Daša Grajfoner[1]

Exploring the Psychological Impact of Dog-Assisted Visitation Programs on University Students' Mental Health and Well-Being: A Qualitative Analysis from Multiple Perspectives

Raziskovanje psihološkega vpliva intervencij s pomočjo terapevtskih psov na duševno zdravje in dobro počutje študentov: kvalitativna analiza

Abstract

This study explores the effects of dog-assisted visitation programs on university students' mental health, incorporating the perspectives of students, dog handlers, and therapists. With rising levels of stress and anxiety among students, there is increasing interest in alternative support options such as animal-assisted interventions (AAIs). While prior research has shown that interacting with therapy animals can lower cortisol, improve mood, and foster social connection, further insight is needed into the mechanisms behind these effects and the ethical considerations of using therapy animals on campuses. Using a qualitative method, this study conducted focus groups with student participants and dog handlers who are also therapists. Thematic analysis revealed that dog-assisted interventions reduce stress, promote relaxation, and offer emotional comfort—particularly for socially isolated or academically distressed students. These interactions were seen as a valuable supplement to traditional mental health services, providing non-judgmental support distinct from human interactions.

Therapists and handlers emphasized the importance of therapy dog welfare, sustainable program design, and matching dogs to student needs. They noted that student preferences varied—some benefited from energetic dogs, while others preferred calm, passive ones—highlighting the need to personalize programs.

1 Dr. Daša Grajfoner, Associate professor of psychology, DOBA Business School, D@Grajfoner.com
Izr. prof. dr. Daša Grajfoner, Izredna profesorica za psihologijo, DOBA Fakulteta, D@Grajfoner.com

The study aligns with existing research on the psychological benefits of human-animal interaction, such as decreased anxiety and loneliness, and increased oxytocin and serotonin levels. It also underscores ethical considerations, including proper training, animal well-being, and the long-term viability of such programs. By capturing both student and handler experiences, the study highlights the multifaceted value of dog-assisted programs in higher education. It calls for future research on long-term impacts and individualized therapy approaches, taking into account personal factors such as pet ownership history and attachment styles. These findings support the thoughtful integration of dog-assisted interventions as a complement to campus mental health services.

Key words: Animal-assisted interventions, dog-assisted visitation programmes, university students, mental health, wellbeing, qualitative study, therapy dogs

Povzetek

Študija raziskuje učinke intervencij s pomočjo psov na duševno zdravje univerzitetnih študentov ter vključuje stališča študentov, vodnikov psov in terapevtov. Zaradi naraščajoče ravni stresa in tesnobe med študenti narašča tudi zanimanje za alternativne oblike podpore, kot so intervencije s pomočjo živali (AAI). Čeprav so predhodne raziskave pokazale, da lahko interakcija s terapevtskimi živalmi zniža raven kortizola, izboljša razpoloženje in spodbuja socialno povezanost, ostajajo mehanizmi teh učinkov ter etični vidiki uporabe terapevtskih živali v visokošolskem okolju še vedno premalo raziskani. V okviru raziskave smo izvedli fokusne skupine s študenti, vodniki psov in terapevti. Tematska analiza je pokazala, da intervencije s pomočjo psov zmanjšujejo stres, spodbujajo sprostitev in nudijo čustveno oporo, zlasti socialno izoliranim ali akademsko ogroženim študentom. Udeleženci so te interakcije doživljali kot dragoceno dopolnilo tradicionalnim storitvam za duševno zdravje, saj nudijo podporo brez občutka obsojanja, ki je pogosto prisoten pri medčloveških stikih. Terapevti in vodniki so izpostavili pomen dobrega počutja terapevtskih psov, trajnostne zasnove programa ter prilagajanja psov potrebam študentov. Opozorili so, da se želje študentov razlikujejo – nekaterim bolj ustrezajo energični psi, drugim pa mirni in pasivni –, kar poudarja potrebo po individualizaciji intervencij in programov obiskov. Študija se ujema z obstoječimi raziskavami o psiholoških koristih interakcije med ljudmi in živalmi, kot so zmanjševanje tesnobe in osamljenosti ter povečanje ravni oksitocina in serotonina. Obenem opozarja na pomembnost etičnih vidikov, vključno z ustreznim usposabljanjem, dobrobitjo živali in dolgoročno izvedljivostjo tovrstnih programov. Z vključevanjem izkušenj tako študentov kot tudi terapevtov in vodnikov psov študija poudarja večplastno vrednost intervencij s pomočjo psov v visokošolskem prostoru. Obenem poziva

k nadaljnjim raziskavam dolgoročnih učinkov in individualiziranih pristopov k terapiji. Ugotovitve podpirajo premišljeno vključevanje tovrstnih intervencij kot dopolnila obstoječim storitvam za duševno zdravje v izobraževalnem okolju.

Ključne besede: intervencije s pomočjo živali, študenti, duševno zdravje, dobro počutje, kvalitativna študija, terapevtski psi

1. Introduction

The human-animal bond is often explained through various theoretical lenses, including the Biophilia Hypothesis and Social Support Theory. The Biophilia Hypothesis (Wilson, 1993) suggests that humans have an innate affinity for other living beings, rooted in evolutionary history when attentiveness to animals was essential for survival (Beck & Katcher, 2003; Herzog, 2010). This natural predisposition toward animals may explain why interactions with dogs can evoke a range of emotions and contribute to psychological well-being. Complementing this perspective, the Social Support Theory (Friedmann & Thomas, 1995) posits that animals can serve as a source of companionship, buffering against social isolation and loneliness (Uchino et al., 1996).

Despite the prevalence of animals in everyday life, whether through direct companionship or symbolic representation in media and culture, few studies have thoroughly examined the subjective experiences and perceived benefits of such interactions (Beck & Katcher, 2003). Animals, particularly dogs, have been recognized for their potential to facilitate social interaction, provide emotional support, and enhance overall well-being (Hunt et al., 1992). Although early studies in this area had small sample sizes, there is growing empirical support for the benefits of animal-assisted therapy (Barlow et al., 2012; Wesley et al., 2009) that has demonstrated that interactions with therapy animals can lead to reductions in stress, anxiety, and feelings of loneliness, while also improving overall life satisfaction (Crawford et al., 2006). Research into human-animal interaction has also highlighted the impact of pet ownership on well-being. McConnell et al. (2011) found that pet owners exhibited higher self-esteem, increased physical activity, and reduced feelings of loneliness compared to non-pet owners. Similarly, Serpell (1991) observed significant health improvements in individuals who acquired a pet, particularly a dog, over a ten-month period. These findings suggest that pet ownership contributes to both psychological and physiological benefits.

AAIs encompass a broad spectrum of interactions involving animals to promote psychological health and well-being. Among these interventions, therapy dog programs have been widely implemented in university settings

as a means of stress relief and mental health support. In addition to observed psychological benefits, physiological benefits have also been noted during AAI, including reduced cortisol levels and increased oxytocin production, which are associated with decreased stress and improved emotional states (Crossman et al., 2020; Kahn, 1997; Gullone, 2000).

Recent studies indicate that engaging with therapy dogs can serve as a form of distraction from academic stressors, allowing students to momentarily shift their focus away from worries and experience a state of relaxation (Pendry et al., 2018). This attentional shift contributes to improved cognitive performance and emotional resilience, further supporting the mental well-being of students (Kamioka et al., 2014).

A growing body of most revent lierature also considers ethical and practical aspects related to welfare of therapy dogs. While they are trained to interact with humans in a therapeutic capacity, their welfare is has increasingly become a subject of investigation to prevent undue stress or fatique (Binfet et al., 2018). Evidence suggests that the sustainability of therapy dog programs depends on the implementation of structured, time-limited sessions that include sufficient rest periods (Ng et al., 2021).

1.1. Student mental health and Animal assisted interventions

The transition to university life is often associated with significant psychological and emotional challenges. Students face increased academic pressure, financial burdens, social adjustments, and personal responsibilities, all of which contribute to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (McIntyre et al., 2021). According to recent surveys, up to 60% of university students report symptoms of anxiety or depression, highlighting a growing mental health crisis in higher education institutions in the USA (Eisenberg et al., 2022) and Europe (Rückert, 2015). These mental health challenges can negatively impact academic performance, social relationships, and overall well-being (Hillen, 2020). In response to these concerns, universities are increasingly adopting innovative interventions to support student well-being (Carr & Pendry, 2024). Among these, animal-assisted interventions (AAIs), particularly dog-assisted visitation programs, have gained prominence as an accessible and effective method for alleviating psychological distress (Grajfoner et al., 2017; Pendry & Vanda Studies focusing on dog-assisted interventions for university students have shown promising results. Dalrty and Mehr (2015) found that students rated therapy dog sessions highly in terms of stress relief, with 79% of participants giving the highest possible rating for effectiveness. Similarly, Buttelmann and Römpke (2014) demonstrated that students who interacted with a dog before

a public-speaking task exhibited significantly lower anxiety levels than those in control conditions. These findings underscore the potential benefits of therapy dog programs in academic settings. The mechanisms through which dog-assisted visitation programs impact mental health are multifaceted. One key factor is the ability of therapy dogs to provide unconditional social support, which fosters feelings of comfort and security (Barker et al., 2016). Studies suggest that interactions with therapy dogs also trigger physiological changes such as reduced blood pressure and heart rate, contributing to overall relaxation and emotional regulation (Grajfoner et al., 2017). Furthermore, the presence of therapy animals has been shown to facilitate social interactions, encouraging students to engage with peers and reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation (Jones et al., 2019). Other psychological benefits of AAIs include decreased perceived stress, improved mood, and enhanced social support, making them particularly valuable for university students experiencing academic pressures (Binfet & Passmore, 2021). A systematic review by Hoy-Gerlach et al. (2022) found that structured therapy dog sessions significantly improved students' emotional resilience and coping strategies during academic stressors. Similarly, McDonald et al. (2020) demonstrated that students who participated in therapy dog programs exhibited lower levels of exam-related anxiety compared to their peers who did not engage in such interventions. These findings underscore the potential of AAIs to serve as a viable complement to traditional mental health services, offering immediate and non-stigmatizing support to students. While AAIs have demonstrated efficacy in reducing student stress and increase mental health and wellbeing, they should not be viewed as a substitute for professional mental health services. Instead, they should be integrated as part of a broader mental health strategy that includes counseling, peer support programs, and academic resources (Barker et al., 2016; Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2022).

1.2. Rationale and objectives of the present study

While previous research has largely focused on quantitative measures of well--being and anxiety reduction associated with therapy dog interactions, this study takes a qualitative approach to gain deeper insight into students' subjective experiences. At the same time it explores animal perspective through focus group composed of dog handlers and therapists who know, live and work with their dogs. This study is particularly relevant given the increasing implementation of animal-assisted interventions in educational settings. Prior studies have indicated the effectiveness of therapy dogs in reducing stress (Dalrty & Mehr, 2015) and improving social connectedness (McNicholas & Collis, 2000), there remains a gap in understanding the lived experiences of students who

participate in these sessions. By addressing this gap, the present study seeks to inform future interventions and enhance the integration of therapy dogs into student support programs.

This qualitative study therefore aims to provide a richer understanding of the role therapy dogs play in student well-being by exploring students' emotional responses, perceived benefits, and personal interpretations of these interactions. Specifically, it seeks to (1) understand students' subjective experiences and perceived benefits of participating in a dog-assisted visitation program, (2) identify potential challenges and barriers to engagement, (3) examine the perspectives of dog handlers and therapists on program facilitation and therapy dog welfare, and (4) offer recommendations for optimizing the structure, accessibility, and ethical implementation of dog-assisted interventions in university settings.

By addressing these objectives, the study offers a nuanced perspective on the role of AAIs in supporting university students' mental health. The findings will inform future research and guide best practices for designing and implementing therapy dog programs that are effective for students and sustainable for therapy animals and their handlers (Binfet & Passmore, 2021).

2. Methods

A multispecies approach was undertaken to explore dog-assisted interventions with university students. This methodological framework was chosen to acknowledge the existence of multiple realities and to provide an empirical, innovative focus on human-canine interactions in academic settings.

2.1. Participants

Data was collected through two separate focus groups with semi-structured questions to capture individual experiences. The first focus group consisted of fifteen university students who participated in dog-assisted interventions at a university setting. There was no deliberate gender selection; rather, the sample reflected the demographic composition of those who frequently engaged in these activities. Participants were recruited through university wellbeing and counselling services and Therapet Schotland. They ranged in age from twenty to thirtyfive years and included both dog owners and non-dog owners, as well as students with varying levels of experience with animals, ensuring diverse perspectives were captured. The second focus group consisted of eight therapy dog handlers / therapists, five females and three males, between twenty and sixtytwo years, responsible for facilitating therapy dog sessions.

2.2. Procedure

Focus groups were conducted in a quiet yet accessible room within the University. Each focus group session lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes. The focus groups facilitated dynamic discussions about participants' interactions, emotions, and well-being in relation to their engagement with dogs in an academic context. These discussions encompassed a range of activities, including structured intervention sessions, informal interactions with therapy dogs, and participation in campus-based animal-assisted programs. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility, ensuring that participants could freely express their experiences and emotional connections with dogs.

Once transcribed, interview data were systematically coded to identify emerging themes related to psychological well-being, stress reduction, and human--canine interactions. The purpose of the focus group with dog handlers and therapists was to gain dogs' perspective. Anonymity was ensured by changing participants names to Participant 1, Participant 2 etc., allowing for an open and honest exploration of their experiences. This methodological approach enabled a rich, interpretative understanding of the role of dog-assisted interventions in university students' well-being. Focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining categories, and producing a final report.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Heriot Watt University Ethical Committee.

Open questions used with the focus groups consited of the following questions for students and dog handlers/therapists:

Students

1. Can you describe your overall experience participating in the dog-assisted intervention program today?
2. In what ways, if any, do you feel the presence of the dog influenced your mood, stress levels, or overall mental well-being during today's session?
3. Were there any specific moments or interactions with the dog that you enjoyed the most?
4. What aspects of the session today did you find most beneficial, and what improvements would you suggest for future dog-assisted interventions?

Dog handlers and therapists

1. How do you think dogs experience therapy sessions and interactions with the students?

2. Do you think the dogs normal behaviour/welfare is compromised in any way during these sessions i.e. as they are working?
3. How does the presence of a therapy dog constitute the therapeutic process, and what unique contributions do you think the dog makes to student well-being?
4. Do you think there is a particular type of interaction with therapy dog that is more beneficial for people?

3. Results

3.1. Student Focus Groups

This thematic analysis examines the key themes emerging from a focus group discussion about students' experiences with an animal-assisted intervention involving dogs. The themese may have been influenced by the questions described in the method section.The discussion, however, highlights motivations for participation, perceived benefits, and the nature of human-animal interaction. The themes are illustrated with direct quotes from participants.

3.1.1. Theme 1: Reasons for Participation

Participants had different reasons for attending the session, including curiosity and emotional attachment to animals. Some were drawn by the uniqueness of the event, as Participant 1 mentioned:

„I think it's quite intriguing, because it hasn't really been around. I've never participated in anything like that before." Other participants expressed a longing for pets they had left at home: *„I miss my dog from home" (Participants 8, 10, 14 and 15)*. For some, the motivation was more social, as they joined at a friend's recommendation: *„I just came because my friend was coming" (Participant 2)*

3.1.2. Theme 2: Emotional and Psychological Benefits

A dominant theme in the discussion was the emotional upliftment provided by interacting with the dogs. Many participants described feeling happier and more relaxed:

„I think it lifted my mood... I just felt a bit happier" (Participants 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 14). Participant 10 further explained the emotional impact their interaction with therapy dog had on them: *"It just makes you smile... it's almost like an instant lift"*.

3.1.3. Theme 3: Stress Relief and Academic Environment

The contrast between the usual university setting and the relaxed atmosphere of the dog session was repeatedly emphasized:

„It's so different, especially because it's at uni, which is stressful. A break from the library was really relaxing" (Particpants 1,8,9). This underscores the potential role of animal-assisted activities in university wellbeing programs. Participant 6 further elaborated how the session provided a break from academic stress: *„I had such a horrendous week with my design projects, and this just made me smile.*"

3.1.4. Theme 4: Preferred Types of Interaction with Dogs

Different participants preferred different forms of interaction: petting, playing, or simply being in the presence of the dogs. One participant reflected:

„I was talking mostly to the dogs, not really to people" (Participant 3). Particpant 7 emphasized the importance of physical touch: *„I just like the cuddling bit.*" Some enjoyed the varied personalities of the dogs: *„The boxer was walking around wanting attention, while the labrador was more laid-back" (Participant 5)*.

3.1.5. Theme 5: Connection to Home and Nostalgia

Several participants noted that being around the dogs reminded them of home, providing a comforting sense of familiarity:

„It reminded me of when I was at home with my animals, and that made me happy" (Participant 11). This suggests that such interventions may help alleviate homesickness among students.

3.1.6. Theme 6: Social Aspects of the Experience

While the primary focus was on the dogs, some participants valued the social interactions the event facilitated:

„I liked meeting the people as well" (Participant 1). However, some individuals preferred solitary engagement with the dogs over human interaction, emphasizing the importance of personal comfort levels in such programs.

3.1.7. Theme 7 : Potential for Future Implementation

The participants discussed the possibility of making such sessions a regular feature at the university. Some mentioned existing programs elsewhere, such as:

„Aberdeen University actually has a dog you can visit and take for a walk" (Participant 15). When asked if they would attend future sessions, responses were overwhelmingly positive: *"Would you sign up again?" – *„Yes, definitely!" (All participants)*.

To summarise, student focus group discussion provided valuable insights into the motivations, benefits, and experiences of students participating in an animal-assisted intervention. The key themes include emotional and psychological relief, nostalgia and connection to home, and the different ways individuals interact with animals. These findings support the idea that structured dog therapy and visitation programs could be beneficial in higher education settings, helping students manage stress and enhancing their overall well-being.

3.2. Dog Handlers/Therapists Focus Groups

3.2.1. Theme 1: Enjoyment of Dogs in Interventions

Participants widely agreed that dogs enjoy the interventions, but noted that enjoyment varies by individual personality, age, and prior experiences.

„I think the dogs do enjoy it. It's a different sort of visit to their normal routine...

Here they're being fussed over and getting lots more attention, a lot more physical contact as well, which is a reward for the dog" (Participant 8).

„Nina is stubborn and food is vital to her, and that's all she's interested in... She just wants to hoover the crumbs" (Participant 3).

„My younger dog, when she was young, was probably better with the elderly than with younger people" (Participant 2).

3.2.2. Theme 2: Matching Dogs with students

The effectiveness of interventions depends on matching the right dog with the right individual. Differences in temperament and energy levels play a role.

„Harvey is much heavier in therapy, but he's getting a lot of feedback in reaction... He was too happy to bounce about but didn't have the patience to sit with the students" (Participant 4).

„Some students preferred a dog that was calm and still, while others wanted one that was interactive and energetic" (Participant 7).

3.2.3. Theme 3: Benefits for Participants

The interaction with dogs was described as beneficial for individuals dealing with stress, anxiety, or other personal challenges.

„The students really valued the fact that the animals interacted back and seemed to need them" (Participant 1).

„Some students said, 'I want to see Harvey again because he's all over the place and I love that energy.' Others said, 'I just want a calm dog to stroke because I'm already feeling anxious'" (Participant 4).

„Dogs act as a calming presence for people who might feel overwhelmed or stressed" (Participant 1).

3.2.4. Theme 4: Working with Individuals with Phobias or Special Needs

Dogs were used to help individuals with dog-related fears, demonstrating a step-by-step approach to overcoming anxiety.

„I worked with a little boy with a dog phobia. At first, he could only look through a window at the dog, but over several sessions, he progressed to being in the same room and interacting with it" (Participant 7).

„I'm working with a young man with autism... we still haven't had him reach out, but at least he's not running away anymore" (Participant 2).

3.2.5. Theme 5: Impact on the Dogs' Welfare

Participants discussed whether therapy work affects dogs' well-being, generally concluding that most dogs enjoy having a job to do.

„Dogs need a job. Some protect their family, others love interacting with people. They rise to the occasion" (Participant 3).

„When my dog sees me put on a specific coat, he knows it's time to work and adjusts his behaviour accordingly" (Participant 8).

„I always say, 'We're going to see the boys and girls now,' and she knows what that means" (Participant 4).

3.2.6. Theme 6: The Role of Physical Contact

Physical touch was emphasized as an essential component of the intervention, benefiting both the dogs and humans.

„Stroking the dog provides comfort, reduces stress, and helps people feel connected" (Participant 1).

„Some students needed an energetic dog to play with, while others needed a still, calming presence" (Participant 5).

The findings from the focus group with dog handlers and therapists highlight the multifaceted benefits of dog-assisted interventions. They emphasize the importance of carefully matching dogs with recipients, ensuring animal welfare, and recognizing the therapeutic value of physical touch. The discussion also points to promising directions for future research in this field.

4. Discussion

The findings align with existing literature on AAIs while also raising critical considerations regarding implementation, ethical concerns, and the potential for future development. The diversity in students' motivations for participating in therapy dog sessions reflects the multifaceted appeal of these interventions. While some students were drawn by curiosity or novelty, others sought comfort from missing pets at home, consistent with McConnell et al. (2011), who found that pet ownership enhances psychological well-being. The social aspect of participation, as indicated by students who attended on a friend's recommendation, suggests that these programs foster both direct and indirect engagement, reinforcing the findings of McNicholas & Collis (2000) that animals serve as social catalysts. A significant portion of students reported experiencing mood enhancement and stress relief through interaction with therapy dogs. This aligns with previous research demonstrating that AAIs reduce anxiety, improve mood, and enhance overall well-being (Grajfoner et al., 2017; Pendry et al., 2020; Kamioka et al., 2014). The notion that therapy dogs provide a comforting distraction from academic pressures supports the attentional focus and mindfulness mechanism. These findings emphasize the potential of AAIs to complement traditional mental health resources.

The contrast between the usual high-pressure academic setting and the relaxing nature of therapy dog sessions was repeatedly emphasized by students. This is consistent with Binfet et al. (2018), who found that brief dog therapy programs significantly reduced stress among university students.

Such interventions may be particularly beneficial in high-stress periods, such as exam seasons, and universities could explore incorporating AAIs into academic support programs to create a more holistic approach to student well-being.

Students demonstrated varied preferences in how they interacted with the dogs, ranging from petting and cuddling to merely being in their presence. This reflects the individual nature of human-animal interactions and underscores the importance of program flexibility. Moreover, the recognition of different dog personalities highlights the importance of matching the right dog to the right student, as emphasized in the dog handlers' focus group. The theme of nostalgia suggests that therapy dog interventions may provide emotional continuity for students experiencing homesickness. By evoking comforting memories of home, therapy dogs may serve as an emotional bridge, easing students' transitions into university life.

Students' perception that therapy dogs provide unconditional love and emotional support underscores the mutual benefits of human-animal interaction. This finding aligns with Serpell (2006), who discussed the historical therapeutic role of animals in human mental health. However, ethical considerations regarding the well-being of therapy dogs must be addressed to prevent overexertion (Ng et al., 2021).

The handlers' focus group discussion raised crucial points about therapy dogs' well-being. While most handlers believed their dogs enjoyed the sessions, they acknowledged variations in temperament, preference, and fatigue levels. Research suggests that therapy dogs require structured sessions with rest periods to prevent exhaustion (Binfet et al., 2018; Ng et al., 2021). Additionally, the idea that some dogs „rise to the occasion" suggests that well-matched, well-trained therapy dogs can thrive in these settings, provided their welfare is continuously monitored (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2022). The importance of matching dogs with students is a significant finding, as different individuals require different forms of interaction. Some students preferred energetic dogs, while others sought calm and soothing interactions. This supports previous literature (Grajfoner et al., 2017), which emphasizes the need for individualized approaches in AAIs to optimize therapeutic benefits.

The significance of physical contact in therapy dog sessions aligns with previous findings that tactile interactions with animals can lower cortisol levels and enhance feelings of security (Kamioka et al., 2014). Students' reports of comfort through stroking and cuddling therapy dogs reinforce the physiological and psychological benefits documented in existing literature.

The overwhelming support for making therapy dog sessions a regular feature at the university suggests a growing demand for AAIs in higher education.

However, institutions must consider logistical factors such as scheduling, handler training, and ethical guidelines (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2022). While AAIs provide meaningful benefits, they should not be viewed as a standalone solution but rather as part of a comprehensive mental health strategy, including professional counseling and peer support programs (Barker et al., 2016).

This study adds depth to the existing understanding of therapy dog interventions in higher education, highlighting not only their emotional and psychological benefits but also the ethical and practical considerations necessary for sustainable implementation. By incorporating both student and handler perspectives, the findings reinforce the importance of individualized engagement, ethical oversight, and integration within broader mental health frameworks. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of AAIs, particularly regarding therapy dog welfare and student mental health outcomes. Through careful program design, universities can harness the therapeutic potential of human-animal interaction while ensuring the well-being of both students and therapy dogs.

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