



Animal-assisted therapy with farm animals for persons with psychiatric disorders: effects on self-efficacy, coping ability and quality of life, a randomized controlled trial

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Abstract

Background

The benefits of Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) for humans with mental disorders have been well-documented using cats and dogs, but there is a complete lack of controlled studies using farm animals as therapeutic agents for psychiatric patients. The study was developed in the context of Green care, a concept that involves the use of farm animals, plants, gardens, or the landscape in recreational or work-related interventions for different target groups of clients in cooperation with health authorities. The present study aimed at examining effects of a 12-week intervention with farm animals on self-efficacy, coping ability and quality of life among adult psychiatric patients with a variety of psychiatric diagnoses.

Methods

The study was a randomized controlled trial and follow-up. Ninety patients (59 women and 31 men) with schizophrenia, affective disorders, anxiety, and personality disorders completed questionnaires to assess self-efficacy (Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale; GSE), coping ability (Coping Strategies Scale), and quality of life (Quality of Life Scale; QOLS-N) before, at the end of intervention, and at six months follow-up. Two-thirds of the patients (N = 60) were given interventions; the remaining served as controls.

Results

There was significant increase in self-efficacy in the treatment group but not in the control group from before intervention (SB) to six months follow-up (SSMA), (SSMA-SB; $F_{1,55} = 4.20$, $p = 0.05$) and from end of intervention (SA) to follow-up (SSMA-SA; $F_{1,55} = 5.6$, $p = 0.02$). There was significant increase in coping ability within the treatment group between before intervention and follow-up (SSMA-SB = 2.7, $t = 2.31$, $p = 0.03$), whereas no changes in quality of life was found. There were no significant changes in any of the variables during the intervention.

Conclusion

AAT with farm animals may have positive influences on self-efficacy and coping ability among psychiatric patients with long lasting psychiatric symptoms.

Background

The utilization of agricultural farms as a basis for promoting human mental and physical health in cooperation with health authorities is growing in several countries in Europe and in the United States of America. In some countries this is called *Green care*, a concept which is not restricted to the use of animals, but also includes plants, gardens, forests, and the landscape. Historically, Green care farms were associated with hospitals, psychiatric departments and other health institutions. Today, most Green care projects involve community gardens, city farms, allotment gardens and farms. Because many Green care farms are rather small compared with traditional farms, there is often a diversity of activities, with the possibility of meaningful work for different people and target groups. Other positive experiences with Green care like self-esteem, responsibility and sense of purpose are similar in the different countries [1]. During the last decade, an increasing number of persons with mental disorders work with farm animals as part of their therapy [2-5].

Although Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) for humans with mental disorders has been well documented with cats and dogs, there is a complete lack of controlled studies of farm animals as therapeutic agents for psychiatric patients. Previous studies of AAT with companion animals have documented that human-animal interaction may decrease stress levels [6-12], and is shown to improve self-confidence, social competence and quality of life [13,14]. As it is shown that different types of animals may have different impact on people's health [15,16], it is therefore worth