

Study demonstrates stress reduction benefits from petting dogs, cats

July 15 2019



WSU students interact with a dog. Credit: WSU

College is stressful. Students have classes, papers, and exams. But they also often have work, bills to pay, and so many other pressures common

in modern life.

Many universities have instituted "Pet Your Stress Away" programs, where students can come in and interact with cats and/or dogs to help alleviate some of the strain.

Scientists at Washington State University have recently demonstrated that, in addition to improving students' moods, these programs can actually get "under the skin" and have [stress](#)-relieving physiological benefits.

"Just 10 minutes can have a significant impact," said Patricia Pendry, an associate professor in WSU's Department of Human Development. "Students in our study that interacted with cats and dogs had a significant reduction in cortisol, a major stress hormone."

Pendry published these findings with WSU graduate student Jaymie Vandagriff last month in *AERA Open*, an open access journal published by the American Educational Research Association.

This is the first study that has demonstrated reductions in students' cortisol levels during a real-life intervention rather than in a laboratory setting.

The study involved 249 college students randomly divided into four groups. The first group received hands-on interaction in small groups with [cats](#) and [dogs](#) for 10 minutes. They could pet, play with, and generally hang out with the animals as they wanted.



A WSU student interacts with a cat. Credit: WSU

To compare effects of different exposures to animals, the second group observed other people petting animals while they waited in line for their turn. The third group watched a slideshow of the same animals available during the intervention, while the fourth group was "waitlisted."

Those students waited for their turn quietly for 10 minutes without their

phones, reading materials, or other stimuli, but were told they would experience animal interaction soon.

Several salivary cortisol samples were collected from each participant, starting in the morning when they woke up. Once all the data was crunched from the various samples, the students who interacted directly with the pets showed significantly less [cortisol](#) in their saliva after the interaction. These results were found even while considering that some students may have had very high or low levels to begin with.

"We already knew that students enjoy interacting with [animals](#), and that it helps them experience more [positive emotions](#)," Pendry said. "What we wanted to learn was whether this exposure would help students reduce their stress in a less subjective way. And it did, which is exciting because the reduction of stress hormones may, over time, have significant benefits for physical and mental health."

Now Pendry and her team are continuing this work by examining the impact of a four-week-long animal-assisted stress prevention program. Preliminary results are very positive, with a follow-up study showing that the findings of the recently published work hold up.

They hope to publish the final results of that work in the near future.

More information: Patricia Pendry et al, Animal Visitation Program (AVP) Reduces Cortisol Levels of University Students: A Randomized Controlled Trial, *AERA Open* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/2332858419852592](https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858419852592)

Provided by Washington State University

Citation: Study demonstrates stress reduction benefits from petting dogs, cats (2019, July 15)

retrieved 13 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-07-stress-reduction-benefits-petting-dogs.html>

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