Effectiveness of an Animal Assisted Therapy program in adults with autism spectrum disorder

**Background:** Effective treatments of highly prevalent stress-related outcomes such as depression and anxiety are understudied in adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This is the first randomized controlled study that explores the effects of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) with dogs on perceived stress, psychological symptoms (including agoraphobia), social responsiveness, and self-esteem in adults with ASD.

**Methods:** Between January 19, 2015 and July 13, 2017, a randomized controlled trial with baseline, post-intervention, and ten-week follow-up was conducted at a mental health care organization in the Netherlands. In total, 53 adults with ASD with normal to high intelligence were randomized in an intervention (N=27) versus waiting list control group (N=26).

**Results:**

The adherence rate of 98% to the therapy program was very high compared to 62.92% in other ASD studies.

**Interpretation:** The remarkable adherence to the therapy program by study participants indicates that this AAT program is feasible and participants are very motivated to receive it. The program’s clinically relevant effects indicate that AAT with dogs can be used to reduce perceived stress and symptoms of agoraphobia, and to improve social responsiveness in adults with ASD with normal to high intelligence. No effects were found for self-esteem.

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The graphs show the changes in perceived stress, impairments in social responsiveness, psychological symptoms, and self-esteem over time. The adherence rate of 98% to the therapy program was very high compared to 62.92% in other ASD studies.