8-20-2013

Paws with a Purpose: Evidence Supporting the Use of Animal Assisted Therapy to Improve Quality of Life in Adults with Psychiatric Diagnoses

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Recommended Citation

Andraka, Julia; Brinser, Lacey; D’Ambrosio, Kelly; Justice, Jordan; and Rugen, Elizabeth, "Paws with a Purpose: Evidence Supporting the Use of Animal Assisted Therapy to Improve Quality of Life in Adults with Psychiatric Diagnoses" (2013). Collaborative Research and Evidence shared Among Therapists and Educators (CREATE Day). Paper 8.  
http://jdc.jefferson.edu/createday/8
Paws with a Purpose:
Evidence Supporting the Use of Animal-Assisted Therapy to Improve Quality of Life in Adults with Psychiatric Diagnoses

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Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Master of Science in Occupational Therapy degree at Thomas Jefferson University

Objectives of Presentation:
At the conclusion of this presentation, the audience will be able to:
1. Define Animal-Assisted Therapy and its role within the treatment of psychiatric diagnoses.
2. Identify three reasons why Animal-Assisted Therapy is relevant to Occupational Therapy practice.
3. Describe current evidence related to Animal-Assisted Therapy for clients with psychiatric diagnoses.
4. Discuss the future clinical implications of the findings for Occupational Therapy.
5. Propose future areas of research regarding the use of Animal-Assisted Therapy.

Clinical Question: Is Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) an effective intervention for increasing quality of life in adults with psychiatric diagnoses?

Methods:
- **Databases used**: CINAHL, Ovid MEDLINE, PsycINFO & Google Scholar
- **Search terms**:
  - Population: adult, geriatric, dementia, psychiatric diagnoses, mental illness, Alzheimer’s, depression, schizophrenia
  - Intervention: animal-assisted therapy/intervention/activity, pet therapy
  - Outcome: quality of life, social participation, health and wellness
- **Inclusion Criteria**: adults (18 years and older), published 1995-present, written in English, psychiatric diagnoses, peer reviewed, use of animal-assisted therapy, quality of life outcomes
- **Exclusion criteria**: hippotherapy, expert opinion without evidence from supported research, studies with outcome measures that only focus on behavioral changes
- 228 articles found in database search plus 6 additional articles from other sources. 216 articles excluded. Total of 13 articles included in final synthesis.

Results:
- Major themes identified in article synthesis were:
  - Overall quality of life (3 articles)
    - 1 study found an improvement in self-perceived quality of life, but the results were not significant (Moretti)
  - Social well-being (6 articles)
    - 5 studies found AAT resulted in a significantly positive increase in social well-being
    - Increased social interactions (Richeson, Barak), increased conversation skills (Virues-Ortega), and increased social contact with neighbors (Zimolag)
  - Physical/functional well-being (7 articles)
    - 1 study found a statistically significant increase in meaningful activities in the community (Zimolag)
    - 5 studies trended towards significance
  - Emotional well-being (7 articles)
    - 4 studies found AAT resulted in a statistically significant improvement in emotional well-being
    - Reduction of symptoms of depression and anxiety (Virues-Ortega, Moretti), increased feelings of self-efficacy (Berget), and improved psychological well-being as a result of enhanced community integration (Zimolag)
  - Improvement in behavioral and psychological symptoms of dementia (BPSD) (4 studies)
    - Increase in cooperation and a decrease in distortion/restlessness (Nordgren), and a decrease in observable agitation in individuals with dementia (Sellers, Richeson) including delusional concepts, aggressiveness, and agitation (Kanamori)
- **Take Home Message**: AAT appears to have the most significant positive effect on the social aspect of quality of life
  - OTs can use AAT to increase social participation of clients with psychiatric diagnoses
  - OTs can have patients work with animals in order to increase feelings of self-confidence and self-efficacy
  - Decrease in BPSD
    - OTs can implement AAT in order to decrease incidence of delusional ideation, agitation, aggression etc.

Implications for future research
- Test AAT as an Occupational Therapy treatment (eg. randomized controlled trials)
- Assess the effectiveness of AAT for individuals with dementia and the effect on BPSD
- Assess potential in robotic AAT, which may be more acceptable in hospital settings due to concern for germs etc.

Implications for Occupational Therapy
- Opportunity for the development of a standard Occupational Therapy protocol or treatment approach based upon specific outcomes (social participation, functional/physical performance (ADLs, IADLs), emotional well-being)
- Determine most appropriate outcome measures to assess results of AAT
  - In order to track progress, demonstrate effectiveness and predict outcomes
References (* Article included in systematic review)


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