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Animal-Assisted Therapy for Military Veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: An Investigation on the Positive Effects of Attachment and Affiliation Behaviors



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Definitions

- Animal-Assisted Therapy or AAT is the use of trained animals to help an individual reach his/her therapeutic goals
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD is a mental health condition cause by experiencing a traumatic event

Introduction

- PTSD is a chronic disorder and is associated with impaired quality of life
- PTSD develops in people who have experienced a traumatic event.
- Symptoms associated with PTSD include re-experiencing feelings related to traumatic event, avoidance of specific places and/or people associated with the event, and hyper arousal
- Other Symptoms include social isolation, depression, fear, anxiety, and irritability
- A specific population at high risk for developing PTSD is military veterans
- AAT has been shown to promote relaxation, calmness, and optimism
- In psychiatric patients, AAT has been shown to decrease fear and anxiety

Problem Statement

- Over half a million military veterans suffer from PTSD
- 24% who return home from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from PTSD
- Many do not seek help because of negative stigma associated with mental illness
- Veterans with PTSD often isolate themselves, leading to loneliness, depression, and worsening symptoms of PTSD
- Recently, efforts have been made to implement veteran friendly treatment to reduce barriers to treatment

Theoretical Framework

- Martha Rogers: Science of Unitary Human Beings
- Humans and the surrounding environment is a continuous energy field
- Energy field is created between an individual and the animal
- The animal and individual exchange energy by gaze, which increase neurochemicals resulting in attachment behaviors, creating a special bond

Statement of Purpose

The aim of this study is to explore the benefits of animal-assisted therapy for military veterans with documented PTSD and investigate the positive effects of attachment and affiliation behaviors.



Proposed Methods

- Descriptive quantitative research study design, using surveys
- Population will be military veterans with documented PTSD
- Sample size will be 120 people based on the need for 15 participants per independent and dependent variables
- Sampling technique will be a probability, randomized sampling of patient's who respond to a discussion concerning the benefits of having a dog during psychotherapy.
- The details of this study will be explained. Posting information packets on the units about the study around the SFVA, and giving copies to therapists for their reference, will both be implemented to obtain a final sample size.
- Instruments: Please see instruments handout
- Procedures: Please see procedures handout

Literature Review

Quality of Life

- AAT increased veterans sociability, reduced feelings of isolation, and improved trust in others (Lanning & Krenek, 2013)
- AAT improved veterans general health, increased in energy levels, and decreased interference of emotional health (Lanning & Krenek, 2013)
- AAT created feelings of calmness and showed improvements in work performance (Beck et al., 2012)

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

- AAT improved the severity of PTSD symptoms (Earles et al., 2015) (Hamama et al., 2011) (Stern et al., 2013)
- Veterans reported having a canine improved stress levels, irritability, anger, and loneliness (Stern et al., 2013)

Attachment and Affiliation Behaviors

- After the human-canine interaction, neurochemicals in both humans and canines increased (Odendaal & Meintjes, 2003)
 - Both had an increase in B-endorphin, oxytocin, B-phenylethylamine, and dopamine (Odendaal & Meintjes, 2003)
 - Humans also had an increase in prolactin and a decrease in cortisol, suggesting a reduction in stress (Odendaal & Meintjes, 2003)
- Human-canine relationship is a special bond, which cannot be recreated in human relationships (Maharaj & Haney, 2015)

Depression

- AAT improved depressive symptoms (Penderson et al., 2012) (Barker et al., 2003)

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References and Contact Information

References are available upon request

Photos downloaded from googleimages.com

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