

Humor And Behavior in Psychiatric Hospitalization: What do Family Members Say About Canine-assisted Therapy?

Humor e Comportamento na Internação Psiquiátrica: O Que Dizem os Familiares Sobre a Cinoterapia?

Humor y Comportamiento en la Hospitalización Psiquiátrica: ¿Qué Dicen Los Familiares Sobre La Terapia Asistida Con Perros?

RESUMO

Objetivo: compreender a percepção de familiares acerca da Cinoterapia no cuidado de pessoas internadas em Unidade de Saúde Mental. **Métodos:** pesquisa do tipo descritiva e exploratória, realizada entre abril e novembro de 2024, com familiares de usuários internados em Unidade de Saúde Mental de um hospital universitário localizado na região central do Estado do Rio Grande do Sul. A coleta dos dados ocorreu por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas. Os dados foram analisados a partir da Análise de Conteúdo Temática, com apoio do software MAXQDA 24 para organização, categorização e elaboração de uma nuvem de palavras. **Resultado:** os familiares percebem que a Cinoterapia proporciona efeitos emocionais e terapêuticos aos usuários, além de favorecer mudanças positivas no humor, comportamento e nos vínculos. **Conclusão:** a Cinoterapia configura-se como uma estratégia de cuidado alternativo e humanizado em saúde mental que contribui para a reabilitação psicossocial de usuários em crise aguda de sofrimento psíquico.

DESCRIPTORES: Família; Unidade hospitalar de psiquiatria; Saúde mental; Terapia assistida com animais; Humanização da assistência.

ABSTRACT

Objective: To understand the perception of family members regarding Canine-Assisted Therapy in the care of people hospitalized in a Mental Health Unit. **Methods:** A descriptive and exploratory study was conducted between April and November 2024 with family members of patients hospitalized in a Mental Health Unit of a university hospital located in the central region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using Thematic Content Analysis, with the support of MAXQDA 24 software for organization, categorization, and the creation of a word cloud. **Results:** Family members perceive that Canine-Assisted Therapy provides emotional and therapeutic effects to patients, in addition to promoting positive changes in mood, behavior, and relationships. **Conclusion:** Canine-Assisted Therapy is configured as an alternative and humanized care strategy in mental health that contributes to the psychosocial rehabilitation of patients in acute crisis of psychic suffering.

DESCRIPTORS: Family; Psychiatric hospital unit; Mental health; Animal-assisted therapy; Humanization of care.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Comprender la percepción de los familiares sobre la Terapia Asistida con Caninos en la atención a personas hospitalizadas en una Unidad de Salud Mental. **Métodos:** Se realizó un estudio descriptivo y exploratorio entre abril y noviembre de 2024 con familiares de pacientes hospitalizados en una Unidad de Salud Mental de un hospital universitario ubicado en la región central del estado de Rio Grande do Sul. La recolección de datos se realizó mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas. Los datos se analizaron mediante Análisis de Contenido Temático, con el apoyo del software MAXQDA 24 para la organización, categorización y creación de una nube de palabras. **Resultados:** Los familiares perciben que la Terapia Asistida con Caninos proporciona efectos emocionales y terapéuticos a los pacientes, además de promover cambios positivos en el estado de ánimo, el comportamiento y las relaciones. **Conclusión:** La Terapia Asistida con Caninos se configura como una estrategia de atención alternativa y humanizada en salud mental que contribuye a la rehabilitación psicossocial de pacientes en crisis agudas de sufrimiento psíquico.

DESCRIPTORES: Familia; Unidad hospitalaria psiquiátrica; Salud mental; Terapia asistida con animales; Humanización del cuidado.

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the family is seen as a group of people who are close and care about each other, and who think of themselves as part of the same unit, based on how the members themselves see who's in it. The family has been included in the care plan for people suffering from mental illness since the Brazilian Psychiatric Reform (RPB) process, as it has come to be understood as a privileged setting for providing care that supports the life and health of individuals, either fully or partially. Thus, the family has become essential for improving the effectiveness of care and promoting the resocialization of people suffering from mental illness⁽²⁻³⁾.

By recognizing the relevance of the life context and support networks, including the family, the RPB redirected mental health care to territorial and community-based services, proposing comprehensive and continuous care. Thus, specialized beds or Mental Health Units (USM) were designated in general hospitals, which should guarantee humane and comprehensive care to individuals, from short hospitalizations until

their condition stabilizes. As a result, the hospitalization of people suffering from mental illness now only occurs in moments of acute crisis, when all territorial care resources are insufficient⁽⁴⁾.

Humanized care, guided by the National Humanization Policy, involves the qualities of health workers in their interaction with users and family members, such as empathy, skilled listening, respect, and an ethical attitude. In addition, it presupposes an environment and resources that facilitate better care for the needs of those assisted and that dignify the treatment offered⁽⁵⁾.

In this vein, one humanizing care practice is the inclusion of trained animals in the treatment of people suffering from mental illness, especially in hospital settings⁽⁶⁻⁷⁾. It is known that the human-animal relationship provides numerous benefits for both, especially for the mental health of humans. In this context, some animals such as horses, dogs, and rabbits have been integrated into treatments as co-therapists to promote the health of individuals in various contexts. This practice has come to be understood as Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT)^(6,8).

Among AATs is Canine Therapy,

which is characterized by the use of dogs as co-therapists. It is known that the role of dogs in Canine Therapy is fundamental and therapeutic for people's overall health, as it positively influences physical, psychological, and social aspects. In relation to mental health, canine therapy can promote improved self-perception, reduce anxiety, improve mood, and facilitate the establishment of emotional bonds⁽⁷⁾.

Given the importance of including animals and family in the therapy of people suffering from mental illness, the following research question arises: What is the perception of family members about canine therapy in the care of people admitted to mental health units? Thus, the objective is to understand the perception of family members about canine therapy in the care of people admitted to mental health units.

METHOD

This study consists of qualitative descriptive and exploratory research. It was conducted in a mental health unit at a university hospital in a municipality in the central region of the state of Rio

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The questions were as follows: a) Has your family member ever mentioned participating in any activities with dogs here at the unit? Tell me what they said; b) What do you think about activities with dogs? c) Do you think activities with dogs can be beneficial? Any changes? d) Have you noticed any changes in your family member's treatment when they participate in activities with dogs? What changes? e) Have you noticed any changes in the treatment of your family

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When analyzing the interviews, two categories were organized: perception of the emotional and therapeutic effects of dog therapy; and changes in mood, behavior, and relationships resulting from dog therapy. In addition, a word cloud was created with the most recurring terms in the statements, presented in Figure 1.

A word cloud visualization of the text, with the word "cães" (dogs) being the largest and most central. Other prominent words include "animais" (animals), "atividade" (activity), "paciente" (patient), "importante" (important), "vida" (life), "familiar" (family), "tratamento" (treatment), "cachorro" (dog), "pessoas" (people), "unidade" (unit), "problemas" (problems), "benefícios" (benefits), "consegue" (can), "interagir" (interact), "participa" (participates), "conectar" (connect), "ajudar" (help), "ambiente" (environment), "bicho" (pet), "bichinhos" (pets), "animalzinho" (pet), "impressão" (impression), "acomoda" (accommodates), "gostou" (liked), "cuidado" (care), "cuidar" (take care of), "cachorros" (dogs), "casa" (house), "adorar" (adore), "hospital" (hospital), "cavalo" (horse), "terapia" (therapy), "gosta" (likes), "paciente" (patient), "bom" (good), "natureza" (nature), "amor" (love), "carinho" (affection), "percebe" (perceives), "melhora" (improves), "escutado" (heard), "ajuda" (helps), "saúde" (health), "cinoterapia" (physiotherapy), "pacientes" (patients), "primeira" (first), "atividades" (activities), "animal" (animal), and "contato" (contact). The words are arranged in a circular pattern around the central word "cães".

Perception of the emotional and therapeutic effects of dog therapy

The interviewees reported that contact with the co-therapist dog promotes distraction during a crisis, promoting greater comfort for the user with themselves and their environment, as well as providing feelings of joy and tranquility.

When you have contact with the animal, you forget all your problems, everything! It is a being that does not talk to you, but gives you a lot of attention. (F12)

I understand that it is good for the patient, that it will make them happier, more comfortable with the environment, with the situation they are experiencing... The animal will help the person feel better, at least for a few minutes, a few hours. (F18)

I understand that it is a way of trying to connect with animals, that they can bring tranquility, a search for peace... (F19)

Family members realize that animal-assisted therapy contributes positively to coping with mental health crises by promoting connection with the internal and external world, as well as promoting relaxation and improving the mental state of users.

[...] He loves it (canine therapy)... For my son who is in this situation (mental health crisis), I think it's wonderful! (F6)

[...] you connect in some way with an animal... it helps a lot with mental health. I believe you connect more with your inner self... reflect more on that activity. (F11)

Very beautiful, for me it's great! [...] animals calm you down a lot. The activity, the work itself, is what will really lift your spirits.

(F21)

Changes in mood, behavior, and bonds resulting from canine therapy

Participants identified improvements in users' mood and behavior, such as greater enthusiasm, attention, autonomy, communication, and motor coordination, reflecting positively on their mental health.

[...] They (users) have more autonomy to overcome the symptoms they are experiencing... They see the animals and become excited... We notice that, in this sense, they improve. (F1)

[...] It must be good (canine therapy), because contact with animals must have benefits for them (users), both mentally and in terms of motor coordination... (F9)

[...] He (user) has definitely become calmer... he is more talkative. He is more interested in caring for animals and people, something he didn't used to talk about... (F12)

I think it's very important! I believe that mood improves, everything improves with the animal! (F17)

For family members, the dog is perceived as a significant companion, capable of reducing the users' feelings of loneliness and promoting changes in bonds, stimulating the development of a sense of care.

A lot (changes in treatment)! There are people who learn to live with the animal and become attached to it, which makes an incredible change! [...] My brother loves animals. He uses the animal as a companion, as a friend. (F2)

[...] I think it can (canine therapy

bring benefits), because if he has a dog... he has a commitment to care for and look after the animal. It's already a big thing that he has an interest in caring for it. (F3)

He (the user) has always liked animals. Seeing a dog in treatment is very good! It must be very rewarding, because it helps to improve things a little. Their behavior, their understanding of the lives of animals... (F7)

DISCUSSION

The sociodemographic profile of family members indicated a predominance of women (15) in the role of caregivers for people admitted to the USM, the majority of whom were mothers (6). It is known that, historically, the care of family members often falls on women, especially mothers, as a result of social and cultural constructs. Thus, the exercise of care is commonly experienced by them as a duty permeated by emotional symbolism and as part of their identity^(2,10).

Regarding marital status, there was a prevalence of people without a partner, varying between single (8), divorced (4), and widowed (2). This data may be related to the adoption of neoliberal logic by the State and the consequent vulnerability of families, which has contributed to a reduction in the number of family members and the adoption of different strategies such as (re) arrangements of family roles or solidarity among members⁽¹⁾.

With regard to education, there was a prevalence among participants with a high school diploma (12). It is understood that social determinants such as age, gender, ethnicity, education, income, among others, influence the origin and perpetuation of mental health problems, as well as the well-being of individuals. In addition to these determinants playing a causal role, they are

also related to how people experience illnesses, how they react to them, and how they seek help⁽¹¹⁾.

In view of this, it is considered that both the presence of the family in mental health care and the practice of dog therapy favor comprehensive care for the individual receiving assistance^(1,7). The presence of the family is based on the understanding that the mental state of the person suffering from psychological distress impacts the family unit, especially in situations of acute crisis, as it requires constant attention from family members. The family has diverse ways of functioning and communicating that can also contribute to the individual's suffering. In this sense, there is a clear need to include the family in the therapeutic plans of users, with a view to improving care actions⁽³⁾.

Regarding the first category, family members perceive that contact with the dog promotes distraction during the crisis and promotes greater comfort for the user with themselves and their environment, in addition to providing feelings of joy and tranquility. A mental health crisis is characterized as a moment of psychological disorganization, in which the individual is temporarily unable to self-regulate⁽¹²⁾. In this case, the presence of animals provides a welcoming and comforting environment for those receiving care, helping them to manage their emotions. This is because interaction with dogs promotes the release of endorphins, thus contributing to feelings of well-being, security, and belonging in individuals⁽¹³⁾.

According to the participants, the connection between the user and the co-therapy dog brings joy and tranquility to their loved ones. This connection with the animal can reduce stress-related parameters, such as cortisol levels, heart rate, and blood pressure, in addition to facilitating social interaction and promoting positive emotions^(8,14). Thus, canine therapy can provide feelings of tranquility, happiness, relaxation, good humor, and satisfaction in

participants^(7,15).

In addition, family members realize that dog therapy contributes positively to coping with the crisis by promoting connection with the internal and external world and promoting relaxation and improvement in the mental state of users. For Nise da Silveira⁽¹⁶⁾, a psychiatrist who pioneered the use of animals in the treatment of people with mental illness, the human-animal relationship acts as a catalyst, as it is capable of coordinating and (re)ordering the individual's mental functions, bringing them into harmony with the external world and enabling their psychosocial rehabilitation. In this sense, the relationship with dogs encourages humans to accept their current situation and, gradually, the recovery process. Therefore, canine therapy is characterized as an effective and accessible care strategy in the field of mental health.

In the second category, respondents identified improvements in users' mood and behavior, such as greater enthusiasm, attention, autonomy, communication, and motor coordination, reflecting positively on their mental health. It is understood, therefore, that canine therapy can contribute to the improvement not only of socio-emotional functioning, but also of behavioral, cognitive, and physical aspects. Thus, the practice is configured as a recreational, motivational, and educational strategy⁽⁸⁾.

It is noteworthy that canine therapy is capable of stimulating psychic functions such as perception, memory, attention, and reasoning⁽¹⁴⁾. As a humanized care practice, it can transform the hospital environment in order to reduce tension in the space, improve the mood of users, interpersonal relationships, and communication^(7,17). It is understood that canine therapy, as an AAT, promotes emotional and social support for those assisted, which enhances interpersonal skills, communication, and meaningful interactions. This is due to the sensory stimuli and the context of trust to which the individual is ex-

posed during the activity. Stimuli such as touch, warmth, and petting the dog activate the oxytocin system and generate the reported positive effects⁽¹⁴⁾.

Canine therapy also contributes to a more independent life⁽¹⁷⁾. A study⁽⁶⁾ points out that the use of guide dogs for people with visual impairment helped stabilize the individuals' locomotion, which persisted in the absence of the dog. In this context, using the dog's guide to detect tactile properties can improve the stability of individuals' locomotion. Furthermore, it helped improve fine motor skills, improve balance, and provided greater autonomy to users. It is worth noting that, although the present study did not include family members of visually impaired people, the same result was noticed by the study participants.

Furthermore, participants realized that dogs are significant companions, capable of reducing users' feelings of loneliness and promoting changes in bonds, stimulating the development of a sense of care. Among the benefits of the relationship with dogs, especially in canine therapy, are improvements in social, empathic, and coping skills, as well as a reduction in psychological distress and feelings of loneliness^(6,15).

It is recognized that, for some people, it may be easier to form an animal-human bond than a human-human bond, given that animals are indifferent and do not judge personal characteristics⁽⁸⁾. In this context, the patient can experience the unconditional acceptance of the dog, without the need to adapt to external expectations or even suffer discrimination⁽¹⁷⁾. Thus, the animal can promote experiences of mutual acceptance, becoming the individual's first relationship in their maturation process⁽¹⁶⁾, offering social support and acting as a buffer in stressful situations⁽⁸⁾.

In addition, the figure of the co-therapist dog facilitates social interactions, the establishment of emotional bonds, and promotes feelings of tranquility,

affection, and good humor⁽⁷⁾. It is understood that the presence of the dog enables the individual to recover the "being-with," that is, the sense of otherness. By representing home and family, companionship, and witnessing human afflictions, dogs enable experiences of care and love for individuals who, in turn, end up reproducing such experiences in their other relationships⁽¹⁶⁾. It should be noted that this change in the way of bonding and the transfer of care and love, made possible by the dog, were noticed by family members during

the treatment of users at the USM.

CONCLUSION-

The study analyzed family members' perceptions of canine therapy in the care of people admitted to the Mental Health Unit, highlighting positive emotional and therapeutic effects, such as improvement in acute crises, comfort, joy, tranquility, and strengthening of users' internal and external connections. The practice was associated with changes in mood, behavior, communi-

cation, autonomy, motor coordination, and bond formation, with the dog being perceived as a companion that reduces loneliness and enhances care.

It is concluded that canine therapy is a humanized and alternative care strategy with the potential to promote psychosocial rehabilitation in acute crisis contexts. However, the short period of hospitalization limited the interventions, indicating the need for more robust research, such as randomized clinical trials, to scientifically validate its benefits and expand its application.

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