

---

# A fluffy friend can chase stress away

---

**VCU's Center for Human-Animal Interaction is researching whether therapy dogs can relieve students' anxiety, just as the dogs can help hospital patients**

---



**WRITTEN BY**  
Jessica Mayfield

**TAGS**  
CHAI, stress, therapy dogs

**PUBLISHED**  
Dec. 5, 2016

**F**or students in panic mode over a looming exam, here's a possible stress reliever – one with four legs, soft fur and an irrepressibly wagging tail.

Dogs may help reduce students' stress levels, just as they do with some hospital patients. Researchers from VCU's Center for Human-Animal Interaction are studying whether that's true.

CHAI was established in the VCU School



A therapy dog at a recent “Paws for Stress” event. (Photo by Jessica Mayfield)

‘We saw all these news stories in the media about dogs reducing stress in students, but we didn’t see any evidence that anyone had researched to see if it indeed did,’ says Dr. Sandra Barker.

of Medicine in 2001 and is housed in the Department of Psychiatry. As the fall semester winds down, the center’s experts have been participating in “Paws for Stress” events hosted by University Counseling Services. The events, held in the Student Commons, give students the opportunity to play with dogs during a particularly demanding time of final projects and high-stakes tests.

CHAI’s dog therapy program is called Dogs On Call. The dogs are well trained and come from willing volunteers. Each dog and its owner must go through an application process to become part of the exclusive Dogs On Call team.

But the “Paws for Stress” sessions aren’t simply playtime; there’s science going on.

“We saw all these news stories in the media about dogs reducing stress in students, but we didn’t see any evidence that anyone had researched to see if it indeed did,” said Dr. Sandra Barker, the director of CHAI and a professor of psychiatry at the medical school.

So Barker designed a study to see whether evidence supports the claims that playing with a dog can reduce anxiety.

For the study, participating students rated how stressful they felt immediately before and immediately after interacting with the dogs; researchers then compared the ratings. The conclusion was that the dogs helped reduce stress – regardless of whether students had a high level of stress or not.

The research has limitations, of course. For one thing, the students recorded the stress levels themselves, so the data was self-reported.

Chelsea Schmidt, a freshman at VCU,



Dogs On Call is the name of the therapy dog program of VCU's Center for Human-Animal Interaction. (Photo by Jessica Mayfield)

'We also have seen studies that interacting with dogs can benefit kids with autism and our psychiatric patients with fear and anxiety. Currently, we are looking at the benefits of our therapy dogs with patients before medical procedures.'

participated in one of the "Paws for Stress" therapy events.

"I feel like it did lower my stress level by distracting me for a little while from what was going on, so playing with a therapy dog before a test would probably help," she said. "I would recommend therapy dogs to anyone who isn't allergic or scared of dogs!"

Students are not the only ones who can benefit from therapy dogs. Other studies have shown that hospital patients can also benefit.

"We're collecting patient satisfaction data right now," Barker said. "We have some of our medical students helping us do that." She said it's "overwhelmingly possible" that patients will react positively to dogs.

Other studies have also concluded that interaction with companion animals can be beneficial to your health.

"The American Heart Association published a white paper revealing all of the studies that have been done on cardiovascular risk factors. They concluded that pet ownership, particularly dog ownership, is associated with reduced cardiovascular risk – and that's huge," Barker said.

"We also have seen studies that interacting with dogs can benefit kids with autism and our psychiatric patients with fear and anxiety. Currently, we are looking at the benefits of our therapy dogs with patients before medical procedures and looking further at the benefits of pet ownership in our students. There are many benefits. The field is still young, but it's promising."



Playing with dogs may help relieve stress. (Photo by Jessica Mayfield)

### How you can help

The Center for Human-Animal Interaction is nonprofit and relies mainly on donations. It is a 501(c)(3) charity affiliated with the Medical College of Virginia Foundation.

With the help of donations, researchers can continue doing research and educating the next generation of health professionals. You can donate on the center's website at [www.chai.vcu.edu](http://www.chai.vcu.edu). •



VCU researchers are studying whether interacting with therapy dogs can alleviate students' stress. (Photo by Jessica Mayfield)