

Pets on College Campuses: Are They Beneficial or Not?

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Abstract

This paper is to provide information about the wellbeing of college students and how pets are beneficial to humans. People will read and understand through this research that pets truly are beneficial to humans. Everyone in the world has mental health and specifically some people have mental illness like depression, anxiety, anger issues, addictions, or eating disorders. Through research it is seen that the high levels of these mental illnesses are decreased when pets or animals are involved in an everyday life situation. Especially for college students whose anxiety skyrockets and depression can increase, having a pet in the dorm with them will significantly decrease those problems and make the college experience more comfortable.

Overview

Did you know that the second-leading cause of death among college students is suicide? Approximately 1,100 commit suicide each year. Potentially, these rates could decrease if colleges opened their campuses to student's pets. Over three dozen colleges or universities allow students to bring their pets with them but there are many restrictions and rules to be able to have a specific pet in a dorm. For college students, 49% of students have depression, 45% endure stress, 31% suffer from family issues, 28% struggle with academic performance and 27% experience relationship problems. Pets should be allowed on college campuses. Pets improve humans' mental health while de-stressing us. They help reduce our depression and anxiety levels. Throughout everyday routines pets help us improve our time management skills. A daily routine for an individual and their pet will also help increase responsibility. Companion animals help to

make sure we are not lonely. Most pets encourage exercise and playfulness. Pets/companion animals improve the quality of life.

In the United States, there are more than three dozen colleges that allow dogs and cats on their campuses (Kantrowitz, 2018). The top five schools that allow pets on their campus with limited rules are Eckerd College, Lees-Mcrae College, Stephens College, Stetson University, and Principia College. Stephens College is known as one of the pet-friendliest campuses in the country (Stephens College, n.d.). But more colleges and universities should be opening up their campuses to students' companion animals.

When attending college, there are many things that stress students out: midterms and finals, classes, professors, athletics, social media, friendships, and relationships. But the diagnoses of mental illnesses in university students are increasing which has left the public concerned (Brown 2018). Many students do not seek help for their mental health problems because some are embarrassed or because it makes them more anxious. A lot of college students say it is normal to be stressed in college and that is true to a point. There seems to be a scale of stress and many students are at the top of it. Sometimes the mental health problems that students experience in their childhood could occur again once they are at college, they might begin to relive the experiences or emotions.

In a general sense, pets improve the quality of people's lives and make us feel less lonely. Companion animals can be seen in two different ways, animal assisted interventions (AAI) or pet ownership. Research shows that people who have pets are healthier than people who do not have pets. Human-animal interaction helps with physical wellbeing which includes exercise,

depression and anxiety, and loneliness and social functioning (Gee & Mueller, 2019). Yet so much interferes with having that human-animal interaction because you and your pet have to feel safe together while also spending time together. If you do not spend time with your pet you will not see or feel the benefits. Animals can sense danger for themselves and companion animals can sense it in humans as well. Pets are aware of emotions and feelings (Dodgson, 2019). Since companion animals can sense our emotions they can tell when we are anxious, depressed or even having a panic attack. Many sets of research show that pets are beneficial; one shows that there are lower levels of stress in pet owners whereas non-pet owners showed negative emotions which indicated higher stress levels (Sane & Sawarkar, 2017). Pets are beneficial to all so within colleges it should not just be limited to the students with mental health problems. They enhanced socialization, stress reduction and improvement in general wellbeing, emotional dysfunction, and behavioral difficulties (Munoz Lasa et al., 2011).

What Is a Pet/Companion Animal?

It has been stated in a blog, that animals not needed for farm work are pets and those that are needed for farm work are not considered pets (Cesar, 2020). While other opinions are for something to be considered a pet, it must be a domestic or tamed animal kept for companionship or pleasure/happiness (Dictionary.com, n.d.). Companion animals are not individually trained to perform specific kinds of tasks, and normally seen as the family pet. At Salem State University in Salem, Massachusetts a general psychology professor asked his students what a pet is and students stated that pets are the animals that live in our homes and share our lives (Eddy, 2003). People consider all different animals to be “pets.” Everyone has a different outlook and

definition for what defines a pet, so colleges have to be very specific on what the nature of a pet entails and if certain animals are eligible.

What Are the Benefits of Having a Pet?

Research has shown that pets improve the quality of life. Human-animal interaction helps with physical needs and exercise, depression and anxiety, and loneliness and social functioning (Gee & Mueller, 2019). More people adopt a dog in order to ease human relationships. Dogs are more attached and depend on humans to live while cats are better for people with lower attachment levels. Lower attachment levels indicate that the individual does not need the animal to be around them all the time. Since dogs usually spend time around humans and cats will go off and do their own things. But at the end of the day, any pet can decrease anxiety and depression levels.

There is a significant difference in stress levels of people who own pets versus the stress levels of people who do not own any pets. In a research experiment done by Sane and Sawarkar, where they had a sample group of 160 individuals of which 80 were non-pet owners and the other 80 were pet owners. The outcome of this experiment was that pet owners had lower stress levels and non-pet owners had high scores of negative emotions, depression, anxiety, muscle tension, and much higher levels of stress (Sane & Sawarkar, 2017).

In a New York Times online article by Jan Hoffman, she talks to two students named Ms. McCarthy who has a German shepherd named Theo and Ms. Brill who has a Netherland Dwarf rabbit named Carl. Hoffman recognizes and is told that they are both very anxious people. Jan Hoffman says this is why Theo and Carl have consent to live on campus (Hoffman, 2015). Pets can sense the danger within themselves and around them. Seems important to have “comfort

animals” on a college campus to help fight an everyday battle with; anxiety, depression, stress, or even panic attacks. Now some colleges do not offer the luxury of allowing personal pets on campus without specific paperwork and payment. But some colleges conduct an on campus “therapy session”, this is where the school brings therapy dogs in to play or allows stressed students to interact with them. (Hoffman, 2015).

Pets are so beneficial to human life that pet therapy is making an increase and being used in different ways; from helping the elderly to enhancing the wellbeing of individuals with serious mental illness. A number of universities have been offering pet therapy for students in hopes to decrease stress levels. University of Sheffield’s Counseling Service works with Guide Dogs for the Blind but this school conducted research on the effect of dogs on 131 students (Wood et al., 2018). This research was used to find out how impactful animals are to human health and stress levels. But it requires that stress and blood pressure were measured before and after a fifteen minute intervention (Wood et al., 2018). The results of the research showed a remarkable decrease in stress, anxiety, and blood levels after the intervention which interrupts that interactions with animals can be proven to reduce mental health problems.

Animals are special in that they can sense human emotions and feelings. Research has shown that cats pick up on emotional gestures and dogs will comfort us when they sense something is wrong (Dodgson, 2019). Since companion animals can do this, they can sense when we are anxious, depressed or even having a panic attack.

Colleges With Pet Friendly Policies

Pets are considered to be an animal that is domesticated, given a name and not used as food (DeMello, 2012). Colleges have to be very specific with their policies and everyone should

fully read the Pet Policy page on each campus website when deciding on bringing a pet to college. But when you go to their Pet Policy websites you see that each school is different in that some limit it to specific breeds, weights, or age.

College Rules for Pets

There are common rules for colleges and their pet policies yet some colleges extend their rules if it is necessary (Kantrowitz, 2018).

- Pets must be registered in the housing office
- Must pay pet deposit
- Roommates may need to approve
- Might need to live in a single with pet
- Pets must be “housebroken”
- Pet may need to be sprayed or neutered
- Pet must be up to date on vaccinations
- Dogs breeds that are known to be aggressive may not be allowed
- Carnivorous fish may not be allowed
- Poisonous pets may not be allowed
- Cage or tank size may be limited

What Causes Stress in College?

Anxiety that is followed by depression is growing among college students in the last few years. This experience of anxiety, depression, and stress can be short or long term. As we already know social media causes stress in students but especially in colleges since students are trying to find themselves and build lives that they want to live in. But social media is not the only cause of

anxiety in college students. Some other things that will lead to stress are; finances, academics, clubs or athletics, family, friends, or relationship stresses.

Due to high levels of stress, the dropout rate is roughly 50% of American students. This means those who start college but do not make it to graduation (Scott, 2019). One big factor to stress in college is midterms and finals. The middle and end of the semester become difficult for students and are proven to have high levels of anxiety and stress (Jarolmen & Patel, 2018).

Many students are experiencing “overwhelming anxiety”, this is due to the large number of tasks being placed on them. When students feel like this it can be exhausting and they may just want to avoid any responsibilities and just try to gather themselves again. Mental illnesses often appear in the change from childhood to adulthood (Daily Life, 2019). Students can also experience “college depression” which is different from clinical depression. “College depression” starts when you attend college; this can be feeling sad or lonely, angry outbursts, loss of interest in things, and feeling worthlessness (Daily Life, 2019).

What Mental Health Problems Occur in College Students?

Mental illness is very common in college students these days. A survey showed that 33% suffer from serious depression and 39% of students struggle with at least one mental illness. While 11% commit suicide (Berger, 2018). Below are the top mental health illnesses common in college students.

Depression

Depression is a serious illness that has you feeling hopeless and distant from everyone else. Depression interferes with everyday tasks and can be caused by genetics, biological, psychological and environmental factors (Best Colleges, n.d.). With depression there are physical

symptoms; difficulty sleeping (insomnia), change in appetite, weight loss or gain. Emotional symptoms; overwhelmed, sadness and hopeless, crying, and social isolation .Thinking symptoms; difficult paying attention, completing tasks or thoughts of suicide.

Anxiety

Anxiety is the most common mental illness in the U.S. This affects 40 million adults over 18 years old. Almost 75% of those who have anxiety disorder will experience their first episode before 22 years old (Best Colleges, n.d.). There are five major types of anxiety; generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Panic Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD). Some people will experience irritability, racing thoughts, sweating, excessive worry, nausea, headaches and insomnia.

Suicide

In 2011, 39,518 suicides occurred in the United States. Suicide is the tenth leading cause in the United States population but it is the second leading causes in college students (David, 2019). Some colleges are reporting that students are going to counseling centers and saying they have had past thoughts or intentions of suicide (David, 2019). Suicide is a very serious thing and should be recognized as soon as possible. It can be detected by an individual harming or trying to harm themselves, thoughts of killing themselves or trying to. Individuals with thoughts of suicide may talk about suicide often, have loss in interests, have depression, withdraw from family, friends and activities, decrease or increase sleep, behave recklessly, or potentially increase use of drugs and alcohol (Best Colleges, n.d.).

Eating Disorders

Throughout college both men and women develop eating disorders. An eating disorder usually occurs with weight problems and behaviors toward food. Every 62 minutes one dies as a result of an eating disorder (Best Colleges, n.d.). Common eating disorders are anorexia nervosa which is when an individual is fixated on being thin and fears gaining weight. Bulimia nervosa is frequent episodes of eating large amounts of food that is bingeing, fasting or over-exercising. While binge eating disorder is binge eating that is related to low self-esteem (Best Colleges, n.d.).

Addiction

Addiction is a complex disease that is defined as continued involvement with a substance or activity despite its ongoing negative consequences. There is physiological dependence which results in tolerance and withdrawal. Psychological dependence is the dependency of the mind on a substance or behavior that can lead to psychological withdrawal symptoms, such as anxiety, irritability, or cravings. Many college students these days are turning to nicotine, marijuana, alcohol and cocaine to deal with the stress and pressures of college.

How Can Students Deal with Mental Health Problems?

As stated before, anxiety, depression, and stress can be short or long term. Many students do not seek help for their mental health problems because some are embarrassed or because it makes them more anxious. When attending college it is normal for people to experience stress because we are preparing for the rest of our lives and every decision made during this time can affect the rest of our lives. 40% of students do not seek help, 80% feel overwhelmed, 50% become so anxious that they have a really hard time in school (Best Colleges, n.d.).

Most colleges and universities have a Wellness Center where students can if they are sick or are not feeling well. In many of these wellness centers the facility offers counseling to students; they offer therapy sessions, medications, and even human-animal interactions. Many health problems can come from genetics so knowing what your family history with mental health is important. Some students do not experience any problems until they attend college and being away from friends, family or pets can bring on signs of mental health problems. Students can start to manage stress by; being able to tackle what is stressing you out, surround yourself with people or animals who make you feel good, try taking a break from what is overwhelming you, or seek professional help (Daily Life, 2019).

What Colleges Are Opening up to Pets on Campus and How Is It Beneficial To Students?

Most colleges are only open to pets on campus for students who are diagnosed with mental health problems (Hoffman, 2015). Not everyone can get help for their mental illness and many college students do not know about their mental illness until being on campus since being at home they had a support system or a pet that made them feel better.

There are twenty-eight schools that allow pets on their campuses. Here are some that are well known or that offer the best support for students with pets. Chapman University, Eckerd College, Iowa State University, Johnson & Wales University, Lees- McRae College, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University, Stephens College, Washington and Jefferson College, Wilson College. These schools have different policies for allowing pets. Some only allow animals that are registered as service animals or emotional support animals (ESA). Other schools only allow certain breeds of cats and dogs, in addition to that the animals might be restricted to a certain size, weight or age.

At Chapman University, the student must sign a housing pet contract. Students' pets must be approved by the university housing. The university allows two dogs per household but pitbulls, rottweilers, dobermans or akias are not allowed. Allows cats, fish, turtles, birds and small rodents but no other animals. If the animal needs a tank it can not be bigger than twenty-five gallons. Must pay a \$500 pet deposit incase of damages, along with this there must be a copy of personal liability insurance \$100,000 in coverage. The pet must be kept inside or in a yard, if the pet is seen anywhere, students may lose pet privileges. All pets must be licensed according to the City of Orange. Owner of a pet is responsible for injuries caused by their pet. (Chapman University, n.d.)

At Eckerd College, pets have been allowed on campus since 1973. Large pets such as dogs, cats, rabbits, chinchillas and ferrets are allowed on campus after your first semester of living on campus but small pets are allowed for your first semester. All pets must be registered with the Pet Life Staff and have to pass the registration and inoculation requirements. Small pets are allowed in all residence halls but large pets are only allowed in large pet housing. (Eckerd College, n.d.).

Iowa State University is similar to Chapman University, whereas students have to sign a contract to start the process of bringing a pet to campus. At Iowa State University specific buildings are open to pets. Only allows two pets per apartment. Animals that are allowed are; Small animals like amphibians, birds, reptiles, and rodents. Cats and dogs but students are not allowed to bring rottweilers, pit bulls, wolves, or any mix of those breeds and it is strongly suggested that all dogs have obedience training. Cats and dogs must have current vaccinations sent to the office before the pet gets to campus. If a pet is outside the apartment it needs to be on

a leash or in a carrier. Students must clean up after their pets and pets must have identification and vaccination tags. Students are responsible for anything that happens to other students or buildings at the University caused by their pet. If a pet attacks another student or anyone on campus, university staff has the right to remove the pet from the community (Iowa State University, 2012).

Johnson & Wales University has pet friendly community residence halls that allow certain approved pets to reside with their owners. This university allows pets because they believe that it is going to further enhance the student experience. To start the process students must submit an online application. In order to have your pet on campus in a pet friendly community you have to have a signed residential life pet friendly community agreement, proof that the animal is licensed, all vaccinations are up-to-date, pet has been sprayed or neutered, proof of flea prevention, a photograph of pet, and a \$250 non-refundable cleaning fee. Students are only allowed to have one pet such as dogs up to 40 pounds and have to be a year old, no pit bulls, Akita's, German shepherds, or wolf hybrids. Cats must be over a year old and small animals such as hamsters, guinea pigs and rabbits. Students may have a fish but the tank must be under five gallons and only one fish is allowed in the apartment (Johnson & Wales University, n.d.).

At Lees-McRae College, there are specific policies and a registration and housing accommodations forms. Cats, dogs and fish are the only pets allowed by campus housing. Fish tanks cannot exceed twenty gallons. Dogs must not be bigger than forty pounds when they are fully grown and these are the dog breeds not allowed on campus; Akita, American Pit Bull/Staffordshire Terrier, Alaskan Husky/Alaskan Malamute, Bullmastiff, Chow, Doberman

Pinscher, German Shepherd, Great Dane, Huskies, Presa Canario, Rottweiler, St. Bernard, Wolf Hybrid (Lees- McRae College, n.d.). If planning to attend Stanford University and bring a pet with you then you can only bring a cat or dog and there are specific apartments for the cats only or cats and dogs (Stanford, 2017).

At Wilson College the only pets allowed are caged or aquarium animals within the residence halls. These animals specified by this college are hamsters, mice, rats, gerbils, chinchillas, guinea pigs, fish, hermit crabs, sea monkeys and or non-poisonous reptiles and amphibians. Cages can not be bigger than two by two by two and the tanks must be 10 gallons or less. Pets not allowed are dogs, cats, birds, rabbits, and farm animals. Pets must be registered with the Resident Assistant and the Pet Proctor of their hall/floor. Lastly pets must remain in the room at all times (Wilson College, n.d.).

In a personal research study that I ran at Keene State College in Keene New Hampshire students responded that in college and especially during midterms and finals they experience feeling; anxious, overwhelmed, depressed, scared, annoyed and sad. I asked the question; Why would you benefit from having your pet with you on campus. The responses I received were around the same. Eighty-five percent of students stated that their pets have helped them through tough times so they feel that they would benefit especially in college, their pet is a stress reliever for them, and that it's someone there to comfort them and ease their anxiety. The majority of students stated that their pet makes them feel happier, relaxes their anxiety and stress levels, comforts them and makes their mental health better. Since Keene State College is not one of the schools that allows pets without full amounts of paperwork I asked another question to these students. I asked if they had ever attended Keene State's Paws to Play or therapy dogs that are

available on campus during midterms and finals week. Seventy percent of the students said yes and out of that 70%, 90.6% of them said it benefited them and made them feel better.

Throughout online and my own research it is proven that pets are beneficial not only to college students, but anyone whether you're struggling with a mental illness or not. Students being able to have their pets/companion animals with them on campus would benefit them truly and research has shown that it does benefit them. Having your animal with you can enhance your college experience and can be seen to make students transfer rates decrease. College student stress levels have decreased since these colleges have begun offering pets on campus whether it be a fish, a hamster, a cat, a dog or a lizard; whatever the campus allows, students are benefitting from it.

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