

Animal and College Student Emotional Relationship: Path to Pet Therapy on Campus

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ABSTRACT

Many college students experience high levels of stress and/or homesickness in their first two years of college. When students experience this emotional state, they may begin to identify as someone who has anxiety and/or depression. Students who are new to the college environment often find relief in a form of familiarity. A family pet holds a permanent bond of perceived unconditional love and affection for their owners. The purpose of this study is to explore the emotional bond a new college student has with animals while away from home and to see if animal interaction while at college helps reduce stress and/or homesickness. This could ultimately help lower the number of college students who experience anxiety and/or depression. The methods used for this study were a) a randomized survey of 102 freshmen and sophomore college students at UW-Stout and b) a pet therapy session with those who indicated on the survey they would like to participate. The results showed 92% of freshmen and sophomore students with pets at home believe interaction with a pet would help reduce their stress levels and/or homesickness. However, even 50% of students with no family pet at home indicated that pet interaction would help lower stress and/or homesickness. The focus group sessions indicated having animal interaction would help the residents cope with stress. This research suggests pet therapy would be a beneficial addition to the Stout campus to help reduce the number of freshmen and sophomore students who are experiencing stress, homesickness, anxiety and/or depression.

Key Words: College Student, Animal, Pet Therapy, Stress, Homesickness, Anxiety, Depression.

BACKGROUND

College Students: Stress, Homesickness, Anxiety and Depression
Students who are beginning college are embarking on a new lifestyle that is different from what they have experienced previously. College is not just limited to the student's academics; there are multiple factors that go into determining a positive experience for each student (Cramer and Prentice-Dunn, 2007). For many college students, they are leaving what is

familiar and comfortable to them in exchange for a new environment with a different type of lifestyle and a new support system. For most this transition can be embraced and celebrated, but for those who struggle with it, homesickness and stress are often an outcome (Beck et al., 2002 and Urani et al., 2003). Homesickness includes having feelings of loneliness and emotional distress along with thoughts about home (Fisher, 1989.). These thoughts can make the student feel lonely, with the possible result of exhibiting symptoms of anxiety and/or depression (Eurelings-Bontekoe et al., 1996). If students who have anxiety and/or depression ignore their condition, it can lead to poor physical well-being (Rawson and Bloomer, 1994 and Hussain et al., 2013).

Human-Animal Relationship

The animal-human relationship can be described in many different forms, from the animal's place in a family to their place in the world; all people have a relationship with animals. Some literature even suggests that animals help bring out the humanity in people beginning during the childhood years (Menefee, 2008). When a person is a young child, animals tend to hold a strong yet different bond than adults' relationship with animals. Children often view animals as similar to themselves and assign to them a sense of personhood (Tipper, 2011). They will act as if their pets are a person in the family by treating them like a brother or sister. This concept fades as people age, but they carry with them this idea of personhood they have assigned to animals as children. For people who grow up having pets in their family, pets become familiar figures which provide them with a feeling of comfort, and a sense of attachment. This demonstrates what we would predict with attachment theory since the person is provided with a sense of security by their pet (Connors, 2011). People also see this in those who have assistance animals for a physical disability.

Assistance and Companion Animals

Many people who own assistance dogs depend greatly on these animals (Kwong and Bartholomew, 2010). People who have mental disabilities also experience this form of attachment, although their animals are not considered assistant animals but rather companion animals. Companion animals' purpose is to aid people's physiological health needs by promoting the reduction of stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness through interaction with their owner. Many nursing homes and veteran homes use companion animals to help those residents who are mentally unstable (Le Roux and Kemp, 2009 and Yount et al., 2012).

Pets at Work and on Campus

Traditionally people with physical disabilities are the only people allowed to have animals in prohibited areas of a society such as stores, schools, and special events. In recent years however, the benefits of pet interaction have been recognized as beneficial for communities, and it is slowly being integrated as a societal norm. There are a variety of workplaces allowing pet owners to bring their animals to work in order to help them and their co-workers cope with daily stress (Wells and Perrine, 2001). The simple engagement with an animal can help lower one's blood pressure leading to initial stress relief (Somervill, et al., 2008). However, it is not just the workplace that has been extending its welcome to pets; colleges have begun to allow companion animals on campus in many different forms. A select few campuses are allowing students to bring their pet with them to college because they recognize that pets reduce homesickness (Steinberg, 2010). Campuses are starting to have pet therapy, which allows for a nontraditional coping mechanism for students (Adamle, et al., 2009). Participating campuses have reacted positively to the idea of having animals around to help their college students' apprehensions towards college. People on campus who interact and see therapy animals find the environment more comfortable and friendly (Wells and Perrine, 2001), which in the end could lead to a happier campus population. The purpose of this study is to explore the emotional relationship a new college student has with animals while away from home and to see if animal interaction while at college helps reduce stress and/or homesickness.

METHODS

Survey

This research involved Institutional Review Board approved quantitative and qualitative research methods. In order to better understand students' transition from home to college, I surveyed 718 freshmen and sophomore students from the University of Wisconsin-Stout. I surveyed freshmen and sophomores because they are the newest additions to campus, but also they are required to live in the dorms. The questions asked on the survey covered multiple demographics of the student's life. The students were asked to identify their academic year, how far they lived from home, number of roommates, and the type of housing they live in (some students are exempt from living policy, which allows them to live off of campus, meaning they have the opportunity to house a pet. The survey then asked the students if they have a pet at their family home. Students that answered "yes" then took a different survey than those who

answered "no." The "yes" survey asked the students to identify what type

of pet(s) their family has and age of the pet. Then they were asked to identify how the pet(s) impact their mood on a daily basis, how much they miss and/or think about their pet(s), and then given several scenarios about their pet(s). Students were asked if they also thought it would be a good idea to bring their pets to college with them. Other than those questions about the students family pet(s), the rest of the two surveys were the same. Students were asked to select an emotion to describe each of two photos and why they chose it (see figure A).

Figure A



The photos both were selected to bring out the positive association between an animal and a human. The rest of the survey questions were focused on the student's stress level and what they do to reduce their stress, homesickness level, and whether they self-identify as having anxiety and/or depression. The final section asked the students if they believe interaction with a pet would reduce their stress, homesickness, anxiety and/or depression and to provide their email if they would like to try pet therapy in a focus group setting.

Focus Group

The students who indicated they would like to participate in a focus group were then contacted by email to select one of the three offered sessions. Sessions were held on campus in a small room creating a more intimate setting in hopes of making the students feel more comfortable. Upon arrival, students entered the building and went over the consent form before being exposed to the dog used for the sessions. After all students had arrived and agreed to the terms on the form, they were taken to the room to meet Rocko. Rocko is my family dog from home and has no companion dog training. However, Rocko is an extremely obedient dog with a strong desire for attention from any and all humans. After the

initial encounter with Rocko, students were asked to sit in a semi-circle allowing Rocko to have access to everyone in the room. Each student was given a treat to give to Rocko when directed to in order to regain his attention and to help even out Rocko's time with each student. The participants were asked a series of questions aimed at better understanding how college has been for them so far. The questions included: What has the transition from home to college been like for you (i.e. emotional/physical state, relationships, daily routine)?, How has your stress level been while at college (i.e. social life, academics, overall well-being)?, Do you believe pet therapy (or something like it) would be useful at Stout (i.e. why/why not, types of animals that would help and where on campus)? While students answered the questions and interacted with Rocko, I took notes on their behaviors and overall reactions to the situation. Sessions lasted approximately 15-20 minutes and then students were allowed to leave or stay and continue interaction with Rocko until they felt satisfied.

RESULTS

Survey of 102 students responded to the questionnaire (14% response rate), including 59% freshmen, 33% sophomores and 8% transfer students that were considered a freshmen or sophomore academically. Out of all the responses, 84% have a family pet at home, leaving 16% that do not. Of the 84% with pets, 92% believe that interaction with a pet would help lower their stress, homesickness, anxiety and/or depression. Of the students who do not have pets at home, results were split 50/50 whether or not interaction would help them with lowering their stress, homesickness, anxiety and/or depression.

This indicates that a large percentage of students believe interaction with animals would help them through the changes they are experiencing during the transitions from home to college. For those students with family pets, 91% indicated that their pets have a positive impact on their mood. These students also indicated high levels of missing their pets (Figure B). When asked if they could have their pet on campus, how would it make them feel, students answered with a generally positive response (Figure C).

FIGURE B

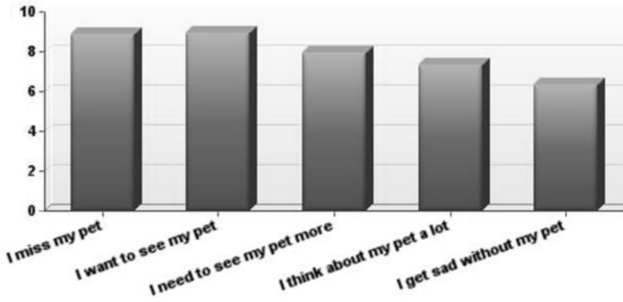
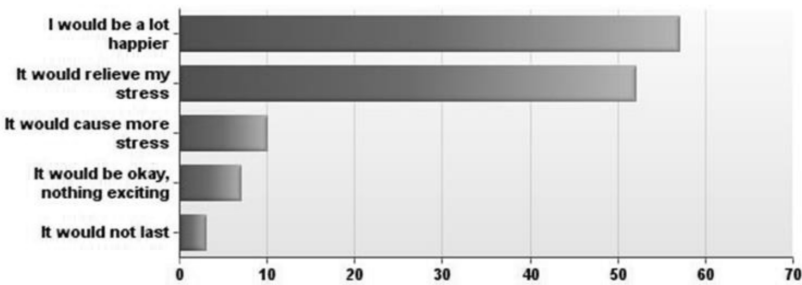


FIGURE C



Overall, when asked to describe the image of the young boy and the puppy, students selected loving, feel-good and relaxed. When asked to explain why they identified the image as the selected emotion, responses were generally the same. Some examples of student's responses are:

"I chose relaxed because I am always relaxed and cozy when I snuggle up with my dog."

"I chose loving because the characters in the picture clearly have a strong loving and trusting relationship."

"Because it shows just how much the little child and the dog really care for and trust each other, they both are relaxed and love each other a lot and from that they can fall asleep together in comfort and ease."

"The dog is so cute and often my dog likes to cuddle with me as well, he also misses me."

"Because I have been in the exact position with my pets. It's a special loving bond that you share with them."

When asked to describe the image of the man and his assistance dog, most selected loving and feel-good, but a few selected upsetting, stressed and sad. The negative selections were justified as either: sympathizing with the human, because he is in need of assistance or sympathizing with the dog by assigning it subconsciously with personhood and assuming its feelings. Descriptions included responses like the following: *"The dog and the human looked like they had a hard time, and were overcoming it together."*

"My dog could read my emotions and knew exactly how to react to make me feel better."

"It shows the strong bond that these two share without any words and you can tell they both understand whatever is happening at that time in a shared emotion."

"No matter what happens, your pet will always be there for you."

When asked to rate their level of stress and homesickness, results overall were constant with no real outlier. This could be because the survey took place over the beginning of second semester, so this was a time that students had just been home along with a lighter academic load (unlike what it would be around finals). However, stress levels were a bit higher than homesickness or no clear reason. Of those who completed the survey, 54% identified as having a mental illness (anxiety and/or depression). Out of the 102 responses, 20 students indicated they wanted to try a pet therapy session.

Focus Group

Out of the 20 students who signed up for a pet therapy session, 15 attended the focus group. Session one was held the week before spring break and had a total of 7 students, 5 females and 2 males. Students were asked the first question about how their transition to college has been. Most agreed it had been hard at first, but as they started to develop friendships, it has become easier. However, those who had family pets told me the hardest part has been being away from their pets and lacking the secure perceived unconditional love around anymore. I asked the group if they missed their family members or their pets more and those

with pets agreed they missed their pets more. When students were asked about their stress levels, they all agreed that they are relatively high due to the exams that were taking place at the time.

"The school work's not so bad, the exams are what get me."

"I feel the same. With exams coming up, I am really feeling the stress."

I then investigated if these students would feel less stressed if they were studying somewhere that had access to an animal. Most liked the idea, but some thought it might be distracting unless they knew what times the animal would be there so they could plan accordingly. I then asked what is it about having an animal around that they think would help them through their college stress. Students agreed that it is something they grew up loving and the animals have a sense of unconditional love:

"It is the physical contact of having a dog around. It's like when you get a hug and there is a release of endorphins."

"Because a dog will still love you even if you get an F on an exam."

After ending session one, students continued to stay engaged with Rocko in a more direct way. Most stayed an additional 5 minutes rubbing and "talking" to the subject animal. However, a group of 3 females stayed an additional 15 minutes just to interact with Rocko on a more personal level. As every student left, they each said "goodbye" out loud to Rocko as if he was a new friend.

Session two had a total of 5 students, 3 female and 2 male. It took place right after spring break when a lot of the students had just gone home to see their families and pets. Out of all three sessions, this session had the most emotionally unstable students. 3 out of the 5 identified as having anxiety and depression from being away from home and other life events. These 3 ended up being Rocko's "favorites" and would spend the most time near them as if he knew they needed to be comforted. The body language of those 3 was very withdrawn at first towards me, but not at all to Rocko. As soon as they saw Rocko, their faces lit up and they started to open up more. As Rocko made his way around the room, all eyes were on him in hopes he would pick them next to get attention from him. As we began our discussion, the students were very open and did not

hold much back. It was as if the presence of the animal being in the room with them made them feel comfortable enough to open up to me. This is a significant finding and could lead possibly to a new form of counseling at UW-Stout. The 2 students who did not identify as having anxiety and depression had little to say and just were interested in interacting with Rocko because they missed their family pets. When asked how the transition has been, students identified it as being difficult and almost as if it was like entering a new world. One of the females indicated she had transferred to Stout and it had been more difficult to adjust here than at her first school.

"See my first year in the community college dorms- actually apartments- weren't too bad because, I knew a lot of people there and it was a separate apartment. But when I came here, I was really anxious. I was nervous because it is a bigger area with more people. I am not very good around people, and I tend to feel very socially awkward. I deal with depression and it has been really difficult. And here I can't have my pets. And the old place I at least had my rats, which was some form of companionship, but here I don't have that. It's difficult, especially not getting to see them very often. The most I hear about my pets is when my mom takes care of kittens and I can hear them meowing in the background on the phone."

A male who identified as having anxiety and depression also said the transition was hard, even though he had made friends and started to form a new support system.

"The first few weeks, even if I was having fun with my dorm floor [friends], I just always had in the back of my mind that I can't go home and I have to sleep in this foreign bed and place I am not comfortable in."

This response suggests the student was experiencing difficulties when he first arrived on campus. He informed me he was looking for some type of relief other than his new friends. He wanted to have a form of familiarity that would be there to unconditional except him and serve as companion. I then moved on to asking them if having pet therapy would help them with their homesickness, especially in the beginning of their first semester. Everyone completely agreed and one female even suggested having a "dorm dog" that could sit at the front desk throughout the week so students could come see it as they please. As the session began to end, the students once again had a hard time leaving. They all genuinely looked sad as they petted Rocko for the final time before exiting. Students stayed an additional 8 minutes after the session ended and once

again everyone said "goodbye" to Rocko.

The final session took place a day after and had a total of 3 students, all female. The students in this session mostly identified as having high stress levels in relation to their academic studies. All 3 have pet dogs at home and were very interactive with Rocko. Since this was Rocko's third session, he started to understand what he was supposed to do. He was the most comfortable with this group and he exhibited a strong connection with one of the students by lying on her feet for approximately 5 minutes. The female was so happy to have his full attention that she would not stop petting him and even massaged him with her feet. When asked about the transition from home to college, the students all agreed that was not the stressful issue; the transition from high school to college was harder. Nevertheless, the females have been able to cope with the transition with the other people on their dorm floors whom they have befriended. I then moved on to the bigger question and asked the females what they thought about pet therapy on the UW-Stout campus. All of them agreed it would be a great addition, and they thought it would be used by a large number of people.

"You can't not smile when [dogs] want to be near you and it would be a wonderful addition to campus."

As I wrapped up our session, the females gave me insight about where the university could house pet therapy. One suggested that it would be most beneficial to have it in a room in the library because that is where students go when they have the most critical assignments to do.

Overall, the focus group sessions had a significant role in my research and I was able to gain the most feedback from the students who could attend the sessions. The students input gave me better insight and perspective on what they are going through during their first couple years of college. I was able to conclude that, overall, pet therapy would appeal to a variety of students for diverse reasons including a form of comfort, companionship, and as an aid to help with homesickness, stress, anxiety, and/or depression.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

My research demonstrated many significant aspects of the human-animal relationship amongst college students and the desire for companion animals. I learned there is a wide range of students interested in pet therapy at UW-Stout for a variety of reasons. Some students are looking for the comfort animals offer on a more basic level of companionship. Others are

seeking the attention to help them cope with greater issues such as stress, homesickness, anxiety, and/or depression. Whatever the motive may be for seeking the interaction with animals for the students, they all agree that the University of Wisconsin-Stout should take the step to become more animal-friendly by having pet therapy offered to its students on a regular basis.

The concept of having a "dorm dog" could also be a great benefit to the students living on campus. If UW-Stout were to have a companion dog come to the dorms once a week for a certain number of hours in an assigned area such as the main entrance, students could come see the dog as they wish, giving them that extra boost of comfort and relief. Having the dog at an assigned area will allow for those students who wish not to engage with the dog a chance to use a different entrance, therefore avoiding contact if desired. The dogs used for this could be dogs that are pet therapy-certified, which means that they need to maintain a certain number of field work hours per month to keep up with their certification. For example, of emBark, a dog obedience school in Eau Claire, is interested in bringing pet therapy dogs to serve as "dorm dogs" on the UW-Stout campus.

Another idea proposed by the students is to have a room in the library dedicated to pet interaction. This idea could work if the companion animal was there a set few hours a week, allowing for the dog to not be trapped in a room all day. Students once again could come and go as they please throughout the available hours, and they do not have to participate if they so choose.

Further Inquiry

There is still more to be done on the UW-Stout campus in order to make pet therapy sessions offered on a regular basis. However, starting in the fall of 2014, students who can provide the correct paper work indicating that they have a mental disability and need a companion animal for emotional support, will be allowed to have them live in the dorms with them. After meeting with UW-Stout housing staff members, I also learned they are very accepting of the idea of having pet therapy available for students on campus, but they do not have anyone to advocate for the policy to allow animals in the campus buildings being most buildings do not allow animals currently. I also learned the campus will have to do further investigation on what types of animals and/or breeds of dogs to use since not all animals are cut out to be companion animals (Ley and Bennett, 2007). There still needs to be more input from students and more focus groups to get the most effective data. The sessions also should aim to get a higher male population to attend since most of the participants for this

study were females. I also would like to do a similar study to this research, but with those that do live off campus and have the opportunity to or already own a pet. My findings suggest that if colleges and universities continue to expand these programs, they will be likely to improve outcomes for students by reducing stress and anxiety, homesickness, and depression. Not only would this benefit students, but it could potentially directly benefit the university by increasing retention and graduation rates among students.

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