



Research Exchange Groups

Research Exchange Group on Human-Animal Interaction & Wellness Meeting Notes October 18 2019

Attended in person:

- Gail Wideman, associate professor, School of Social Work, REG Co-convener
- Carolyn Walsh, associate professor, Canine Research Unit, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Science, REG Co-convener
- Morag Ryan, Family Medicine Resident at Memorial
- Laura Bass, Master's student in Kinesiology at Memorial
- Lynn Cooze, Coordinator, St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog program at Ronald McDonald House.
- Rochelle Baker, Manager, Communications & Partnerships, NLCAHR

Attended via webinar/teleconference:

- Trudy Goold, advocate for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Pamela Button, Student Wellness & Counselling Centre, Memorial University
- Carolyn Sturge-Sparkes, Coordinator, Aboriginal Health Initiative, Memorial University
- Sadia Chowdhury, BSS (Hons) MSS (Hons) Graduate Student, Gender Studies, Memorial University

Purpose of the Meeting

After the [equi-assist program presentation](#) by Gail Wideman and Rhonda Fiander on September 20, the decision was made to re-convene the group to continue the conversation about how people who are practicing or interested in animal-assisted therapies might link practice knowledge to research goals. Gail Wideman pointed out that, while many of us have anecdotal experience that supports how well these therapies are working, it will be important to provide more and better quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods research to provide evidence for the benefits of animal-assisted therapies.

Question to Consider for this Roundtable:

We know the benefits of animal-assisted therapies and visitation experientially, but how might we approach finding out more about them from a research point of view?

Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA): The Equi-Assist Evaluation

Gail Wideman and Pamela Button discussed the evaluation process, some challenges, and some key findings from the Equi-Assist program evaluation. The research questions were:

- What are the effects of EAP (Equi-Assist) on symptoms of PTSD?
- What are the effects of EAP (Equi-Assist) on social functioning and interpersonal relations?
- What are the effects of EAP (Equi-Assist) on negative and positive affect?

General challenges of research of equine assisted practice (EAP):

- Concept clarity – many forms of EAP
- Lack of control or comparison groups
- Anecdotal and qualitative evidence but little quantitative
- Small sample sizes
- Inconsistency in length of treatment – depending on program and funding
- Unpredictability of animal – human interactions
- Fidelity of treatment – is the intervention being applied in the same way across programs – usefulness of the EAGALA structure
- Equine well-being – research is being conducted with therapy horses to ensure we have an understanding of how horses are impacted by EAP work

Original Research Plan:

- Logic Model Program Evaluation Approach
- Pre/Post standardized well-being test
- Facilitator Observations
 - *Psychosocial Session Forms (Chandler, 2012)*
 - *EAP Session Tracking Forms*
- Focus Group with Facilitators
- Qualitative Post-Interviews with Participants

Logic Models are a popular tool that can be used to help conceptualize program development and evaluation. It does this by inviting constituents to articulate their understanding of the current situation or social problem, assumptions they are making, the changes they hope to bring about through their program effort, with and/or for whom, the activities planned to contribute toward this change, the resources needed to put into the effort, and external factors that could influence results.

- Starting with “What is the Social Problem we are trying to address?” : mental health and wellbeing of military families

- For Whom? : current serving military members and their immediate families (spouses, children, youth) – MFRC mandate
- Things we needed to identify: Assumptions, Inputs, Outputs, Activities, Intermediate and Long Term Indicators

Logic Model Assumptions:

1. Well-being is negatively affected by stress associated with military lifestyle (disruption of family, hours of work, frequent absences, trauma related loss or injury, transitions, stigma, lack of programming)
2. Participation in EAP will increase well-being as expressed quantitatively (pre and post well-being scales) and qualitatively (session notes and in-depth interviews)

We found that client goals varied. A benefit of EAP is its adaptability to ‘client’ goals. But we found that “trusting the process” is not where everyone can start – which has led us to consider a more structured approach to goal setting. From a research and program point of view, we learned to be mindful of participant goals – those related to ‘therapy’ and those related to ‘growth’ and ‘learning’

For Phase Two we used a goal attainment scaling (GAS) approach. The literature describes GAS as a “coherent pursuit of relevant, feasible outcomes”. Benefits are described as:

- Improvement of the therapists’ conceptual basis and organization of treatment efforts, clarity of treatment objectives and facilitates client problem solving
- Establishment of realistic expectations
- Increased patient satisfaction
- Increasing therapy goal direction
- Increase in staff and client agreement
- Increased motivation of client
- Improved therapy outcomes

Revised Protocol:

- Participants met with a social worker to define their own goals and were asked “what would success look like for you?” This pointed approach helped to target outcomes and enabled participants to discuss/ define success on their own terms.
- Once participants established goals, they completed a weekly survey/ success matrix to measure goal attainment.
- The process got participants to think, on a weekly basis, about how they were progressing with their goals. The collection of their responses after each weekly session will help measure progress based on participant-stated outcomes. In short, participants articulated what they wanted to achieve and how well they were doing in achieving it.
- Overall, when people completed the scale, they also talked through and thought about things. The evaluation itself gave an anchor to the process, provided an opportunity for reflection and helped to clarify and focus the work.

- Taking this approach is proving to be beneficial: it helps to establish realistic expectations, goal identification, improves motivation and aligns facilitators with clients. It helps initiate tangible ideas about what success looks like.
- Data analysis is underway.

DISCUSSION

- A structured approach to observation in the EAGALA model was found to be helpful. The ‘SPUDS’ model is used in EAGALA as part of the therapy process but it is also useful as a research data tool to help define parameters:
 - Shifts people make while in the therapy
 - Patterns we notice
 - Unique aspects of the therapeutic experience
 - Discrepancies we see between behaviours and what the client reports
 - S- "Our Stuff" – what observations are really more about us, as facilitators than may be to/about the clients?
- It can be difficult to capture the self-sense of what is working. The work is not “objective” even though it attempts to be.
- **Question** from Carolyn Walsh : *We expect that something positive is going to happen in animal-assisted therapies but are there other models of Equine-Assisted Therapy or even work with other animals that may be more well-defined and easier to measure than the EAGALA model, in terms of having much more specific interventions/ outcomes?*
- **Answer** from Gail Wideman/Pam Button
 - EAGALA is actually quite structured- more so than many other animal-assisted therapy models.
 - The EAGALA model wants to acknowledge that subjective responses are sometimes going to happen-(e.g., a facilitator’s knowledge of safety rules with horses may go against the EAGALA experience and this focus may be troubling for the facilitator.
 - EAGALA also seeks to ensure that the interactions remove the “emotional” piece, but this creates its own challenges. The model is trying to add standardization in a way that standardization cannot always be applied.
 - Overall, animal assisted therapies are a far “messier” process than the scientific method often allows for.
- **Question** from Lynn Cooze, who worked with Dr. Sandra LeForte on her graduate studies in this area to start the Janeway Hospital Therapy Dog Program in 2006: *I recall Dr. LeForte suggesting that we establish clarity about the difference between visitation programs with animals vs. programs that set specific therapeutic goals. Some programs are not so goal-directed. In some programs, the visitation IS the whole point of the program. How do we demonstrate the value of visitation programs?*

- **Answer** from Gail Wideman/Pam Button
 - It's a challenge. One idea may be to look at the approach taken with EAGALA in Phase II and have the participants themselves establish their own goals, completing a weekly marker to think about how they are doing. Perhaps such an approach might be applied in evaluating the benefits of visitation with animals (i.e. if program leaders were to first ask the participants what they hope to get out of it and then see whether or not they did.)
- **Question** from Morag Ryan *Are there any goal-directed therapies in the dog world?*
- **Answer** from Gail Wideman/Pam Button
 - Yes. Gail Wideman mentioned a program for treating Post Traumatic Stress Injuries by working with dogs to improve mental health. She will share those resources with the group.
 - We call upon other members to share additional examples of goal-directed therapies with dogs.
 - **After the meeting, Gail provided additional resources re AAT with dogs. Please see REFERENCES at the end of these notes.**

Animal-Assisted Interventions to support pro-social behaviours in young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) -ages 6-17 years.

- Morag Ryan is a Family Medicine resident with a Master's degree in cognitive behavioral psychology who is now working on two manuscripts with Dr. Carolyn Walsh and is seeking collaboration on the use of animal-assisted therapies for young people with ASD
- Morag is designing a survey to find out what the use of animal therapies in the province looks like now – essentially conducting a use assessment for NL
- The project will also include a basic science component to quantify perceived benefits of animal therapies
- The work is funded by the Janeway Foundation
- The basic science component will be a study of oxytocin levels. Oxytocin is associated with pro-social behaviours and is often found to be at lower levels in people with ASD. Morag's research will ask if we can expect an increase in oxytocin by measuring levels of oxytocin pre and post interaction with animals. In addition, behavioural assessments will be conducted to assess some quantitative measures, pre and post animal interaction
- Rochelle will connect Morag with Trudy and with members of the NLCAHR Research Exchange Group on Autism to support a review of the questionnaire to make sure it is suitable for both the parents of children with ASD and for young people with ASD

St. John Ambulance (SJA) Therapy Dog Program at Ronald McDonald House

- Lynn Cooze is the coordinator of the SJA therapy dog program with Ronald McDonald House which provides a home for families of sick children who are being treated at the

Janeway. It is a place where families can be together and kids can share experiences with others who are just like them. In this program, therapy dogs come into Ronald McDonald House on Tuesday evenings twice a month. Dog handlers bring in dogs for about an hour- to the TV room.

- There is no feedback mechanism formally in place at this time to measure the success of the program.
- Currently, there are more new/expecting moms at the house than there are young children, but the adults/parents seem to enjoy the stress relief as well.
- At the end of the first year, Lynn would like to look at successes.

- **Question** from Gail Wideman: *What are some challenges with the program?*

- **Answer** from Lynn Cooze:
 - Volunteers and child-tested therapy dogs are in good supply and we have more than we can actually use to visit with children. The opportunities are not there yet to use them all.
 - Child-testing is carried out by Ken Reid and Krista Head who work with the dogs to train / test them in activities with kids. It is *very* strict testing and dogs are not easily passed. Dogs must show no aggression as the kids "test" the dogs' limitations.
 - This over-supply of animals and volunteers might be solved by having more frequent visits or by expanding the program into another venue. Ideally, we would need more children staying at the house to measure success for kids, but the resident population is beyond our control.

- **Question** from Carolyn Walsh: *Is the SJA program run the same way in Long-Term Care homes? Does each program have a coordinator position like yours?*

- **Answer** from Lynn Cooze
 - Not always. Most long term care settings in the city have unit coordinators but most do not schedule volunteer visits as is done for other visitation settings such as the Miller Centre's Palliative Care Unit and Iris Kirby House and Daffodil Place. Some arrangements are less formal, depending on the institutional setting. It is worth noting that therapy dogs are increasingly popular in private sector businesses for stress relief, relaxation, etc. This is called the SJA Therapy Dog Sponsorship Program.
 - The new SJA Coordinator for therapy dogs is Amy Vincent

FURTHER DISCUSSION

- The SJA Program has standards and is evidence-based across Canada
- The coordinators of the program need to talk with volunteers about safety, especially for LTC residents/ children. Gail noted that volunteer coordinators are essential to the success of volunteer-run programs

- Lynn said that while healthcare professionals were initially skeptical about using dogs with children at the Janeway Hospital who have infections, etc. the program has won them over.
- Lynn interviewed nurses, handlers, etc. to evaluate/ review the Janeway Therapy Dog Program from a health provider perspective and presented her findings at the Canadian Association of Pediatric Health Care Centres annual conference in Ottawa in 2011.
- She received notification from St. John Ambulance in March 2012 that the Evaluation of the Janeway Therapy Dog Program was used by the Ontario Council of St. John Ambulance as part of a presentation to FIDO.
- The Ontario Council stated: “As part of our overall original presentation to FIDO Canada, we used certain findings as described in the paper to further outline the efficacy of our therapy dog program, and its overall acceptance in the hospital environment.”

Seeking Research Opportunities for Master’s Degree in Kinesiology/ Therapeutic Recreation

- Laura Bass is pursuing her Master’s Degree in Kinesiology/ Therapeutic Recreation at Memorial. Originally from BC, Laura is looking for opportunities to do research on animal assisted therapies. She has a recreational therapy background, having worked in both Long-Term Care with seniors and with at-risk youth. She also worked at a recreation centre in college for stress-buster events. In her background in these settings, animal-assisted therapies were always very well-received, although not evaluated.
- Laura is also a yoga instructor and also expressed an interest in yoga with animals and so Rochelle will connect her with Susan O’Leary, whose work includes a yoga practice on horseback.

Indigenous Cultures and the Human-Animal Bond

- In her role with the Aboriginal Health Initiative at Memorial’s Faculty of Medicine, Carolyn Sturge Sparkes works with Indigenous populations. Through this work, she has been learning more and more about the long-standing Indigenous history of connecting with animals. For example, Indigenous peoples have been practicing equine-assisted therapy for hundreds of years. Carolyn pointed out the work of the University of Regina’s Angela Snowshoe and Noel V. Starblanket in this field: <https://journalindigenuswellbeing.com/media/2018/07/50.43.Eyininiw-mistatimwak-The-role-of-the-Lac-La-Croix-Indigenous-Pony-for-First-Nations-youth-mental-wellness.pdf>
- Given her interests in these areas, Carolyn Sturge Sparkes is hoping to learn more about the history of animal relationships and Indigenous health; she is generally interested in the connection between human and non-human creatures and hopes to pursue these ideas in greater depth by connecting with this group.
- Carolyn Walsh noted that she teaches a fourth-year psychology course that includes diverse cultural perspectives on animal-assisted therapies

- Rochelle noted that there may be potential for humanities-based research in this area and that group members may want to find researchers working in fields outside of the stricter “healthcare” lens to see what may be under study at the cultural level.
- It was noted that Memorial University sociology professor Nicole Power teaches about animal studies, chiefly looking at how animals are “used” in society and that she might be a good presenter to speak to the cross-cultural piece

Memorial’s Canine Research Unit (CRU)

Gail and Carolyn Walsh suggested a possible presentation from Memorial’s [Canine Research Unit](#), possibly together with Ken Reid and/or Glenn Redmond.

- At the unit, Carolyn Walsh and Rita Andersen, with a colleague at Grenfell, look at the social behaviour / cognition of dogs: dog emotions, cognition- looking for objective measures- in things like salivary hormones in people and dogs to measure bonds, comfort, etc.
- CRU research articles, talks and conference poster presentations are listed here: <http://play.psych.mun.ca/cru/publications.html>

Other Items

- Potential New Members. Gail Wideman shared an [October 16 CBC piece on Horses for Hope, and equine therapy program in Labrador](#)- and noted that this team may be potential new members for this group. Rochelle Baker will reach out to them with an invitation to join this group.
- Pam Button has been working as a facilitator and researcher with Gail Wideman on equine-assisted therapy and wants to do more but is not sure what that would look like. At this time, the work is “off the corner of her desk” but she is keenly interested in qualitative perspectives and in building relationships and learning what areas of research might be pursued through this group.
- Rochelle suggested that researchers with an interest in equine therapies connect with [Stable Life](#) and with [Horses for Hope](#) for possible comparators in terms of exploring what people are doing across the province in terms of looking at different therapeutic approaches, different client demographics, intervention styles, etc.
- When the conversation turned to cats in animal therapy, it was noted that the only interventions our members knew anything about were Cat Cafes and yoga with kittens.
Question for the group: Are there more things happening with our feline friends?
- Wait lists are very long in NL when it comes to finding service dogs for people with autism. The group discussed the potential to connect people with ASD to the SJA program as a possible measure for people on wait lists.

- There was some discussion about service dogs in Canada. After the meeting, Rochelle located the following position paper on service dogs from the Canadian Foundation for Animal-Assisted Support Services:
https://www.cf4aass.org/uploads/1/8/3/2/18329873/service_dogs_in_canada_position_paper_-_jan_14_2019.pdf
- Participants talked about the need for some mechanism to coordinate service demand with resources and Rochelle suggested that the group develop its webpage as an online resource to help members to engage and connect. The webpage could also become a hub to connect students to potential research opportunities
- It was proposed that the group engage with Dr. Aimee Surprenant, Dean of Graduate Studies, to explore what's happening in graduate student research at Memorial.

NEXT MEETING

November 15, 2019 at 12:30pm | Dr. Hugh Whitney on research into zoonotic diseases. These included rabies, mosquito-borne viruses, Lyme disease and MRSA/MRSP.

REFERENCES ON ANIMAL ASSISTED THERAPIES WITH DOGS

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