

New research shows virtual canine comfort can benefit stressed students

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Perhaps you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but new research shows that a novel take on in-person canine visits for stress reduction can provide wellness benefits to students.

Associate Professor Christine Tardif-Williams in Brock University's Department of Child and Youth Studies, along with Associate Professor John-Tyler Binfet of the University of British Columbia (UBC) Okanagan, recently completed a study to determine whether virtual time spent with animals might be as effective at bolstering well-being, reducing negative affect and increasing positive affect as in-person animal visits.

"We know from a number of studies now that animal- or canine-assisted interventions work really well in alleviating student stress, reducing homesickness and loneliness and increasing positive affect and social connectedness on campus for [undergraduate students](#)," says Tardif-Williams.

After the pandemic hit, Tardif-Williams and Binfet, who is also the Director of UBC Okanagan's Building Academic Retention through K9s (B.A.R.K.) program, started to have conversations about supporting student wellness in an online context. They were awarded a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Insight Grant entitled "Undergraduate student [stress reduction](#) through virtual canine comfort" to find out if virtual visits might help.

Their findings are shared in a new paper, "Virtual Canine Comfort: A Randomized Controlled Trial of the Effects of a Canine-Assisted Intervention Supporting Undergraduate Wellbeing," which appeared in *Anthrozoös* at the end of April.

The paper describes a study in which more than 460 students participated in either live and synchronous or recorded and asynchronous virtual sessions with a dog and a trainer.

While students visited virtually with the dog, the trainer followed a script asking about stress in the participant's life. After the session, the

researchers measured stress, loneliness and other well-being measures, along with positive and [negative affect](#).

Though the sessions lasted only five to seven minutes, the results showed they were effective in reducing stress and improving well-being, regardless of whether they were synchronous or asynchronous.

"I think in some ways this is really attractive for [young people](#), from remote or distance learners to those who do not seek mental health services for various reasons," says Tardif-Williams, who has done extensive research on the [close relationships](#) between young people and animals and has taught a course on companion animals in the lives of children and youth for the past decade. "The dog and the handler can bring people together to start to have a conversation about well-being, and I think that it has the potential to reach a large number of diverse students."

Tardif-Williams emphasizes that the modules are meant to be used as a first step toward the full [mental health services](#) provided on campus, rather than a substitute.

However, because the videos are low-cost, low-barrier and available online whenever students need them, she believes there is a lot of promise in the research, which is ongoing.

"Now we have really finely tuned the asynchronous videos, with the help of a videographer and other people on the research team, and we've produced a series of six videos," says Tardif-Williams. "Almost 250 participants across 41 different countries have now watched these clips."

Those interested in taking part in the next phase of the study are encouraged to visit [@barkubc on Instagram](#). Participation takes only a

few minutes to complete and will support ongoing research into the stress-reducing impact of virtual canine sessions.

More information: John-Tyler Binfet et al, Virtual Canine Comfort: A Randomized Controlled Trial of the Effects of a Canine-Assisted Intervention Supporting Undergraduate Wellbeing, *Anthrozoös* (2022). DOI: [10.1080/08927936.2022.2062866](https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2022.2062866)

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