

# Study finds therapy dogs help stressed university students

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Therapy dog sessions for stressed-out students are an increasingly popular offering at North American universities. Now, new research from the University of British Columbia confirms that some doggy one-

on-one time really can do the trick of boosting student wellness.

"Therapy dog sessions are becoming more popular on university campuses, but there has been surprisingly little research on how much attending a single drop-in therapy dog session actually helps students," said Emma Ward-Griffin, the study's lead author and research assistant in the UBC department of psychology. "Our findings suggest that therapy dog sessions have a measurable, positive effect on the wellbeing of university students, particularly on stress reduction and feelings of negativity."

In research published today in *Stress and Health*, researchers surveyed 246 students before and after they spent time in a drop-in therapy dog session. Students were free to pet, cuddle and chat with seven to 12 canine companions during the sessions. They also filled out questionnaires immediately before and after the session, and again about 10 hours later.

The researchers found that participants reported significant reductions in stress as well as increased happiness and energy immediately following the session, compared to a control group of students who did not spend time at a therapy dog session. While feelings of happiness and life satisfaction did not appear to last, some effects did.

"The results were remarkable," said Stanley Coren, study co-author and professor emeritus of psychology at UBC. "We found that, even 10 hours later, students still reported slightly less negative emotion, feeling more supported, and feeling less stressed, compared to students who did not take part in the therapy dog session."

While previous research suggested that female students benefit from therapy dog sessions more than male students, the researchers found the benefits were equally distributed across both genders in this study.

Since the strong positive effects of the therapy dog session were short-lived, the researchers concluded that universities should be encouraged to offer them at periods of increased stress.

"These sessions clearly provide benefits for students in the short-term, so we think universities should try to schedule them during particularly stressful times, such as around exam periods," said Frances Chen, the study's senior author and an assistant professor of psychology at UBC. "Even having therapy [dogs](#) around while students are working on their out-of-class assignments could be helpful."

The therapy dog sessions were organized in partnership with UBC's Alma Mater Society and Vancouver ecoVillage, a non-profit organization that provides therapeutic services, including [therapy](#) dog sessions, and mental health wellness services.

**More information:** *Stress and Health*, [DOI: 10.1002/smi.2804](https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.2804)

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