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Animal Assisted Therapy and its Effect on Loneliness in Older Adults: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The number of Americans over the age of 65 is rapidly increasing. Loneliness and social isolation are common in this population. Research has shown that loneliness and social isolation can lead to adverse physical and mental conditions. Animal-assisted therapy uses human-animal interaction as a therapeutic intervention to provide mental, emotional, and physical benefits including decreased depression and anxiety, decreased loneliness, and increased socialization.

This project's aim was to explore older adults' perception of animal therapy sessions and its effects on loneliness. Participants engaged in an animal-assisted therapy session in a community-based senior center. Six participants volunteered to be interviewed. Participants identified 6 positive benefits of the therapy including the dog was not judgmental; the dog made them feel worthwhile; they could be their authentic self with the dog; the interaction with the dog was enjoyable and the dog showed warmth and love; the therapy sessions made them feel less anxious and happier; and encouraged them to leave their house and socialize. This project demonstrated that animal-assisted therapy has positive benefits for older adults including decreased anxiety, decreased loneliness, and increased socialization. These findings identified animal-assisted therapy as a successful intervention for loneliness in older adults.

Animal Assisted Therapy and its Effect on Loneliness in Older Adults: A Qualitative Study

Background

According to the 2020 United States Census Bureau, there were 55.8 million adults over the age of 65 (Caplan, 2023). This number is rapidly growing as the “baby-boomers” age. Loneliness and social isolation are common in this population. According to The National Institute of Health, the prevalence of social isolation in community-dwelling older adults can be up to 43% and up to 50% experience loneliness (Freedman & Nicolle, 2020). Research has shown strong evidence that loneliness and social isolation can lead to an increased risk of developing dementia, stroke, heart disease, hypertension, obesity, depression, anxiety, and premature death (CDC, 2021). Currently, there is a lack of effective interventions that address this issue.

Animal assisted therapy uses human-animal interaction as a therapeutic intervention to provide mental, emotional, and physical benefits. Studies have shown that AAT can decrease depression and anxiety, increase physical activity, and increase feelings of comfort, safety, as well as provide a greater sense of independence (Chang et al., 2021). Other studies showed that AAT also decreases loneliness, increases communication, and socialization (Hui Gan et al., 2020). In a systematic review, it was found that 57.4% of animal assisted therapy (AAT) studies used dogs as the therapy animal (Chang et al., 2021). Often animals can connect with individuals in a way that humans cannot.

Purpose of the Project

The significant health impacts of loneliness and the lack of effective interventions warrant further investigation; therefore, the aim of this project was to assess the older adult’s perception of animal therapy sessions and its effects on loneliness.

Method

The setting for this project was a Seattle based community center. Seven older adults volunteered to participate in the study. They each attended at least one 30-minute sessions in various activities with the dog such as petting, brushing their fur, throwing a ball or squeak toy. Interviews were conducted with the participants within one week of the sessions. Participants were asked what they thought were the positive effects of the AAT on loneliness. They were also asked to identify any negative aspects. Notes were taken during the interviews and transcribed. The responses were then read line-by-line and grouped into similar themes. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data (Saldana, 2021). The themes were reviewed with a qualitative nursing researcher and more themes were developed. Seven themes were elicited from the data.

Findings

Overall, the participants reported positive perceptions after engaging in the dog sessions. Thematic responses were divided into 2 major categories; positive benefits and adverse factors associated with dog therapy.

Most participants reported positive benefits from participating in the dog therapy sessions.

They described the positive benefits as:

- The dog is not judgmental, fully accepting the person
- You can be your authentic self with the dog
- Interaction with the dog is enjoyable, you are less anxious and happier
- Pet therapy encourages you to leave your house and socialize
- The dog makes you feel worthwhile
- The dog senses your emotions and show you warmth and love

The only reported negative aspect associated with dog therapy was that some people may have had a negative experience with dogs and were fearful of them.

Conclusion

Several positive themes were elicited from the data. For the participants in this study, dog therapy resulted in mental, emotional, physical support, and comfort for the participants. Given the prevalence of loneliness with older adults in the community and the increased risk of developing dementia, stroke, heart disease, hypertension, obesity, depression, anxiety, and premature death associated with loneliness, further exploration of the use of animal assisted dog therapy shows promise in reducing loneliness in this population. This project identifies the specific aspects of the dog-assisted AAT that reduced the participants' experience of loneliness. Implications for nursing practice include the awareness by nurses that non-pharmacologic interventions such as AAT are effective in achieving positive effects on an older adults' physical, emotional, and social well-being. Nurses may serve as advocates for AAT in older adults to increase the use of this therapeutic strategy for older adults.

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