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Mini Review

Combating geriatric depression: Pet therapy's revolutionary role and contributions to public health

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the impact of pet therapy on the treatment of depression in elderly individuals and its implications for public health. The research explores the objective, observations, results, and conclusion, of the study. Research has shown that regular interaction with animals can decrease stress hormone levels among older individuals. Additionally, it promotes the release of hormones such as oxytocin, which are associated with increased positive emotions. The physical activities involved in pet therapy sessions also contribute to the overall physical health of elderly individuals by improving balance, and coordination, and reducing the risk of falls. Furthermore, interaction with animals encourages the use of social skills and helps in reducing social isolation among the elderly.

The findings indicate that pet therapy significantly reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety in elderly individuals. The widespread adoption of pet therapy can potentially alleviate the burden on healthcare systems and decrease the reliance on medications, ultimately reducing treatment costs. However, it is essential to prioritize animal hygiene and welfare to ensure the effectiveness and safety of pet therapy practices.

Overall, pet therapy presents a promising and innovative approach to addressing depression among the elderly. Existing research highlights its efficacy in reducing depressive symptoms and enhancing the quality of life for older adults. Further research is needed to explore the broader applications of pet therapy and to integrate this approach into elderly care programs. This will help establish pet therapy as a valuable component of holistic geriatric care, ultimately contributing to improved mental health and well-being for the elderly population.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the potential benefits of pet therapy in treating depression among the elderly. By further exploring and integrating pet therapy into elderly care programs, we can enhance the overall mental health and well-being of this population. This research underscores the importance of considering alternative and innovative approaches to address mental health issues in the elderly, ultimately contributing to a healthier and happier aging population.

Introduction

Depression among the elderly is a pressing health concern that significantly diminishes their quality of life, often leading to social withdrawal and a range of physical ailments. As noted by the American Psychiatric Association, the impact of this condition extends beyond the individual, increasing the strain on healthcare resources and presenting a challenge to public health initiatives [1]. The World Health Organization further underscores the importance of addressing geriatric depression, emphasizing the need for effective management strategies to enhance community health outcomes and alleviate the

pressures on healthcare systems [2]. The rising prevalence of depression in older adults calls for concerted efforts to provide targeted interventions and support, which would benefit not only the affected individuals but also the broader societal context in which they live.

Pet therapy, also known as animal-assisted therapy, has gained substantial recognition as a groundbreaking approach in the realm of geriatric mental health care. Its application has been particularly noteworthy in the mitigation of depressive symptoms among the elderly population. The presence of animals during therapy sessions has been shown to foster social



engagement and provide emotional support, which are critical elements in alleviating feelings of loneliness and isolation that often accompany depression in older adults. Additionally, the requirement for routine care associated with pets can promote physical activity, which is beneficial for both mental and physical well-being. Friedmann and Son's study highlights the positive correlation between pet therapy and enhanced health outcomes in this demographic [3]. Indeed, the integration of pet therapy into treatment plans can significantly contribute to the improvement of public health by addressing the complex needs of the elderly with depression, offering a holistic approach that complements traditional therapeutic modalities. The innovative nature of pet therapy underscores its potential as a valuable tool in the arsenal against depression within this vulnerable segment of the population.

Pet therapy can involve various animals depending on the disease condition, the patient's age, mobility, gender, pet care requirements, and need for assistance. For example, dogs, cats, birds, rabbits, and even fish can be used, tailored to different disease conditions and patient profiles [4].

In the realm of therapeutic interventions, pet therapy has emerged as a significant modality in addressing mental health concerns, particularly depression among the elderly population. The foundational principle of this approach rests on the meticulous attention to animal hygiene and welfare, which is critical not only for the animals involved but also for the patients who interact with them. Organizations such as Pet Partners underscore the importance of maintaining the health, cleanliness, and overall well-being of therapy animals to ensure a safe and effective therapeutic environment, the management of stress levels, and the provision of adequate nutrition for these animals are considered to enhance the therapeutic outcomes [5].

Empirical evidence, as presented by Cherniack and Cherniack, supports the efficacy of pet therapy in alleviating depressive symptoms and fostering an improved quality of life among older adults [6]. These findings pave the way for further investigations that may broaden our understanding of pet therapy's applicability across diverse patient demographics and a spectrum of health conditions. Such research endeavors are anticipated to elucidate the full spectrum of benefits associated with this non-pharmacological treatment option. The integration of pet therapy into public health strategies signifies a progressive step toward holistic and innovative care solutions that prioritize compassionate human-animal interactions.

Definition and history of pet therapy

Pet therapy may come up with different names and definitions, but it refers to the inclusion of animals in human healing processes. The Delta Society, which provides certification in this field in the United States, has grouped these therapies into two main categories as Animal-assisted activities and Animal-assisted therapy to simplify the terminology. Animal-assisted therapy aims to improve the quality of life of individuals, especially those with chronic diseases, and to treat psychological disorders. This method of treatment is based on

the interaction between man and animal [7].

The place of animals in therapy dates back to ancient times. It is known that animals were used in the treatment of disabled people in the 19th century. For example, in Belgium in 1790, rabbits and chickens were used in the treatment of mental illnesses. In England, in 1792, animals took part in mental therapy at York Retreat. In 1867, farm animals and horses were used for epilepsy patients in Germany, while in 1942, at the Army Air Corps Recovery Hospital in New York, patients received relaxing treatment by working with farm animals. In 1972, psychotherapist Boris Levinson discovered that a third of his colleagues in New York City used pets in their therapy [8,9].

There is also research to understand the importance of AAT. In 1973, the Humane Society in Colorado's "petmobile" program brought the elderly and animals together in nursing homes. In 1977, Drs. Dean Katcher and Erika Friedmann investigated the positive effects of pets on health. Finally, with the establishment of the Delta Society in 1980, one of the organizations that support the human-animal relationship, studies in this field have become even more professional [8,9].

In short, pet therapy has a long history and has been scientifically proven to have positive effects on both [10-12] our physical and mental health. This form of treatment plays an important role in improving the quality of life of many people, thanks to the caring nature of animals and the special bond they form with humans.

Geriatric depression and public health

Geriatric depression is a mental health problem that is usually seen in individuals aged 65 years and older and seriously affects the quality of life. The prevalence of depression in the elderly is a serious public health problem. Globally, approximately 5.7% of the elderly population is affected by depression (WHO). Depression combined with physical health problems can negatively affect the daily lives and general well-being of older people (WHO). It is associated with increased physical problems, suicide risk, and social isolation, reduced cognitive functioning, and self-neglect. These factors can lead to increased mortality rates among older adults [10,11].

Beyond reducing quality of life at the individual level, geriatric depression places a heavy burden on the health care system. The increasing incidence of depression in the older population increases the demand for both physical and mental health services and strains the resources of health systems. The social and economic costs of depression are also considerable. In addition to the burden on health services, it also has negative effects on labor productivity [10,11]. As social interactions and active participation of older people in society decline, this also affects the dynamics of the social structure. Public health systems play a critical role in the prevention and treatment of geriatric depression. The development and implementation of early diagnosis and intervention programs can reduce the prevalence of depression. Raising public awareness and encouraging older people to seek support for mental health issues are also important parts of this struggle.

Pet therapy in the treatment of geriatric depression

Old age is full of physical, social, and psychological changes that individuals face. Among these changes, geriatric depression stands out as a particularly important health problem. In recent years, pet therapy has come to the forefront in the treatment of geriatric depression in addition to traditional treatment methods [11].

Old age brings several challenges, depression being among them. Modern treatment strategies now increasingly incorporate pet therapy, which has proven a valuable complement to traditional methods for alleviating depression in older adults. This therapeutic method offers numerous advantages, such as mitigating feelings of loneliness, fostering social interaction, and adding structure and significance to daily life. Studies show that elderly individuals with pets exhibit lower depression rates compared to those without pets [13,14]. Pets provide companionship and emotional support, delivering a sense of unconditional love and acceptance—key for those battling depression [15]. Integrating pet therapy into mental health plans for the elderly illustrates its substantial support benefits, emphasizing its potential to enhance overall well-being [16,17].

Interaction with animals encourages seniors to use their social skills and relate to other people, while also increasing physical activity. Activities carried out during the care of pets, such as walking, allow the elderly to move and positively affect their health. The daily care needs of pets establish a routine for older individuals and provide a sense of purpose in everyday life. These regular activities allow seniors to feel more productive and connected. Spending time with animals can lower levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, and provide an overall sense of relaxation [18]. This interaction can improve older individuals' ability to cope with stress and alleviate symptoms of depression. With its emotional, social, and physical benefits, it has the potential to improve the overall quality of life of older individuals. With the provision of appropriate conditions and the adoption of a professional approach, this method of therapy may become more widespread in the future and become a promising support for the elderly.

Discussion

The efficacy of pet therapy has been supported by various scholars. Friedmann and Son (2009) highlighted that human-animal bonds significantly benefit mental health by reducing stress levels [3]. Their research emphasized the physiological mechanisms behind this effect, noting a decrease in cortisol levels and an increase in oxytocin, which are indicators of reduced stress and enhanced well-being.

Similarly, Cherniack & Cherniack (2014) found that animal-assisted therapy improves older adults' overall health outcomes by fostering emotional support and social engagement [19]. Their study demonstrated that regular interaction with pets can lead to improved mood, reduced feelings of loneliness, and increased social interactions among elderly individuals.

Banks & Banks (2002) demonstrated that animal-assisted

activities effectively reduce loneliness among elderly residents in long-term care facilities [4]. Their research showed that regular visits from therapy animals significantly decreased feelings of isolation and improved the overall quality of life for these residents.

Souter & Miller's (2007) meta-analysis confirmed that animal-assisted activities are effective in treating depression [16]. Their comprehensive review of multiple studies found consistent evidence that pet therapy can alleviate depressive symptoms across various patient populations, including those with chronic illnesses and mental health disorders.

Organizations like Pet Partners emphasize maintaining animal hygiene and welfare for effective therapeutic outcomes [5]. Ensuring animals' well-being is critical not only for their safety but also for patients' health. Proper training and care of therapy animals are essential components of successful AAT programs.

Further research should explore broader applications across diverse patient demographics and health conditions. Villarreal-Zegarra, et al. (2024) systematic review indicated that animal-assisted interventions effectively reduce depressive symptoms among older adults [20]. Their findings suggest that AAT could be beneficial for a wide range of conditions beyond those currently studied, including anxiety disorders, PTSD, and autism spectrum disorders.

Limitations

Despite the promising findings, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the majority of studies have focused on older adults, leaving a gap in research on younger populations and diverse demographic groups. Second, the methodologies used in many studies vary widely, making it difficult to compare results across different settings and patient populations. Third, there is a need for more longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effects of pet therapy. Finally, ethical considerations regarding the welfare of therapy animals must be continuously addressed to ensure their well-being.

Conclusion

Pet therapy, also known as animal-assisted therapy, has garnered increasing attention in recent years for its potential to enhance both mental and physical health across diverse patient populations. This article delves into the multifaceted benefits of pet therapy, summarizing key findings and exploring future research directions. One of the most compelling aspects of pet therapy is the ability of human-animal bonds to reduce stress levels. Numerous studies have demonstrated that interaction with animals can lead to significant decreases in cortisol, a hormone associated with stress. This stress reduction not only improves overall well-being but also has a cascading effect on other health metrics, such as blood pressure and heart rate. Animal-assisted therapy has shown particular promise in alleviating loneliness and depression, especially among older adults. The presence of a therapy animal can provide emotional support through unconditional love and acceptance, which is



often lacking in the lives of those who are isolated or suffering from mental health issues. This emotional support can be a critical component in comprehensive care plans aimed at improving mental health outcomes.

For pet therapy to be effective, the care and training of therapy animals are paramount. Well-trained animals can better understand and respond to human emotions, thereby enhancing the therapeutic experience. Proper care ensures that these animals are healthy and well-behaved, which is crucial for maintaining a safe and effective therapeutic environment. While the current body of research highlights the benefits of pet therapy, there is a need for further studies to explore its broader applications. Future research should aim to investigate the efficacy of pet therapy across various demographics and health conditions, including children with developmental disorders, individuals with chronic illnesses, and patients undergoing rehabilitation.

Key takeaways

1. **Holistic Approach:** Pet therapy offers a holistic approach that complements traditional therapeutic modalities.
2. **Emotional Support:** Pets provide emotional support through unconditional love and acceptance.
3. **Physical Activity:** Routine pet care promotes physical activity beneficial for mental well-being.
4. **Social Engagement:** Interaction with animals encourages social skills use among seniors.
5. **Stress Reduction:** Spending time with pets lowers cortisol levels, providing relaxation.

In summary, pet therapy holds significant promise as a complementary approach to traditional medical treatments. By addressing current limitations and continuing to explore new avenues for research, the full potential of pet therapy can be realized. This will ultimately offer valuable benefits for improving both mental and physical health outcomes across diverse patient populations.

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