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Dogs - our best friends when it comes to mental health therapy

Dogs may be a better 'therapist' for young people when they are part of a psychotherapy session rather than a waiting-room companion, researchers at Orygen, the National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental health, have found.

A study by Melanie Jones, Dr Simon Rice and Professor Sue Cotton found that integrating a dog into the psychotherapy process may help reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety in young people aged 10-19. It may also decrease interpersonal issues in young people with autism and increase a young person's ability to connect and talk with the therapist about their mental health.

Published in the journal PLOS One, the study is the first literature review to focus on young people and the mental health benefits of formally integrating dogs into therapy sessions versus the benefit of using them in more informal settings, such as doctors' waiting rooms, schools or 'dog spaces.'

The study is also part of a larger research program by psychologist and PhD researcher Ms Jones to develop an evidence-based, canine-assisted therapy that can be standardised, taught and accredited like other mental-health practices.

Professor Cotton, Orygen's head of health services and outcomes research, said the growing use of dogs in Australian mental health settings had increased the need to differentiate informal activities involving dogs from the more formal, professional-directed Canine Assisted Psychotherapy. There was also an increased need to develop standards for this therapy, she said.

"This study has helped create a better consensus about what different interventions look like and a greater understanding that having a dog in a waiting room or visiting is not the same — or as potentially beneficial — as having a dog that's participating in a therapy session," Professor Cotton said.

"In the wider community, there are also a lot of people offering dog-assisted therapy interventions and using the terminology, but they may not necessarily be medically trained or trained in the appropriate discipline, such as psychology," she said.

The systematic review analysed seven studies that used Canine-Assisted Psychotherapy for young people aged 10-19 years. The review identified the different types of therapy activities; the underlying psychological theories; the role of dogs and facilitators in treatment; the impact on symptoms, patient wellbeing and therapeutic relationship; and how well the young people accepted this type of therapy.

Professor Cotton said the research review was an important first step in assessing the current evidence for Canine-Assisted Psychotherapy and improving this evidence so that the therapy could be offered to young people, who often struggle with stigma around mental illness and engaging with treatment.

"Adolescence is the period where the most common forms of mental illness develop, and engagement can be often very difficult during the early stages of mental health problems. So looking at other ways to supplement standard treatments can be helpful, and using animals can be one way to encourage young people to participate in therapy," she said.

"There are indications that Canine-Assisted Psychotherapy can actually be beneficial to young people. However, we need larger research studies with improved methodologies in order to get a better understanding



of the benefits of using canines in therapy."

Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health was first established on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respect to their Elders, past and present, and to all the traditional custodians of land throughout Australia.
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