

Partnering with therapy dog in acute psychiatric inpatient unit-Supporting recovery and building resilience

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The benefits of animal-assisted therapy in residential aged care facilities have been recognized for several years. In a recent study, pet therapy has been found to improve older people's mood and cognitive function. Older consumers who have a poor response to pharmacological treatment may experience significant improvements in their mood by adopting and interacting with a pet. The pet therapy program (the program) aimed to improve consumers' perceived mood and overall well-being by providing in-person sessions to consumers in the acute mental health inpatient unit in partnership with Delta Dog Society. The program was a unique therapeutic activity as it eliminated language and cultural and linguistic barriers and included all consumers. This kind of program, first time offered in the acute inpatient mental health units, transformed the consumer experience. The positive impact the pet therapy sessions had on consumers' moods and well-being exhibits the therapeutic magnitude of this intervention.

Staff observed increased levels of arousal and interaction from consumers when interacting with the therapy dog; quiet and withdrawn consumers came out of their shells, talking to the dog and asking questions of the volunteer about the dog. Spending time with the therapy dog also invoked memories of the consumer's dog or the pet they had in the past. One elderly gentleman was reduced to tears of joy remembering special times with his deceased pet. Consumers demonstrated significant improvements in their mood, the feeling of hopefulness, reductions in anxiety levels and improvements in overall well-being and a spillover effect on carers and health staff. The program increased the effectiveness of our service delivery, resulted in enhancing consumers' resilience and supporting their recovery journey. It may also have some influence on early discharge and time of reintegration into the community.