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Canine-Assisted Therapy: Treatment of PTSD in Combat Veterans

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Background: Every day, 22 veterans diagnosed with combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) commit suicide. Veterans diagnosed with PTSD are also more likely to experience a decreased quality of life including: self-destructive behavior, social isolation, and severe anxiety. Mental illness can carry a negative connotation in the military, with service members under pressure to remain stoic. Unfortunately, fear of ostracism and loss of status, community, and benefits can result in decreased treatment-seeking behaviors. Current treatment options include psychotherapy and psychopharmacological methods, which can lead to misuse and abuse of these substances.

Purpose: The purpose of this evidence-based project was to explore the impact of canine therapy and how it can improve quality of life for war veterans diagnosed with combat-related PTSD.

Methods: A review of the literature was conducted utilizing Academic Search Elite, Academic Search Premier, Education Full Text, MEDLINE, and PsycINFO databases. Key words used include: veteran, posttraumatic stress disorder, PTSD, canine therapy, animal assisted therapy, and pet therapy, with multiple combinations and truncations. A total of 118 articles were returned. After reviewing for relevance to the PICOT question, 12 were retained for inclusion in the project.

Results/Summary/Discussion: Results indicate that veterans can derive both social and psychological benefit from therapeutic canine interactions as a form of non-pharmaceutical treatment for PTSD. Canine therapy is associated with decreased symptoms of PTSD, decreased need for medication, and improved feelings of social acceptance. Canine therapy also provides a non-stigmatizing, non-pharmaceutical alternative treatment intervention.

Nursing Implications: Canine therapy can be integrated into treatment plans using a comprehensive multidisciplinary approach to increase the quality of life for veterans with PTSD. Nurses are instrumental in advancing this treatment modality by becoming more aware of signs and symptoms of combat-related PTSD in patients and being knowledgeable about the canine service programs available to veterans. Further research is needed to determine reliability of this method of adjunct treatment for PTSD and associated symptoms.

Title:

Canine-Assisted Therapy: Treatment of PTSD in Combat Veterans

Keywords:

Canine therapy, PTSD and Veterans

References:

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Abstract Summary:

Veterans with PTSD may be hesitant to seek psychological treatment because of the negative connotations associated with the diagnosis. Canine therapy can offer a non-stigmatizing, non-pharmaceutical option. Veterans can derive both social and psychological benefits from therapeutic canine interactions, thus improving quality of life.

Content Outline:

- **Background**
 - Every day, 22 veterans diagnosed with combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) commit suicide.
 - Combat veterans diagnosed with PTSD are at a higher risk of decreased quality of life including: self-destructive behavior, social isolation, severe anxiety, and suicide.
 - Current treatments for PTSD include: psychotherapy which includes talk therapy, exposure therapy, and many forms of cognitive behavioral therapy, in addition to psychopharmacological methods such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors and anti-anxiety medications.
- **Purpose**
 - Explore the impact of canine therapy and how it can improve quality of life for war veterans diagnosed with PTSD.
- **Methods**
 - Search terms used: veterans, PTSD, canine therapy, and pet therapy.
 - Databases utilized: Academic Search Elite, Academic Search Premier, Education Full Text, MEDLINE, and PsycINFO.
 - Results obtained: 118 articles initially, and only 12 were retained for inclusion in this project.
- **Results**
 - Veterans can derive both social and psychological benefit from therapeutic canine interactions as a form of non-pharmaceutical treatment for PTSD.
- **Summary**
 - The studies overall indicate a decrease in PTSD and associated symptoms when a veteran uses the services of a therapy canine.
- **Discussion**
 - Canine therapy is associated with decreased symptoms of PTSD, decreased need for medication, and improved feelings of social acceptance. Canine therapy also provides a non-stigmatizing, non-pharmaceutical alternative treatment intervention.
- **Nursing Implications**
 - Nurses are instrumental in advancing this treatment modality by becoming more aware of signs and symptoms of combat-related PTSD in patients and being knowledgeable about the canine service programs available to veterans.

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Professional Experience: Student Nurse clinical experience Spring 2017 at Barnes-Jewish Extended Care. Student Nurse clinical experience Fall 2017 at The John Cochran Division VA hospital and DePaul hospital SSM. Student Nurse clinical experience Spring 2018 at St. Clare hospital SSM, Missouri Baptist, and Children's Hospital. Student Nurse with set graduation date of December 2018. Accepted into the Student Nurse Externship Program sponsored by UMSL for the summer of 2018, placed in the Neuro ICU, floor 10400.

Author Summary: Jessica is a nursing student at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, graduating in December 2018. She has experience in several hospitals in the greater St.Louis area, including the John Cochran Division VA hospital where she had the opportunity to care for veterans dealing with PTSD and the ramifications it brings to their everyday lives. This is where she saw the need for research into alternative treatment modalities for one of this populations' most pressing problems.

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Author Summary: Emily is a nursing student at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, graduating in December 2018. She has experience in patient care in several hospitals in the greater St. Louis area, including at the John Cochrane Division of the VA Medical Center. In her time at the VA, she saw the need for more affordable, less stigmatizing treatment of patients suffering with post traumatic stress disorder.