Canines on Campus: A Literature Review Exploring the Effect of Canine-Assisted Therapy on Student Stress at Canadian Universities

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Abstract

Background: Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is primarily founded on two theories: the biophilia hypothesis and the social support theory (O’Haire, 2010). The former proposes that an instinctual affiliation between humans and animals exists as a result of the historical reliance of humans on animals to increase survival probability (O’Haire, 2010). According to the theory, focusing on animals and their behaviours has a calming and relaxing effect on humans that relieves feelings of anxiety (O’Haire, 2010). The social support theory suggests that positive, unconditional love towards animals can be perceived as a social support variable (O’Haire, 2010).

Purpose: To identify factors that can maximize and prolong benefits to student mental health.

Methods: A systematic review of the literature was conducted using Scopus database. The keywords used included “animal-assisted therapy”, “student stress”, “wellbeing”, and “animal therapy”. Inclusion criteria: (1) English articles, (2) peer-reviewed articles, (3) publication date from 2010 onwards. Exclusion criteria: (1) articles that did not meet the exclusion criteria, (2) articles that did not report statistics, (3) articles that did not report stress levels. In total, 72 articles were identified.

Results: The effects of AAT were found to be significant. The study by Ward et al. (2016) showed a decrease in perceived stress levels, anxiety, and depression in students who participated in the AAT program. The study by O’Haire et al. (2017) showed a decrease in stress levels and an increase in positive affect among students who interacted with animals.

Conclusion: The results of this literature review suggest that canine-assisted therapy, in comparison with no intervention, reduces stress levels in Canadian university students. Further research is needed to identify factors that can maximize and prolong benefits to student mental health.

Keywords: Animal-assisted therapy, student stress, wellbeing, therapy dogs.

References


Figure 1: An illustration of the methodology used to locate articles for this literature review.