Evaluation of Dog Walking Programs to Promote Nurse Health

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**Significance and Background:** Obesity is a common problem among Americans and combined with a sedentary lifestyle has a negative impact on morbidity and mortality.\(^1\)\(^2\) However, this problem is not unique to patients. In a survey of over 2,100 female nurses conducted by the University of Maryland’s School of Nursing, 55% surveyed were overweight or obese citing stress as a factor.\(^3\) The modern nurse is a critical member of the health care team. However, current workplace demands put them at risk for an unhealthy lifestyle. There is a critical need to focus on health promotion of nurses that lead to improving and promoting health and wellness.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, adults ranging from 18 years of age to those over 65, need a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate-intense aerobic activity every week.\(^4\) However, in the United States there are low numbers of adults that actually meet these recommendations, and therefore, are at risk for health disparities that lead to increased morbidity and mortality.\(^4\)\(^5\) Given that the nursing population reflects the population as a whole, it is likely that this growing epidemic of inactivity translates to nurses. Nursing is the largest group of healthcare workers with 3.6 million nurses in the United States.\(^6\) Unfortunately, beginning early in their careers; some nurses do not meet the suggested weekly activity guidelines. A survey conducted by Gillen et al reported many nursing students are overweight, with many not engaging in any form of physical activity.\(^7\) Over 50% of nurses are estimated to be overweight or obese.\(^8\) Thus, obesity is one of the most common health concerns among nurses along with, arthritis, chronic pain, irritable bowel syndrome, and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.\(^9\) Work related stress can exacerbate other health issues, including obesity, hypertension and burn-out. Approximately 62% of nurses report they had considered leaving the profession, citing stress as a factor.\(^6\)\(^10\) As a result, nurses may have increased risk for a subset of diseases associated with stress and decreased physical activity.

Clinical Nurse Specialists’ training and competency provide opportunities to promote wellness initiatives to bridge the gaps in health care for nurses. Physical activity is a modifiable risk factor associated with diseases affecting the nurse population: hypertension, obesity, and stress. Walking is a low-impact form of physical exercise\(^11\) that is accessible and inexpensive.\(^12\) Walking regularly has shown to have valuable health benefits with dog walking as one intervention benefitting both nurses and their canine companions.\(^13\)

**Evaluation Methods:** To provide a review of current evidence on dog walking programs and describe a best practice intervention using dog walking as a means to enhance the health of the nurse and canine. A Clinical Nurse Specialist and a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine collaborated to review research related to dog walking benefits to both humans and canines. The review included health promotion initiatives aimed to treat common diseases affecting humans and canines including cardiovascular health, obesity, and emotional wellbeing.\(^14\)\(^20\)

**Outcomes:** Almost half of the US population owns a dog\(^21\), and several studies provide data supporting dog walking as a method to increase activity,\(^22\)\(^23\) with dog ownership cited as a primary reason for increased activity.\(^13\) Dog walking is an intervention to increase activity among nurses due to the companionship and sense of obligation a dog can provide to their owner. There are many negative implications to a sedentary lifestyle that can be counteracted through low impact exercise such as walking.\(^13\)
**Implications:** Dog walking as part of dog ownership has benefits to both human and canine. Positive outcomes of health promotion are important when planning interventions to meet the needs of the nurse population. Walking a dog provides a companion and a form of motivation to walk. More research is needed to empirically evaluate the effectiveness in different settings and populations.

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**Title:**
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**Keywords:**
Dog-walking Programs, Healthy Work Environment and Nurse self-care

**References:**


Abstract Summary:
There are many negative implications to sedentary lifestyles that can be counteracted through low impact exercise. Walking regularly has valuable health benefits and dog walking, in particular, have cumulative benefits to nurses and their canine companions. Developing evidence-based health initiatives such as dog walking programs are imperative to promote health.

Content Outline:
I. Introduction

A. sedentary lifestyle
   i. morbidity
   ii. mortality

B. interventions to motivate nurses
   i. health promotion programs
   ii. walking

II. Body

A. Health risks associated with a sedentary lifestyle
   i. population as a whole
   ii. nursing population

B. benefits of walking
   i. nursing population
   ii. benefits to canines
C. literature review of dog walking programs

D. proposed interventions

i. organization

ii. nurse leader driven

E. animal assisted therapy programs

III. conclusion

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**Professional Experience:** I have been a registered nurse for 14 years and a Clinical Nurse Specialist for 5 of the 14 years. I am currently an assistant professor at Auburn University and have conducted research in the areas of health and animal assisted therapy.

**Author Summary:** Dr. Morgan Yordy is an assistant professor in the School of Nursing at Auburn University. Her primary teaching role is within the undergraduate Baccalaureate program of study. Dr. Yordy’s research interests include Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT), student success, health promotion initiatives, health disparities, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Prior to her position as an assistant professor, she worked in staff development as a Clinical Nurse Specialist in the hospital setting.

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**Author Summary:** Dr. Graff is an Assistant Professor and clinical pathologist at Auburn University and has been an active member of the Boshell Diabetes and Metabolic Disease Research Program since 2008. Her current research projects include comparative pathologic evaluation of companion animals as models of human of human obesity and metabolic disease, specifically in the area of adipose and immune dysregulation.