

Therapy dogs lower stress for nursing students, study finds

July 25 2023, by Bridjes O'Neil



Nursing students pet Jessie, a certified therapy dog, before professor Margaret Bultas' class on July 19, 2023. Credit: Sarah Conroy/Saint Louis University

Research at Saint Louis University has found that integrating a therapy dog into the classroom increases mental health support for nursing

students.

Margaret Bultas, Ph.D., professor at SLU's Trudy Busch Valentine School of Nursing, is an experienced nurse educator who currently teaches pathophysiology and has taught courses on growth and development, child health nursing, essentials of therapeutic nursing, and health assessment in the undergraduate and pre-licensure programs.

Bultas says her work at SLU in improving student experiences has stemmed from past research around improving health outcomes for children with developmental delays and disabilities.

"I have to set up my nursing classroom for success by creating a positive and supportive environment," she said.

Nursing education is a stressful major. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing has called on nurse educators to increase mental [health](#) support for nursing [students](#).

Bultas observed that stress and anxiety levels among her nursing students were increasing. She began incorporating mindfulness interventions into the classroom to improve mental [health outcomes](#). She next explored the feasibility and acceptability of bringing a therapy dog to campus in a [pilot study](#) published in the *Journal of Nursing Education*.

SLU has implemented a policy to allow responsible dog owners to bring their dogs to work to promote employee morale, [job satisfaction](#), and a pleasant work environment. Bultas says bringing dogs to campus for a day reduces stress and anxiety, but only momentarily.

"Students are stressed all semester. We bring a dog in, which calms them for an hour, but next week the dog's gone. It's a short-term fix, not a long-term solution," Bultas said. "I was interested in learning if the regular

presence of a dog would reduce stress for my students over time."

The study included 67 baccalaureate nursing students. Bultas taught two sections of a course: one section had a therapy dog and one section did not. At the end of the course, participants in the intervention group showed improvement in stress, anxiety and happiness, whereas participants in the [control group](#) did not demonstrate improvement.

Jessie, the therapy dog used in this intervention, is a three-year-old Cavalier King Charles Spaniel. Cavalier Spaniels are known to be gentle dogs with even temperaments and kind faces, Bultas says, and Jessie was an excellent fit for the classroom.

Students interacted physically with the dog before class, during a break, and after class. To reduce distraction, Jessie remained in her bed at the front of the classroom during class; she did not roam the room. A research assistant was available to remove the dog if she became distracted; however, Bultas says that never occurred. She says students reported positive feelings and benefits from the [therapy dog](#)'s presence.

"We teach students to care for the whole person and we as faculty model this approach as we teach, and care for our students," Bultas said.

More information: Margaret W. Bultas et al, Evaluation of Dog Presence as a Therapeutic Classroom Intervention, *Journal of Nursing Education* (2023). [DOI: 10.3928/01484834-20230404-04](https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20230404-04)

Provided by Saint Louis University

Citation: Therapy dogs lower stress for nursing students, study finds (2023, July 25) retrieved 22 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-07-therapy-dogs-stress-nursing->

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