

The Use of Pets to Combat the Mental Health Crisis on Campus

Henry Phippen

While anxiety and depression have always existed on college campuses, many studies have found that the COVID pandemic aggravated these mental health issues (Copeland, Li et al). As the mental health crisis grows on college campuses across the country, college administrations need to address this growing issue. Several suggestions have been made to relieve anxiety and depression on campuses. One suggestion involves the use of pets to lower anxiety and depression among college students. To decrease stress and anxiety on campuses, administrations at universities such as Western Illinois University (WIU) should develop opportunities to increase students' access to pets. These opportunities could range from pet friendly dormitories to therapeutic pet days.

In their article published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, Li et al reported results indicating a significant increase in anxiety and depression in college students after the pandemic began. Levels of college students experiencing anxiety and depression jumped from 19% and 21% to 36% and 39%, respectively (Li et al). In his article, Dr. Copeland also cited a University of Vermont study that indicated that students perceived a high level of disruption, due to the COVID pandemic and pandemic mitigation measures, which lead to mental health issues. Copeland further asserts that colleges must find ways to support students to improve mental health conditions (Copeland). A WIU survey of 18 English 180 students found results similar to the Li et al and Copeland studies. The WIU survey indicated an average stress level of 7.1 on a stress scale from 1 to 10 with 10 being the highest level of stress (Smith). This high stress level

among Western Illinois University English 180 students should be concerning to the administration and prompt mitigation efforts.

There are several possible solutions to reduce stress on campus. Western Illinois University has several posters advertising campus counseling services. The campus recreation center is open to students to provide equipment and space to boost natural mood enhancing endorphins. Clubs on campus allow students to connect with other students with similar interests to experience some down time from the pressures of studying. However, while all of these measures are effective, they have still not been enough to alleviate the increased stress incurred due to the COVID pandemic. In fact, some of these have aggravated depression and anxiety as the recreation center has been limited by COVID pandemic mitigation measures and many clubs have been canceled or unable to meet in person. The counseling services can easily be overwhelmed with the significant increase in mental health issues. For these reasons, WIU must look at alternative ways to decrease stress and anxiety among students.

One innovative way to decrease stress and anxiety among college students involves the use of pets to lower anxiety and stress. In her *Scientific American* article, “Pets: Why do We Have Them?” Daisy Yuhas explores the possible reasons that people own pets, including for the positive mental health benefits. Yuhas cites scientific research that supports the positive impact pets have on their owners’ mental health. In the COVID pandemic era that has emphasized social distancing and isolation, pets can fill our social needs as indicated by the following Yuhas quote from anthrozoologist Pauleen Bennett of La Trobe University in Australia: “Pets help us fill our need for social connectedness” (Yuhas 28). Yuhas also cited the research of psychologist Hiroshi Nitoono at Hiroshima University in Japan that suggested exposure to animals can increase focus and attentiveness (Yuhas 30). This increased focus and attentiveness could lead to better grades,

which would improve mental health. Dr. Harold Herzog who is a pet owner and professor of psychology at Western Carolina University has also published research on the mental health benefits of owning a pet. Herzog references several scientific studies that support and refute the hypothesis that pets enhance health. Harold Herzog concludes that while it is unclear “whether, and under what circumstances, pets make people happier and healthier,” it is “clear that animals play a role in nearly every aspect of human psychological and cultural life” (Herzog 238). In “Raining Cats and Dogs – How Pets Can Improve your Mental Health,” Quinn Walkes outlines several benefits of pet ownership to mental health. Many of these benefits counter some of the negative effects of COVID mitigation. With many classes online and social distancing, isolation is a real issue contributing to pandemic stress. Walkes asserts that a pet can provide companionship and help combat loneliness. Walkes also points out that pets encourage owners to exercise which can lead to a greater ability to concentrate (Walkes). These studies clearly illustrate the mental health benefits of owning a pet.

The WIU English 180 survey results further support the mental health benefits of pets. On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being extremely happy, students who owned pets had an average of 8.3 when they were around their pets versus a general average of 6.7. This clearly indicates that students perceive themselves as happier when they are around their pets. While 77.8% of respondents indicated that they owned a pet, only 5.5% of pet owners currently live with their pet (Smith). This could be a missed opportunity to improve mental health among WIU students.

While it may sound simple to say that WIU could encourage pet ownership to lower stress and anxiety among students, there are several difficulties. First, on-campus housing and many landlords off campus do not accommodate residents with cats or dogs. When considering on-campus housing for pet owners, it is difficult to accommodate pets in buildings with people

who have allergies. Some dogs can cause issues with behavior and barking. While obstacles exist, they are not insurmountable. Currently, WIU has several dormitories offline that are unoccupied. Opening these up to pet only residents may eliminate the allergy issue. Limiting pets to dogs that have attended obedience training or cats may help avoid behavioral issues. Currently, I know of students who attend universities in both Michigan and Kentucky that allow cats in certain residence halls to provide emotional support to the students. These programs indicate that the difficulties are not impossible to overcome.

Finally, for those that are unable to take on the responsibility of pet ownership, programs that provide opportunities for students to be around pets may be an alternative. By partnering with the McDonough County Animal Shelter, opportunities for WIU students to walk dogs and volunteer to care for shelter animals may improve mental health. A university message board for local pet owners to post pet sitting jobs would not only give students the opportunity to be around animals but also to generate some income. WIU might also host designated therapy animal days where students can interact with trained therapy animals at specific locations on campus. These and other programs that open opportunities for students to interact with animals may be starting points for WIU administration proactively tackling the mental health crisis on campus.

While pets may not be the answer to every WIU student's anxiety and depression issue, they provide a proven therapy for many. With the rising stress and anxiety levels among college students during the COVID pandemic, university officials must actively seek unique solutions to handle the mental health crisis. While WIU currently has wellness and counseling programs in place, stress and anxiety still remain high. More must be done if we are to tackle the mental health crisis on campus. Access to pets provides a proven solution to many mental health issues

and should seriously be considered as an option to combating the mental health crisis that WIU students face during the COVID pandemic.

Works Cited

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