution to reducing the patients’ fears. According to Dr. Richard Ruchman, the twenty-eight patients’ anxiety levels significantly decreased after interacting with the therapy dogs for thirty minutes before undergoing an MRI (https://www.anxiety.org/therapy-dogs-decrease-mri-claustrophobia).

AAT is an effective treatment strategy that can be used to facilitate patients’ progress toward their selected treatment goals. According to the article, Animal-Assisted Therapy for Persons with Aphasia: A Pilot Study, AAT positively enhances patients’ attitudes, motivation, and communication skills. Beth L. Macauley explains how AAT allowed the participants to meet and improve their treatment goals each semester. For example, the participants were willing to pay attention throughout the AAT sessions, and participate more in the therapy activities. Therefore, the participants felt that the atmosphere of the AAT sessions were lighter and less stressed compared with the traditional therapy (Macauley, 2006). AAT involves fewer demands compared to traditional therapy, allowing for a significant reduction in anxiety for patients with mood disorders and psychotic disorders. A study examined the effects of AAT on anxiety ratings of hospitalized psychiatric patients, and discovered that the therapy dog offered a sense of comfort and provided a nonthreatening diversion from anxiety-producing situations (Barker, & Dawson, 1998). The R.E.A.D. Reading Education Assistance Dogs Children’s literacy program is another example where a nonjudgmental and relaxed environment is provided within schools and libraries. This program uses registered therapy animals to help improve children’s reading, communication, and social skills (http://newyorktherapyanimals.org/r-e-a-d/). The participating students build self-esteem and confidence, while creating a trusting relationship with the therapy dog and handler.

According to these articles, AAT encourages communication, while providing acceptance, incentive, company, support, comfort, and assistance. At times college is challenging, stressful, and
emotionally exhausting, which leaves students feeling stressed and anxious throughout their college experience. Students sometimes find it difficult to balance their classes, assignments, exams, work, and personal life all at once. Thus, the Department of Speech Communication Studies at Iona College formed a therapy dog committee, that worked together to bring therapy dogs to campus during finals week to help reduce students’ stress.

(This is a review of the dog events held at Iona College - No methods)

**BENEFITS OF THERAPY DOGS AT IONA COLLEGE**

During the school year, on Monday, November 27th, 2017 and Thursday, May 3rd, 2018 therapy dogs from New York Therapy Animals Program visited Iona College between 12:00 p.m. and 1:00 p.m. Before the dogs arrived, the therapy dog committee confirmed with New York Therapy Animals that both handlers and dogs met all certification requirements and training needed. According to the program, the handlers and dogs are required to complete a seven-week training and education process to become a registered and insured therapy animal team (http://newyorktherapyanimals.org/join-us/). Iona College and the therapy dog program worked together to ensure that all requirements were met on both ends. For example, flyers were created by the therapy dog committee to advertise the dogs coming to campus, which resulted in it being announced via word of mouth by students and professors. Also, the Speech Department at Iona College reserved a medium sized room for the events, allowing enough space between the dogs. Each therapy dog had their own section of the room to interact with the students. There were between 40-50 students that attended the events. One might expect a noisy environment with the plethora of students, dogs, and handlers. However, there was a sense of tranquility and peace within the gymnasium. The therapy dog committee wanted to ensure that there was a mutually beneficial interaction between the students and dogs. As a result, the students were broken up into groups of either four or five, in order to minimize any stressors for the dogs. Each group sat in a circle on the floor to interact with the therapy dogs. Students had between ten to fifteen minutes to pet the different therapy dogs, and speak with the dog handlers. This particular time frame diminished the possibility of the dogs becoming stressed by their “work,” and instead allowed them to enjoy the interaction with the students.

Before interacting with the therapy dogs, the students anxiously lined up outside of the room waiting for their group to be called. The students were eager to see how many dogs there were, and most importantly have a few minutes to escape the pressure of finals week. It was an incredible experience to witness the students start to smile and laugh as they interacted with the different therapy dogs. One could hear the enthusiasm in the students’ voices as they interacted with the therapy dogs, handlers, and other students. The students were extremely gentle with the dogs, and one could see that the dogs were loving the attention and affection. Future research needs to be conducted, in order to note the effect of human-animal interactions on the animals themselves. The welfare of dogs used in AAT needs to be considered to diminish the possibility of fatigue and burnout. During AAT, the stress and welfare of animals should be analyzed to ensure the health and well-being of our furry friends. Overall, the students had a positive and worthwhile experience with the therapy dogs. In fact, several students did not want to leave the therapy dogs after their ten to fifteen-minute time slot. Many students stopped to inquire whether the dogs would be returning to campus. One student in particular suggested having the therapy dogs return to campus once a month. Other students explained that the dogs provided a sense of comfort and acceptance. Thus, the therapy dogs served as an efficient and relaxing study break.
THERAPEUTIC CONNECTION BETWEEN THERAPY DOGS AND STUDENTS

The Department of Speech Communication Studies at Iona College allocated a plethora of time and effort into organizing two successful therapy dog events on campus. These events required research, planning, advertising, and teamwork. However, both of the events ran smoothly and allowed the students to have a few minutes to escape from their regular routine and daily lives of attending classes and studying for finals. As a result, the therapy dog committee witnessed firsthand the powerful connections made between the students and dogs.

Overall, the students were extremely positive when leaving the therapy dog room. Some students personally came up and thanked the therapy dog committee for organizing the event. After speaking with the students, one could conclude that the students felt, “happy, loved, relaxed, refreshed, excited, energized, calm, comforted, and overjoyed.” The students explained that they felt extremely stressed, and on edge about all of their assignments due, however, getting to spend time with the dogs allowed them to feel “exponentially better.” Several students explained that it was extremely calming to interact with the therapy dogs. They felt relieved and comforted after the experience. Lastly, students discussed how the therapy dog handlers were extremely sweet and friendly, which positively influenced their experience. The therapy dog committee observed that the students spent more time talking and connecting with the handlers throughout the second therapy dog event. This sense of connection, along with the soothing presence of the dogs could have helped reduce the students’ stress, and allowed them to feel comfortable communicating with the handler.

AAT continues to be a useful resource among college campuses. Students’ growing interest in therapy dogs have resulted in an increase in training programs and sessions on AAT. School administrators and educators understand the importance of implementing therapy dog programs in a school setting. Further research needs to be conducted, in order to validate the potential short and long term benefits of AAT, and whether the therapy dogs or empathetic handlers are responsible for easing the students’ stress of finals week.

CONCLUSION

Both of the therapy dog events brought smiles to the students’ faces. Many of the students who attended the first therapy dog event returned the following semester. Students found time in their busy schedules to patiently line up for 15 minutes to interact with the therapy dogs, which shows their interest in having a therapy dog program on campus. Getting the opportunity to interact with the therapy dogs provided the students with a feeling of comfort, joy, and relaxation. Students stated that “especially during finals week, this experience was a great stress reliever.” Some students even stated that “this experience made their day ten times brighter.” As a result, the students highly recommended having the dogs return to campus in the future. Iona College will continue to collaborate with the New York Therapy Animals Program, in order to help students de-stress during their exams. Future research will be conducted to examine the possible benefits of animal-assisted therapy in helping students adjust to college life, as well as encouraging communication and serving as empathic listeners.

REFERENCES


5. Anxiety and Depression Association of America, Mental Health and College Students https://adaa.org/finding-help/helping-others/college-students/facts (accessed August 2018)


ABOUT STUDENT AUTHOR
Sarah Brennan recently graduated from Iona College on May 19, 2018 with a bachelors’ degree in Speech-Language Pathology. Sarah is currently pursuing her masters’ degree.

PRESS SUMMARY
Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) continues to be implemented among colleges due to the growing demand from the students, and the positive research findings and theories. AAT is a complementary intervention that uses animals trained to be obedient, calm, and comforting, for therapeutic benefit across a broad range of medical conditions (Marcus et al., 2013, p. 43).¹ Research suggests that AAT shows improvements in human physical, social, emotional, and cognitive function (Macauley, 2006).³ AAT encourages communication, while providing acceptance, incentive, company, support, comfort, and assistance. At times college is challenging, stressful, and emotionally exhausting, which leaves students feeling stressed and anxious throughout their college experience. Students sometimes find it difficult to balance their classes, assignments, exams, work, and personal life all at once. Thus, the Department of Speech Communication Studies at Iona College formed a therapy dog committee, that worked together to bring therapy dogs to campus during finals week to help reduce students’ stress.