Effects of Emotional Support Animals on Adults with Depression and/or Anxiety

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INTRODUCTION

Although mental health disorders and their clinical manifestations are largely controlled by medication, non-pharmacological therapies are often used in cohesion. Emotional support animals (ESAs) offer a more holistic approach to symptom management and provide companionship to those suffering from symptoms of anxiety and depression. ESAs are protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act and can be any type of pet that provides comfort to an individual.

PICOT QUESTION

In adults diagnosed with anxiety and depression (P), what effects do emotional support animals (I) have on symptoms (C) compared to individuals (O) without emotional support animals (O)?

SEARCH OF DATABASES

- Databases: CINAHL and EBSCO
- Keywords: support animal, mental health, symptom management, anxiety, depression
- Inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed, evidenced-based articles, published from 2018-2023
- Exclusion criteria: articles containing other mental health disorders, participants aged under 18, service animals
- 12 articles were then chosen to be reviewed

BENEFITS OF ESA

- Decreased levels of cortisol
- Higher perceived well-being
- Increased empathy
- Improvement in blood pressure control
- Reduction in heart rate
- Decrease in immunoglobulin A level
- Overall reduction in anxiety and depression symptoms
- Gives individual a sense of purpose and companionship
- Encourage positive social interaction

BARRIERS TO ESA

- Difficulty caring for an ESA related to disabilities
- Limited resources due to socioeconomic status
- Unclear laws and regulations regarding housing waivers
- Animal restrictions in public environments often allow protections for service animals, but not ESAs
- Limited regulations on HCP involvement may lead patient to select ESA not suited to their specific treatment needs
- Difficulties accommodating ESAs in the workplace
- Limited use in long-term care facilities or assisted living

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

- Social isolation and pandemic-related anxieties caused stress levels to rapidly increase
- ESA involvement encourages interaction, engagement and play
- ESA during quarantine and isolation offers a strong companionship and lessens sense of loneliness
- Healthcare providers (HCP) should consider in assessments through telehealth

HCP INVOLVEMENT

- HCP involvement in ESA selection and continuity of care correlates with better outcomes for patient and animal
- Allows for the ESA selected to be clinically relevant to each patient’s case and treatment plan
- HCP need to have appropriate skills and knowledge regarding ESAs and animal assisted interventions (AAIs) to appropriately evaluate the efficacy of an ESA within a treatment plan

CONCLUSION

- There is limited research on the direct effect of ESAs and that considers well being of the animal
- Combining literature on ESAs and AAIs shows ESAs are a viable therapeutic intervention
- Further research is needed utilizing larger pool of participants to direct the use of and regulations on ESAs

REFERENCES