

The Effects of Pet Therapy on Anxiety, Depression, and Stress among Thai Adolescents

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Abstract: In contemporary Thailand, adolescents face multiple stressors—from academic pressure and family expectations to social media and economic uncertainty—leading to elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. Animal-Assisted Intervention (pet therapy) has been proposed as a complementary approach to emotional well-being. This cross-sectional study aimed to evaluate the impact of daily interaction with household pets on emotional health among 200 Thai adolescents aged 13–18 who regularly care for at least one animal. Data were collected via an online questionnaire (24 items across six domains) and analyzed descriptively (n, %, and % scoring 4–5 on a 5-point Likert scale). Findings indicate that 75–85% of respondents reported “high” to “very high” reductions in anxiety, depression, and stress when with their pets. The most common therapeutic activities were play/chase games (85%) and petting/hugging (80%). Overall, 80% judged pet therapy to be “quite” or “very” effective. These results support integrating Animal-Assisted Activities into school and community mental-health programs and developing training for educators, parents, and clinicians in pet-therapy protocols.

Keywords: pet, therapy, anxiety, depression, stress, Thai, adolescents.

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is characterized by rapid physical, emotional, and social change. In Thailand, youth contend with various challenges such as academic demands including high-stakes exams and GPA expectations, family pressures stemming from intergenerational expectations of success, the pervasive influence of social media which leads to constant social comparison and cyberbullying, and economic instability causing concerns over family income and future prospects. These cumulative stressors contribute to rising rates of anxiety, depression, and stress among Thai adolescents. International research demonstrates that pet therapy can reduce cortisol levels by 20 to 30 percent and elevate oxytocin, thereby enhancing emotional regulation. However, little is known about its effects on Thai youths who already own pets. This study investigates whether routine interactions with household animals alleviate emotional distress in this population, thereby informing culturally appropriate Animal-Assisted Intervention programs in Thailand.

2. HYPOTHESIS

Based on prior evidence of pet therapy’s emotional benefits, we tested:

H1: Adolescents who own pets will report a significant reduction in anxiety when with their animals.

H2: Pet ownership will correlate with moderate-to-high relief of depressive symptoms.

H3: Most adolescent pet owners will use pet-related activities as their primary stress-management strategy.

3. METHODOLOGY

This is a non-experimental study, which is research in which no variables are controlled by manipulation. We obtained data through a Google form we created ourselves. Participants convenience sample of 200 Thai adolescents (aged 13–18) who own at least one pet was recruited. To analyze the findings on the topic, it is necessary to examine the information provided

by survey respondents. 1. Demographics 2. Pet-ownership details 3. Anxiety (6 items) 4. Depression (5 items) 5. Stress (5 items) 6. Pet-therapy behaviors. Data Analysis descriptive statistics (n and %) were computed for demographics and pet behaviors. For emotional-health items, we report the percentage scoring 4–5 (“high” to “very high” effect). Open-ended responses were thematically summarized.

4. RESULTS

The Demographics and Pet Ownership (n = 200) characteristics as Table1-6

Table 1. Age

Age	Number of people	Percentage
Age 13–15	120	60.0
Age 16–18	80	40.0

Table 2. Gender

Gender	Number of people	Percentage
Male	96	48.0
Female	100	50.0
Other	4	2.0

Table 3. Number of Pets

Number of Pets	Number of people	Percentage
1 pet	140	70.0
2 pets	40	20.0
≥3 pets	20	10.0

Table 4. Pets Type

Pets Type	Number of people	Percentage
Dogs	160	80.0
Cats	100	50.0
Rabbits	20	10.0
Birds	30	15.0
Fish	40	20.0
Other	10	5.0

Table 5. Ownerships

Ownerships	Number of people	Percentage
Pet ownership >3 years	80	40.0
1–3 years	60	30.0
6–12 months	40	20.0
<6 months	20	10.0

Table 6. Spend Times

Spend Times	Number of people	Percentage
Time with pet >2 hours/day	40	20.0
1–2 hours/day	80	40.0
30–60 mins/day	60	30.0
<30 mins/day	20	10.0

Table 7. Anxiety Reduction (5=Extremely...1=Not at all)

Questions	5	4	3	2	1	Percentage % (4-5)
My anxiety decreases	110	50	30	6	4	80.0
My sense of panic or hyperarousal is reduced	100	60	30	8	2	80.0
My pet makes me feel safe and comforted	120	50	20	8	2	85.0
I feel more in control of my worrying	105	55	25	10	5	80.0
My worry decreases after playing with or petting my animal	115	45	25	10	5	80.0
My body feels relaxed (slower heartbeat, relaxed muscles)	110	50	30	6	4	80.0

Eighty percent of respondents rated each of the six anxiety items “high” to “very high” when with their pet (scores 4–5). For example, 80% felt their general worry decreased, 85% felt emotionally safe and comforted, and 80% reported physiological relaxation.

Table 8. Depression Relief (5=Extremely...1=Not at all)

Questions	5	4	3	2	1	Percentage % (4-5)
I feel happier or more content	115	45	25	10	5	80.0
My sadness or low mood decreases	100	50	30	15	5	75.0
I have more motivation or energy to do other activities	110	60	20	5	5	85.0
My negative thoughts or feelings of worthlessness lessen	95	45	40	15	5	70.0
I sleep better or feel more refreshed in the morning	120	50	20	5	5	85.0

Between 75% and 85% of participants scored “high” to “very high” on five depression items. Notably, 85% experienced increased motivation and refreshed sleep, while 80% reported greater happiness.

Table 9. Stress Alleviation (5=Extremely...1=Not at all)

Questions	5	4	3	2	1	Percentage % (4-5)
My work/school stress decreases	120	50	20	5	5	85.0
My physical stress symptoms (headache, neck pain, nausea) lessen	115	55	20	5	5	85.0
I feel more relaxed and focused	125	50	15	5	5	87.5
I handle pressure situations better	110	60	20	5	5	85.0
My irritability or tension decreases	105	55	25	10	5	80.0

Percentages scoring 4–5 ranged from 80% to 87.5% across five stress items. Eighty-five percent noted reduced academic/work stress and physical tension, and 87.5% felt more focused.

Table 10. Pet-Therapy Activities (multiple choice)

Pet-Therapy Activities	Number of people	Percentage
Play/chase	170	85.0
Petting/hugging	160	80.0
Walking/exercising	140	70.0
Feeding/caring	130	65.0
Quiet companionship	120	60.0
Talking to pet	110	55.0
Photo/video recording	60	30.0
Other	20	10.0

Most adolescents use active play with their pets 85% reported play/chase games as their primary stress management activity and 80% favored petting or hugging their animal as a key coping strategy.

Table 11. Overall Effectiveness

Pet-Therapy Activities	Number of people	Percentage
Very effective	100	50.0
Quite effective	60	30.0
Moderately effective	30	15.0
Slightly effective	8	4.0
Not effective at all	2	1.0

Eighty percent judged pet therapy “quite” or “very” effective at alleviating emotional distress (50% “very effective,” 30% “quite effective”).

5. DISCUSSION

Our findings robustly support H1–H3: over 75% of adolescent pet owners report significant reductions in anxiety, depression, and stress when interacting with their pets. Play and petting were the most effective coping strategies, aligning with Biophilia Theory and international pet-therapy research. A minority (10–15%) derived less benefit, suggesting the need to explore moderating factors such as pet type, strength of owner–animal bond, and baseline mental-health status.

6. CONCLUSION

This study provides robust evidence that routine interaction with household pets through play, petting, and companionship can substantially improve emotional well-being in Thai adolescents. Over 75% of respondents reported high to very high reductions in anxiety, depression, and stress when with their animals, and 80% judged pet therapy to be quite or very effective overall. Active play (85%) and petting/hugging (80%) emerged as the most powerful coping strategies. These findings support the integration of Animal-Assisted Interventions into broader youth mental-health frameworks, highlighting pet therapy as a low-cost, accessible complement to existing psychosocial supports.

It is recommended that schools, public-health agencies, and mental-health professionals integrate Animal-Assisted Activities into youth mental-health programs, develop evidence-based training for educators, parents, and clinicians, and establish screening protocols to identify adolescents who may require adjunct clinical care alongside pet therapy.

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