



Don't Stress, Get a Pet!
Stephanie Olin, Mckenzie Bryant, Carly Craig
Dean: Mary Bess Griffith, PhD, RN, FNP, CS, CNE
Faculty Advisor: Marcia Barnes, DNP, APRN, ACNP-BC



BACKGROUND/SIGNIFICANCE

According to Binfet et al. (2018) stress can increase students' feelings of anxiousness or depression, impair the ability to function, and can contribute to suicidal ideation. In 2018, the American College Health Association (ACHA) National College Health Assessment revealed that 31.9% of college students reported increased stress that affected their academic performance, 45.1% of students reported more than average stress, and 85.5% reported feeling overwhelmed by all they had to do in the last 12 months. Stress also has the effect of an overall lower well-being. Stress, if not handled and controlled, can progress into more serious mental illnesses like anxiety and depression. Stress also is known for its negative effects on physical health such as metabolic syndrome, obesity, reduced insulin sensitivity, and poor sleep (Pascoe et al., 2020). The human-animal bond is a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals which is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes, but is not limited to, emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, animals, and the environment (Jarolmen, & Patel, 2018). Exposure to a therapy dog is associated with an increase in sense of well-being and pleasure and is also found to be associated with greater decreases in endocrine and cardiovascular reactivity following stress exposure (Fiocco & Hunse, 2017).

PICO Question:

What is the effect of pet therapy among college students in relation to stress reduction?



RESULTS

In an experimental quantitative study conducted by the American College Health Association (2018), forty-four postsecondary institutions self-selected to participate in the Fall 2018 ACHA National College Health Assessment; 27,864 surveys were completed by campus students. The results found that 31.9% of college students reported increased stress that affected their academic performance. 45.1% of students reported more than average stress, and 85.5% reported feeling overwhelmed by all they had to academically.

Pascoe and colleagues (2019) studied the significance of effective stress-management skills among young people and how these skills provide opportunities to improve young people's academic stress-related coping abilities. A survey conducted by the OECD resulted in 66% of students reported feeling stressed about poor grades and 59% worried that taking a test would be difficult. In addition, 55% of students reported feeling very anxious about school testing, even when they were prepared. 37% of students reported feeling tense when studying, with girls consistently reporting greater anxiety relating to schoolwork. Binfet and colleagues (2018) proposed a visual analog scale over the course of three semesters including 1,960 undergraduate students (56.1% female, 28.9% male). This study examined the use of a weekly drop-in canine therapy program to reduce the stress levels in college students. The participants self-reported stress levels before and after the canine-therapy. A paired t-test analyzed stress levels and were significantly lower after the canine therapy (M 1/4 1.73, SD 1/4 1.45) compared to before (M 1/4 4.47, SD 1/4 2.91), t (1959) 1/4 71.19, p.001, d 1/4 1.61. Stress decreased an average of 2.74 points (SD 1/4 1.71, 95% CI [2.67, 2.82]) following the canine therapy intervention.

In a randomized control trial, Fiocco & Hunse (2017) assessed a sample of 61 university students (14 male and 47 female) to monitor the physiological stress response using electrodermal activity. This activity measured skin conductance levels when an individual is under stress. The study indicated that exposure to a therapy dog is associated with an increase in sense of well-being and pleasure and is also found to be associated with greater decreases in endocrine and cardiovascular reactivity following stress exposure.

Jarolmen & Patel (2018) conducted a correlational study to determine the relationship between the systolic and diastolic blood pressure levels among a group of college students between ages 18 and 39 before and after exposure to a therapy dog. The experimental group showed a significant (p=.003) decrease in both systolic and diastolic blood pressure. In contrast to the experimental group, the control group results found no significant decrease in blood pressure before and after exposure to a therapy dog (p=.317).

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

There is an increasing importance of nurses to find ways to improve patient care based on current evidence to manage stress using nonpharmacological approaches. Stress is a very common problem affecting college students. Providing current and best evidence for potential management modalities for stress is a primary nursing role. Nurses should encourage college students to consider the benefits of using pet therapy as effective management of stress. The nurse should always assess the level of stress, observe behaviors, and encourage awareness and foster the ability to recognize and express these feelings among young college aged patients.

CONCLUSIONS

Stress has a large impact on college-aged individuals associated with how they manage the stress and how it will impact their physical and emotional health. Without managing stress, college students will not perform to their full potential and achieve academic success. This review of the literature found that pet therapy can have tremendous outcomes in promoting the overall well-being and health of college individuals. The results of this literature review also showed that stress can increase students' feelings of anxiousness or depression, impair the ability to function, and can contribute to suicidal ideation (Binet et. al. 2018). There is a need for evidence-based nonpharmacological methods to manage stress. Guided by the utilization of the theory of stress, appraisal and coping, pet therapy is an evidence-based coping strategy to manage stress and promote an individual's quality of life and success.

METHODS

This review evaluated if there were beneficial effects in using pet therapy as a to reduce stress among college students. Key search terms used in examining this review included: pet therapy, stress reduction, college students, and academic performance. Databases used through the Cumberland University Vise Library included PubMed and CINAHL. For the proposed PICO question, five peer reviewed articles, all being written in English, as well as all being published within the last five years in peer reviewed journals were found to be appropriate to answer the proposed PICO.

Roming & Howard (2019) identified the middle-range theory of stress, appraisal, and coping founded by theorists Lazarus and Folkman and was used to guide this literature review. According to these two theorists, coping involves a proactive attempt to deal with stress despite the outcome. This can incorporate the use of pet therapy as an effective coping strategy for college students experiencing stress because it aims towards the goal of reducing stress and improving the quality of life for those affected.

REFERENCES

American College Health Association. American College Health Association (ACHA)-National College[MS1] Health Assessment(NCHA) II: Reference Group Executive Summary Fall 2018. Silver Spring, MD: American College Health Association; 2018.

Binfet, J., Passmore, H., Cebry, A., Struik, K. & McKay, C. (2018). Reducing university students' stress through a drop-in canine-therapy program. *Journal of Mental Health*, 27(3), 197-204.

Fiocco, A., & Hunse, A. (2017). The Buffer Effect of Therapy Dog Exposure on Stress Reactivity in Undergraduate Students. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 14(7), 707.

Jarolmen, J. & Patel, G. (2018). The effects of animal-assisted activities on college students before and after a final exam. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 13(3), 264-274

Pascoe, M. C., Hetrick, S. E. & Parker, A. G. (2019). The impact of stress on students in secondary school and higher education. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 25(1), 104-112, <https://doi.10.1080/02673843.2019.1596823>

Roming, S. & Howard, K. (2019). Coping with stress in college: an examination of spirituality, social support, and quality of life. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 22 (8), 832-843.