

Research Week Proposal

Title: Animal Assisted Therapy: Fighting Symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder Among Law Enforcement Officers

Program of Study: M.A. Clinical Mental Health Counseling

Presentation Type: PowerPoint

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Category: Investigative

Research question: Does a comprehensive review of research literature confirm the hypothesis that Animal Assisted Therapy can reduce symptoms of PTSD among law enforcement officers?

Abstract

Maintaining optimal mental health and wellbeing is of the utmost importance within law enforcement populations. According to Flannery, (2015) law enforcers are at risk for psychological trauma in result of ongoing exposure to critical incidents, life threatening situations, and death. Chopko and colleagues (2017) estimate that 30% of police officers experience symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or meet full diagnostic criteria of PTSD. Therefore, mental health treatment is crucial for law enforcement officials so they may effectively continue working in such a demanding profession without being a harm to themselves or others. Several evidence-based treatments are commonly used to treat PTSD including Cognitive Processing Therapy, Exposure Therapy, and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy (Dinnen, Simiola, & Cook, 2015). Such treatments are standard protocol when working with PTSD clients. However, research has explored the use of animal assisted therapy (AAT) as an adjunct mental health treatment for individuals, used to help decrease stress, anxiety, and depression. Amerine & Hubbard (2016) report positive outcomes across AAT studies including increasing client motivation, increased sense of safety in sessions, and increased social behaviors among children and older adults. Populations in the reviewed literature that benefitted from AAT included children with autism, terminally ill individuals, and the elderly. Research in the field of AAT is growing, but further evidence-based research is needed to support the use of AAT for service men and women experiencing symptoms of PTSD. In essence, the purpose of this research is to conduct a literature review that explores the potential of AAT treatment decreasing symptoms of PTSD in law enforcement officials.

References

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- Flannery, R.B. (2015). Treating psychological trauma in first responders: A multi-modal paradigm. *Psychiatric Quarterly, 86*, (2). doi: <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1007/s11126-014-9329-z>.