

# Impact of Animal-Assisted Therapy on Psychological Well-being and Social Functioning in Inpatients of Mental Health Facilities: A Systematic Review

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## Introduction

In recent decades, Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) has emerged as an innovative adjunct to traditional psychiatric treatment, leveraging the unique bonds between humans and animals to enhance emotional and social well-being in patients with psychiatric disorders. As the prevalence of these disorders continues to escalate globally, the integration of AAT into psychiatric care offers a promising avenue for improving treatment outcomes. However, the existing literature presents a fragmented picture, characterized by mixed results and varying methodological rigor, which complicates the evaluation of AAT's true efficacy. By providing an evaluation of AAT's effects across diverse patient demographics—including children, adolescents, and adults—this review seeks to clarify the therapy's impact on psychiatric symptoms, social functioning, and quality of life. The findings are intended not only to enhance clinical practice but also to inform policy-making and guide future research, and to incorporate a more holistic approach to patient treatment.



## Results

**Enhanced Social Interactions and Emotional Support:** AAT consistently demonstrated a positive impact on social interactions and emotional support, particularly evident among patients with chronic conditions like schizophrenia.

**Reduction in Anxiety and Stress:** Significant reductions in anxiety and stress are reported across various studies, including among acutely depressed patients and those in acute care settings, with interactions typically involving dogs.

**Improvements in Clinical Outcomes:** There are notable improvements in specific clinical outcomes such as pain, anxiety, and fatigue, particularly highlighted in acute care settings where AAT sessions show statistically significant reductions in these symptoms.

**Benefits Across Diverse Demographics:** The benefits of AAT extend across a range of patient demographics, from children to the elderly, demonstrating its potential to enhance mental health outcomes across various psychiatric and medical conditions.

## Methodology

This systematic review aims to evaluate the effectiveness of AAT in psychiatric inpatients by examining improvements in psychiatric symptoms, social functioning, and quality of life. We will include studies that focus on psychiatric inpatients affected by acute or chronic disorders, where AAT is used as a deliberate part of the therapeutic plan. Preference will be given to randomized controlled trials, although non-randomized controlled studies, quasi-experimental studies, and observational studies with control groups will also be considered if they provide clear and relevant data. Excluded from this review will be studies focusing solely on outpatient settings, those lacking clear methodology, case reports, opinion pieces, reviews without original data, and studies with insufficient details on AAT protocols or outcomes. This review will prioritize studies with valid and reliable outcome measures and a rigorous description of methodology, participant characteristics, intervention specifics, and outcomes, to ensure that conclusions drawn are robust and applicable to clinical practice.

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## Discussion

The consistent positive impacts of AAT on social interactions and emotional support are especially beneficial in settings treating chronic conditions like schizophrenia, where it helps mitigate feelings of isolation and fosters a supportive therapeutic community. The significant reductions in anxiety and stress observed in studies, including those involving acutely depressed and acute care patients, highlight AAT's potential to enhance overall treatment efficacy and patient well-being. Furthermore, the measurable improvements in clinical outcomes such as pain, anxiety, and fatigue underline AAT's role as an effective non-pharmacological intervention, potentially reducing the need for medication and associated costs. Given its efficacy across various demographics, AAT has the potential to be a valuable addition to personalized medicine strategies, improving adherence and satisfaction among a wide range of patient groups. These findings positively argue for the integration of AAT into therapeutic regimens, but emphasize the need for further research to standardize protocols and clarify mechanisms, ensuring effective and ethical implementation in clinical practices.