

Dogs help improve moods among teens in treatment

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A participant at Excelsior Youth Center in Spokane, Washington, gives treats to a shelter dog from the Spokane Humane Society. A first-of-its-kind study demonstrates how dog-interaction activities improve the mood of teenagers living in residential treatment centers. Credit: Washington State University

Lindsay Ellsworth is prescribing a new, mood-boosting therapy for

teenagers in drug and alcohol treatment: shelter dogs.

On Friday afternoons, about four dogs from the Spokane Humane Society take a field trip to Excelsior Youth Center as a group of teenage boys eagerly await their arrival. Ellsworth, a doctoral candidate in [animal sciences](#) at Washington State University, organizes the meet-ups where participants can help brush, feed and play with the dogs.

"We found one of the most robust effects of interacting with the dogs was increased joviality," she said. "Some of the words the boys used to describe their moods after working with the dogs were 'excited,' 'energetic' 'and happy.'"

The relationship between dogs and humans is prehistoric, but Ellsworth's study is the first of its kind to demonstrate how dog-interaction activities improve mood among teenagers living in residential treatment centers.

A method to the gladness

Once a week, during the daily recreation time at Excelsior, Ellsworth breaks about eight participants into two groups. One group plays pool, video games or basketball provided in the treatment center. The other group interacts with the shelter dogs for about an hour.

Before the activity, participants identify 60 mood descriptors on a scale of one to five on what is known as the PANAS-X, a self-reporting method organizational psychologists use to scale and study emotion. After the activity, the participants fill out the same scale.

Those who spent time with the dogs not only showed an increase in joviality, but also positive affect (in psychology, the experience of feeling or emotion), [attentiveness](#) and serenity. Meanwhile, overall sadness decreased, Ellsworth said. Many participants are also being

treated for ADHD, depression or [post-traumatic stress disorder](#).

"I was surprised, during the trial period, how calm the boys were around the dogs and at how outbursts and hyperactivity diminished," she said.

"It was something you could observe like night and day."

When Ellsworth asked the boys what they like most about working with the dogs, some of their written responses included, "giving dogs treats and showing a lot of love to the dogs" and "I like to have time with the dogs because (it) lets me get my mind off things" and "I loved playing with Junior."

Robert Faltermeyer, executive director of the youth center, and the staff are hopeful this kind of science-based program could be established as part of treatment centers' structured activities.

"It's an opportunity for kids in a real chaotic life, making unhealthy choices, to focus in on a specific task with an animal," he said. "It empowers them to make positive changes even on the simplest scale of correcting the animal's behavior."

"I think those exposures build some internal capacity for them to say, 'Hey, I think I'm capable of changing my life,'" he said.

A chemical response to companionship

The National Institute on Drug Abuse is actively looking for science-based behavioral interventions to help those struggling with drug abuse, and the accompanying lack of affect, respond more fully to the stimulus of day-to-day activities, Ellsworth said.

She hypothesizes that dopamine, a natural feel-good chemical human brains produce, is released in the boys' brains as they anticipate the dog

interaction. Social companionship with the dogs may also stimulate opioid release.

Using natural stimuli like dogs, she said, could help restore the normal function of these critical chemical messengers after the brain's chemistry has been altered through drug use. Animal behaviorist Ruth Newberry, Ellsworth's doctoral advisor at WSU, agrees on the potential for treatment.

"It could be a really novel, cost-effective and beneficial complement to traditional treatments. This could be a win-win innovation for everyone involved," Newberry said, "including the dogs."

Ellsworth hasn't been able to scientifically track the impact on the dogs, since so many are adopted over the course of the trials. However, she said research has shown dogs in a limited social environment, like a shelter, are more responsive to humans.

"Any sort of activity that provides an opportunity for shelter dogs to socialize with humans and other dogs outside of the kennel environment is great, and that is the value that the shelter sees in these dog-interaction activities, too," Ellsworth said.

According to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, more than 5 million animals enter shelters annually in the U.S. With more than 5,000 independent shelters nationwide, Ellsworth believes these types of behavioral therapy programs could be widely implemented.

Ellsworth's interest in the dog and human connection emerged through her work with the University of Washington Conservation Canine Program, the Smithsonian Zoo and adolescent medicine at Seattle Children's Hospital.

The WSU alcohol and drug abuse research program helped fund the dog-teen interaction study.

Starting this summer, Ellsworth is increasing the number of visits to Excelsior to twice a week. In this phase of her research, she's also interested in understanding how [dogs](#) can influence teenagers' engagement in group therapy and cooperation in structured activities. She hypothesizes that the more compliant and engaged teenagers are with structured programs, the more likely they are to reap the benefits of treatment.

Provided by Washington State University

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