

Can Therapy Dogs Help Ease Stress for Nurses and Doctors?

Healthcare workers are always faced with sickness, injuries and death, which adds to their physical, emotional and mental burden. To help ease their stress, nurses, doctors and others in the field of health can turn to therapy dogs for comfort and emotional support.

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Healthcare workers face significant stress and burnout, with 24% to 43% struggling with depression. A recent study explored how therapy dogs can help alleviate this stress burden in hospital settings
- The study involved 64 hospital staff members interacting with therapy dogs three times a week for eight weeks. Participants reported immediate reductions in stress and emotional exhaustion after these interactions
- Therapy dog programs have shown positive results in various healthcare settings. A similar program at Rush University Medical Center found that petting therapy dogs significantly reduced staff stress levels
- Therapy dogs must meet specific criteria and undergo training from reputable organizations. They should be friendly, calm, well-behaved and comfortable with strangers and new environments
- Handlers also play a crucial role in therapy dog work. They must enjoy interacting with people, prioritize their dog's needs, learn proper handling techniques and maintain professional behavior

There's no doubt that people who work in health care are among the most overworked and stressed-out individuals today. Every day, they see patients and encounter difficult, intense situations, including grave (and sometimes irreversible) injuries, sickness and death. In fact, a study shows that 24% of healthcare workers, 25% of nurses, 24% of medical doctors, and 43% of frontline workers now struggle with depression.¹ And with the burden brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, the conditions just became much worse.

As a result, researchers are looking for avenues to help alleviate the stress burden that healthcare workers are grappling with — and this is where our furry canine friends prove to be extremely helpful.

Study Finds Therapy Dogs Boost Healthcare Workers' Moods

In the healthcare setting, therapy dogs are usually put to the task of comforting patients and/or their caretakers. A recent study, however, investigated how these canines can help comfort healthcare workers instead — and the results are encouraging.

The study, which was published in the *International Journal of Complementary and Alternative Medicine*,² involved 64 hospital staff members — doctors, nurses, nurse practitioners, patient care associates, respiratory and rehabilitation therapists, and unit clerks.³ They were allowed to have unstructured interactions with seven certified therapy dogs and their handlers, called "animal-assisted activities" (AAA), three times a week for eight weeks.

The researchers took note of the stress and burnout levels of the participants before and after the interactions. They found that many participants reported that their feelings of stress and emotional exhaustion were significantly and immediately reduced after the interactions, no matter how brief. According to the researchers:

“The immediate benefits of the AAA on HCW [health care worker] mood were realized in both groups. In addition, mood scores for the intervention group were significantly higher post-intervention. Our results mirror improvements in HCW mood that have been noted in various healthcare clinic settings and have been associated with positive influences on overall HCW well-being.”

Beth Steinberg, senior researcher with Ohio State University’s Center for Integrative Health and the study’s lead investigator said that during the activities, they observed staff in tears, simply sitting beside the dogs and telling them about their day.

“The recruitment for this study was incredibly easy because as soon as you said, ‘We’re going to do a study assessing your response to therapy dog interaction,’ people were like, ‘I’m in!’

Even before COVID-19 hit hospitals so hard, the staff were already struggling with stress, burnout, lack of work engagement,” she said.

Steinberg is also the co-founder of a therapy dog program called Buckeye Paws, which aims to uplift the mental and emotional health of staff at the Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center. Buckeye Paws was launched in March 2020, shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic began, when health professionals were undergoing intense physical, emotional, and mental stress and burnout.

“For the most part, people have an affinity to a non-judgmental, warm, furry animal that can come and just sit with them and listen. Dogs don’t care what you look like, how you’re feeling that day; they just know that when you need them, they’re there,” she commented.

Dogs Have a Long History of Providing Emotional Support

Over the years, there have been numerous studies conducted on how therapy dogs can help ease stress and burnout among people working in high-pressure environments like hospitals and clinics, and the results have always been positive.

In Chicago’s Rush University Medical Center, a similar program was concluded in September 2018, and looked at the impact of petting therapy dogs on stress levels of the staff. The program, called Pet Pause, involved nearly 700 participants from the hospital and therapy dogs of different sizes and breeds, including Labradoodles, Goldendoodles, a German Shepherd mix, and Westies. In one instance, miniature horses were brought in, too.⁴

Before petting the dogs, the participants’ blood pressure levels were measured, and they gauged their stress level on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest). After petting the dogs, they recorded these measurements again before returning to work. According to an article from the American Medical Association (AMA):⁵

“Coming into the room to pet the dogs, participants on average said they had a stress level of 4.75 on that one-to-10 scale. After petting the dogs, the physicians, nurses and others who participated in the Pet Pause study reported a stress level that averaged 3.25.”

“People like it. It’s a good break and it increases morale,” said Mary Heitschmidt, Ph.D., APRN, CCRN and the study’s lead author.⁶

Does Your Pet Have What It Takes To Be a Therapy Dog?

Therapy dogs are trained to comfort and provide support to people who are dealing with stressful situations. They provide relief from stress, anxiety, depression, fear, pain, loneliness and boredom in both children and adults. Aside from hospitals, their services are also useful in schools, prisons, courtrooms and nursing homes. Therapy dogs are different from service dogs, which are certified to assist people with disabilities.

But while all dogs are adorable and lovable, not every dog is cut out to be a therapy dog. There are certain criteria that your pup needs to meet and training from a reputable therapy dog organization is mandatory. These organizations work with both dogs and their handlers, training them and setting up opportunities for events.

According to the Whole Dog Journal, these requirements are needed for your dog to be allowed to train as a therapy dog:⁷

- At least 1 year old (in some programs, the minimum age is 18 or 24 months)
- Friendly, affectionate, and enjoy being petted by strangers
- Calm, quiet and well behaved, possessing basic “good manners” skills
- Clean and well groomed
- Comfortable traveling to new locations
- More interested in interacting with people than with other animals

Therapy dogs work with their handler as a unit — hence, a handler also needs to meet certain qualifications, such as:

- Enjoys interacting with people
- Acts as their dog’s advocate, always putting their dog’s needs first
- Must learn therapy dog handling techniques
- Dresses and behaves professionally

In addition, your dog must be able to stay calm during hectic situations. They’ll be hugged, bumped and petted, and may encounter people struggling with different emotions, such as angry outbursts and crying spells. Your pet must remain calm through these situations. If you think your pet can be a good therapy dog, search therapy dog organizations in your area and have them evaluated.

Sources and References

¹ [J Clin Med. July 30, 2021;10\(15\):3406](#)

² [Int J Complement Alt Med. 2024;17\(4\):174-182](#)

³ [USNews. Therapy Dogs Can Ease Nurses’, Doctors’ Stress, Too. September 18, 2024](#)

^{4,5,6} [American Medical Association, November 19, 2018](#)

⁷ [Whole Dog Journal, January 2, 2023](#)