

Transitioning a Therapy Dog Program Online During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learned

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Abstract

The University of Saskatchewan PAWS Your Stress Therapy Dog program is offered in **collaboration** with campus peer health 'What's Your Cap?' binge drinking prevention initiative. The goal of the program is to offer participants feelings of comfort/love and support. The COVID-19 pandemic has put students at heightened risk of experiencing social isolation and loneliness, worsened mental health problems, and using substances to help cope. In response, our team transitioned the therapy dog program from an in-person to online format. We designed content for participants to (1) connect with therapy dogs and acquire increased feelings of love, comfort and support, and (2) increase their knowledge of pandemic-specific, evidence-informed mental health. For example, we partnered with the CCSA and MHCC to design a resource outlining how the connection between animals and humans can be beneficial to human health. Our on-line program highlighted what dogs can teach humans about health through their own care and daily activities. From April-June 2020, we developed a website, created Facebook livestreams and recorded videos featuring therapy dogs and handlers. Over three months, a process and outcome evaluation determined that our activities contributed to the program's goals. Key lessons were learned related to program personnel, handler training and support, and online expertise. This combined understanding is informing our current activities with the virtual program.

Online activity examples



Therapy dog Mia doing an online photo-shoot with handler Dan



Therapy dog Anna-Belle learning to do the Hokey-Pokey with handler Colleen



Therapy dog Winston receiving a haircut from Groom Team Canada member Jovi



Shared our evaluation the results over social media channels, highlighting attendee voices

What we did

Digital Transformation

Our team designed online content for participants to connect with therapy dogs.

How we Did This

Our team developed www.therapydogs.ca and used social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flipgrid) to store and share videos featuring therapy dogs and their handlers. Videos included Facebook Live events, pre-recorded greetings and Scholastic Canada storybook readings. All content is saved to a YouTube channel to meet participants where they are at to view the content at their convenience.

Developed Unique Products

For example, partnered with CCSA and the Mental Health Commission of Canada to produce a poster offering information on how the connection between animals and humans can help reduce feelings of stress and anxiety during the pandemic.

Accessibility of Knowledge

Focused on what dogs can teach humans about health through their own care and activities.



Lessons learned

Program Personnel

- Considerable time commitment up front and decreased as the program established itself.
- Our team worked cumulatively in what would amount to 1.5 full-time positions.
- A large portion of this time was spent brainstorming ideas on ZOOM.

Handler Training and Support

- 35 therapy dogs and handlers asked to participate in the program had all previously visited on the U of S campus.
- Due to concerns of the permanence of the videos and anxiety regarding being public to the world, only 17 handlers opted to do live events, 24 did prerecorded greetings and storybook readings.
- Considerable time commitment to teach handlers how to used the technology.
- A handbook was created to guide handlers on how to develop their mental health tips.

Online Expertise

- Our research team concentrated on social media we had a higher level of familiarity with.
- Website was built using GoDaddy.
- Social media was very time intensive for both learning and execution.
- Site analytics were difficult to track across platforms.
- Success in using traditional media to promote the program.

Project partners



Evaluation outcomes

People Responded Positively to Dogs Online

- Of the 94 participants who completed our process evaluation, the majority strongly or somewhat agreed that they felt comforted by (90.4%), loved by (62.5%), connected to (85.9%), and/or supported by (82.8%) the therapy dogs.
- Compared to other sources of connection, love, comfort, and support in their lives, 39.4% of the participants experienced these feelings a little bit more and 29.6% experienced about the same from watching the therapy dogs online.

The Mental Health Tips were Effective

- 67.6% of Participants reported learning about pandemic-specific mental health self-care from the handlers and therapy dogs.
- 85.4% of participants agreed that they were using the pandemic-specific mental health self-care tips from the therapy dog videos.

Participant preferences

- Of the 372 participants who completed our outcome evaluation, 48.4% visited the dogs to reduce stress, 37.4% wanted to learn about the therapy dogs' lives, and 28.8% missed visiting the dogs in person.
- Only 15.6% of participants indicated they visited the online program to learn how to stay healthy during the pandemic.



The work continues

Our program has expanded to include:

- Zoom sessions with students and therapy dogs.
- Webinar series called "20 Minutes with Zaphod" where a handler/yoga teacher instructs a breathing exercise with her therapy dog.
- Life sized dog cut-outs have been introduced to the hospitals around Saskatoon with information on our program.
- Our social media pages are still in operation and we are posting content regularly.