

# Animal magic

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**Lindsay Crago** and **Jenny Leeder** describe an innovative pilot project designed to help alleviate student exam stress





*'Perhaps one central reason for loving dogs is that they take us away from this obsession with ourselves. When our thoughts start to go in circles, and we seem unable to break away, wondering what horrible event the future may hold for us, the dog opens a window into the delight of the moment.'*

Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson<sup>1</sup>

**A**nimal assisted intervention (AAI), a broad term which includes 'animal assisted activity', 'animal assisted therapy', and 'pet therapy', is defined as 'any intervention that intentionally includes or incorporates animals as part of a therapeutic or ameliorative process or milieu'<sup>2</sup>. Despite the physiological and psychological benefits of the human-animal bond having long been recognised<sup>3</sup> and having become established in the US as an effective clinical intervention for a wide range of issues<sup>4</sup>, as a modality in the UK, AAI still remains relatively new<sup>5</sup>.

During the past few years, AAIs have emerged in various forms as a growing trend across campuses of leading universities and colleges in the US and Canada. From the resident therapy dog at Yale University's Law School, that can be 'checked out' for 30-minute sessions, to Dalhousie University's 'puppy room', these specially selected canines have been brought onto campuses to offer students a unique break from the stress and pressures of academic life.

It was the anecdotal success of these North American programmes, coupled with the 60 per cent increase in service demand, which we at the University of Edinburgh Student Counselling Service (SCS) have experienced over the past two years, that prompted Paws Against Stress (PAS). Our vision was to hold a number of short events on campus which would provide students with access to therapeutic canines, offering both a fun break from revision and an intervention to help manage stress levels in the run-up to summer exams.

The pilot project offered the potential for an innovative, fresh and current intervention to support students' wellbeing, and presented an opportunity to make contact with the wider student population, particularly students who might not necessarily access one-to-one counselling.

## Planning

Initially, we could find no evidence that other UK universities or colleges had embarked on such an initiative. Just prior to our first event, we learned that the University of Aberdeen, the University of St Andrews and the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, had also held events with animals, none of which, however, had been organised by the universities' counselling services. We knew that Assistance Dogs (guide, hearing, signal or support) had been used in similar programmes across North America, but while the assistance and therapy dogs may share some qualities – for instance good temperament – they perform very different functions and roles<sup>6,7</sup>, and it was important that these differences were recognised. We had, therefore, no template to follow of where to find an organisation that could provide the services of therapeutic dogs.



The vision, and simultaneously the challenge, was to ensure that the experience remained as therapeutic and stress-reducing as possible for students, whilst retaining the key element of fun



Through online research we discovered Canine Concern Scotland Trust (CCST). The Trust has been in operation for 25 years, with local chapters throughout Scotland, and while its main mandate is to support and promote responsible canine ownership and welfare, it also has a well-established 'therapet service' which provides visiting and therapeutic services to residents and patients in hospices, care homes, prisons and hospitals<sup>8</sup>. Initial conversations with CCST revealed a clean injury/complaints record, a comprehensive screen process for both dogs and their volunteer handlers,

insurance cover and an impressive CV of regular therapet engagements, including a service-level agreement with NHS Lothian. Our proposed higher education setting, however, was a first for them.

In an effort to maximise the potential for the project's success, we also approached Edinburgh University Students' Association (EUSA) as an additional collaborator. We anticipated that EUSA's involvement would help reach a wider student population, particularly through their established social media networking and online presence. Additionally, on a very practical level, we hoped that with EUSA on board, administrative bureaucracy involving gaining access to an appropriate physical space would be minimised. Both CCST and EUSA responded with great enthusiasm to our proposal and we found that collaboration allowed each decision at the design stage to be considered from a clinical, canine and student perspective. The vision, and simultaneously the challenge, was to ensure that the experience remained as therapeutic and stress reducing as possible for students, whilst retaining the key element of fun.

## The events

Three ticketed, two-hour events were held over three weeks during the summer revision and exam period in 2013, two at Edinburgh University's main campus and one at a peripheral campus. Students were offered 15-minute sessions with a therapet (and handler) with the option of either a one-to-one or a group session. Twelve experienced therapet dogs were selected for the project, with five or six participating in each event. The dogs covered a range of breed types and sizes from Cavalier King Charles spaniel to greyhound, and they ranged in age from under two to 11 years old.

EUSA's marketing expertise proved to be invaluable, providing professionally designed posters, university-wide screensavers, Facebook posts, Twitter feeds, university-wide emails, and student newspaper coverage. External public relations were coordinated by the university's Communications and Marketing department. A press release and photo call organised by the University Press Office attracted considerable media attention from various sources, including the BBC and Scottish TV.

All events were held in a 'therapy' room located within EUSA buildings and large

enough to comfortably accommodate up to six dogs, six handlers and a maximum of 24 students at any one time. The room was divided into six therapeutic areas, each bounded by a circle of chairs, offering students and handlers the option of either sitting on the floor or on a chair.

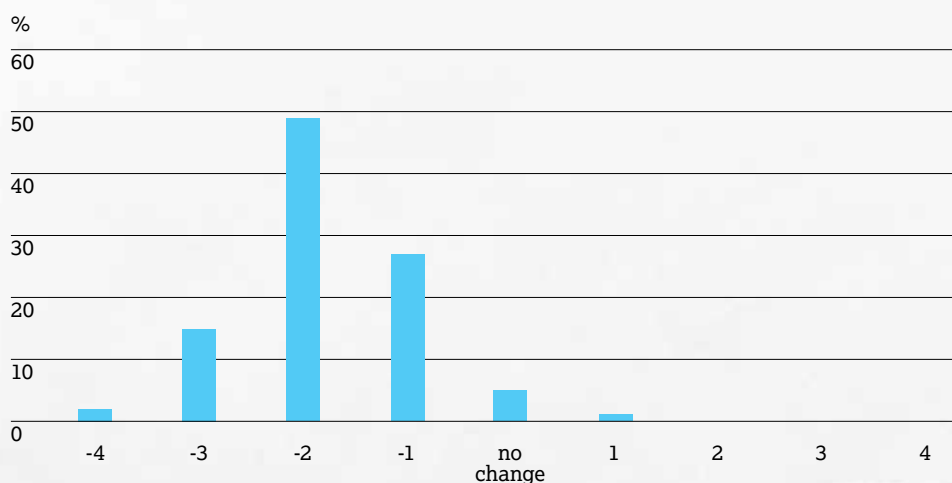
As the event was held in a heavily populated student building, a waiting room close to the therapeutic space helped to protect student confidentiality and also minimised queuing. This was important in creating a calm environment, and necessary from a health and safety perspective. The waiting room also provided an ideal location in which to display mental health resources such as relaxation CDs, and exam success and stress booklets. Although every precaution had been taken to ensure the safe and smooth running of the events, a risk assessment form was completed by CCST, SCS and EUSA to safeguard against any potential difficulties.

At no cost to the students, tickets for 15-minute sessions were made available two days before each event through the university's online booking system, and students were able to select a time slot for their session. A few tickets were reserved and released on the day of the events, which students could obtain directly at the event site.

## Logistics of the day

On the day of the event human and canine volunteers arrived early enough to become familiar with the space and were briefed on how the event would unfold. They were introduced to SCS staff members, and handlers were encouraged to approach staff should any issues or concerns arise with respect to student disclosures or content of sessions that they felt ill-equipped to manage. Students arrived close to their ticketed time slot, presented their ticket, and were directed towards the waiting area where an SCS or EUSA staff member received them. Before entering the therapy room students were given a quick briefing and asked to use hand sanitiser before being led into the room and directed towards the dog of their choice. At the end of the session, the SCS staff member overseeing the therapeutic space gave a gentle 'two-minute remaining' reminder, before students were encouraged to sanitise their hands once again, and then invited to complete the evaluation on their way out. The three two-hour events attracted a total

**Student rated reduction in stress pre and post event**



of 232 students, which included pre-booked tickets and tickets obtained on the day. We were aware from our colleagues in EUSA, however, that many students had phoned to seek tickets after the events quickly booked up on the website.

## Analysis

From a cursory glance at faces when students and handlers were engaged with the dogs, it was clear that there was a strong 'feel-good' factor. Whilst it was obvious that those attending enjoyed their 15 minutes with a therapist, it was less clear whether it had impacted significantly on their stress levels and psychological wellbeing. As this was a pilot project it was essential to gather feedback, and so students were invited to complete a brief evaluation immediately following their session.

Evaluations were returned from 223 of the 232 participants (a 96 per cent response rate). The simple evaluation collected both biographical information as well as feedback on the events. In terms of student profile, the returned evaluations indicated that 79 per cent of those attending were female, and 89 per cent were undergraduates, with the highest proportion in their final undergraduate year of study (27 per cent).

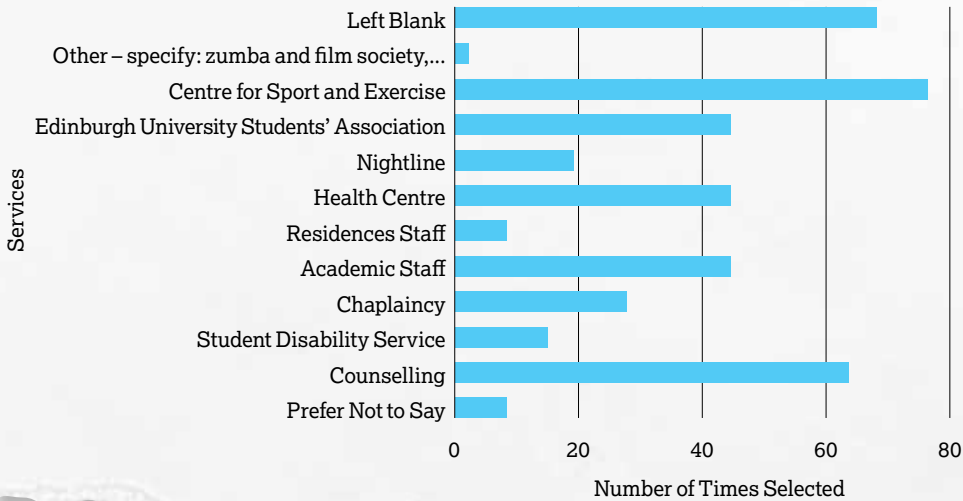
When asked to rate statements on a five-point scale from strong disagreement to strong agreement, 91 per cent either agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the event, 90 per cent agreed or

strongly agreed that they would do it again, 89 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that it was a worthwhile use of their time, 89 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that it was a useful break from study, and 74 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that it helped to re-energise them.

In answer to a question concerning stress rated before the event compared with stress after the event, 94 per cent of students reported experiencing less stress afterwards, five per cent felt the same level and one per cent recorded feeling more stress. When this was analysed further, almost half of the students (49 per cent) identified as having moved two points down the stress scale (out of a possible maximum four points), with 27 per cent moving one point and 15 per cent moving three points.

On the basis of these self-reported figures, it appears that interacting with therapists had a significant effect on students' stress levels. It remains unexplored from this brief evaluation exactly what aspects of the intervention were experienced as particularly stress-reducing. Research highlights the therapeutic centrality of touch and physical bonding in animal-human interaction,<sup>5</sup> but it is possible to hypothesise other likely beneficial factors in this case, such as distraction from the norm, enjoyment of a shared experience with peers, amiable discussion with the handlers, and reconnection with memories of pets from home.

### Different university services which students considered using



The last question on the evaluation form sought to determine if the students had ever considered making use of any university services to support their mental health. This question was designed to ascertain whether the event had attracted a different category of student from the group that would normally self-refer to receive support for stress. In 68 per cent of cases, students had thought of using university services to support their mental health, and in most cases, several services were highlighted. The most popular options were the Centre for Sport and Exercise followed by the Counselling Service and the Students' Association, then followed equally by academic staff and the Health Centre. Nearly a third (29 per cent) of students had not considered using any university service. Further questions would have been required to ascertain whether this was because no support was deemed necessary or that other sources of support were preferred, eg friends or family.

### Conclusion

The pilot events were deemed a success. They appeared both fun and there was evidence that the intervention had had a positive impact on the students, helping them manage their revision and exam-related stress. The three partners in the new venture, SCS, EUSA and CCST, all found the experience to be highly rewarding, and we agreed that it had been an excellent use of time and resources. As a result of the project's success, similar sessions are to be staged in the 2013-2014 academic year before both the winter and summer exam periods. The events will include the same collaborators and there has been additional interest from the university's Accommodation Services to host some of the events. For future events, we envisage making some small practical adaptations concerning rooming, ticketing procedures and the need to include a more formalised way to gain feedback from the

handlers who shared the therapeutic space with the therapists and students/student groups. While the dogs were the main focus of interactions, we observed that handlers seemed to play a significant role in facilitating the therapeutic engagements. This additional information would offer an increased richness to our understanding of how students were engaging with the handlers and dogs.

The most significant consideration for next year, however, is to optimise how therapeutic and stress-reducing the experience is for the students, whilst retaining the fun element. Ascertaining what aspects of the interaction provided the most therapeutic benefit and enjoyment for the students would signal how we ensure a stress-reducing experience that keeps the fun factor. More detailed questions on the student evaluation or a random selection of students for in-depth questionnaires or follow-up interviews would provide greater clarity on this.

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