Effects of Emotional Support Animals on Adults with Depression and/or Anxiety

Ileana Adams, Tori Cline, Breanna Oakes, & John White

School of Nursing, University of Maine Orono

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Dr. Valerie Herbert

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Abstract

Through understanding the role of emotional support animals and the effect their utilization has on mental health outcomes, a review of the literature was used to explore the following evidence-based PICOT question: In adults diagnosed with anxiety and depression, what effects do emotional support animals have on symptoms compared to individuals without emotional support animals? Although mental health disorders and their clinical manifestations are largely controlled by medication, non-pharmacological therapies are often used in cohesion. Emotional support animals offer a more holistic approach to symptom management and provide companionship to those suffering from symptoms of anxiety and depression. We performed an in-depth search across research articles retrieved from CINAHL and EBSCO using the terms and phrases *emotional support animal*, *mental health*, *anxiety*, *depression* and *symptoms*. As the use of current evidence supports best practice, our search criteria was limited to research articles published between 2018 and 2023. Articles discussing other mental health disorders, those aged under 18, as well as service animals rather than emotional support animals were excluded from our search. Ultimately, twelve articles were selected to be reviewed. The literature suggests that utilization of an emotional support animal improves symptoms seen in anxiety and depression, as well as supports the patient through adjunct or combined therapies. In addition, our research suggests there is an underutilization of emotional support animals in therapy and may provide benefits for other mental health disorders.

Keywords: support animal, mental health, symptom management, anxiety, depression

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