

# The Effects of Interacting with Farm Animals on Selected Emotions in Older Adults`

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## Introduction

The population as a whole is aging and as a result older adults are the fastest growing segment of the population in the world. As people age, their emotional health may be impacted. They may develop feelings of loneliness, anxiousness, and helplessness due to moving into a care facility, becoming widowed, or developing health issues. Interacting with animals may help increase positive emotions and decrease negative emotions.

A study was completed by Banks and Banks (2002) that involved animal-assisted therapy at a long-term care facility. They found that the residents who interacted with animals had a reduction in loneliness scores when compared to the residents who did not interact with the animals. In a study completed by Baun, Johnson, and McCabe (2007), it was found that interacting with animals enhanced older adults' quality of life because the interactions brought value into their lives.

The purpose of this research was to determine if interacting with farm animals effects selected emotions in older adults. The selected emotions were calmness, happiness, anxiousness, and loneliness.

## Research Model

The research was conducted over the summer of 2017 at Angel Horses in Billings, MT. Angel Horses is a human service organization whose mission is to provide positive physical and emotional stimuli to people through the use of animals including horses, donkeys, dogs, and cats. For this research, I collected data for six weeks with 28 participants aged 65 years or older. The participants interacted with the animals through a variety of ways including riding horses, caring for the animals and petting the animals. The type of interaction with the animals varied for each participant.

Before each participant interacted with any of the animals, he/she was asked to indicate the extent to which he/she was presently experiencing four emotions: calmness, happiness, anxiousness, and loneliness. After completing the scales, the participant interacted with the animals for an average of 30 minutes. After interacting with the animals, the participant completed the four emotion scales a second time.

## Statistics

Calmness					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>n</i>
Pre	58.54	23.96	-1.22	.117	28
Post	63.25	24.47			

Happiness					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>n</i>
Pre	68.82	26.91	-1.48	.075	28
Post	77.39	25.36			

Anxiousness					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>n</i>
Pre	45.18	23.02	3.56	.001	28
Post	31.07	22.35			

Loneliness					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>n</i>
Pre	38.14	27.60	2.85	.004	28
Post	31.89	23.71			

## Results

The statistical analyses indicate that interacting with farm animals had a positive, significant impact on reported levels of anxiousness and loneliness. The older adults became less anxious and less lonely due to riding horses, caring for the animals, and petting the animals.

The statistical analyses indicate that interacting with farm animals had a positive, but non significant impact on reported levels of happiness and calmness though the change did approach significance for happiness. The older adults became more happy and more calm due to riding horses, caring for the animals, and petting the animals.

## Implications

The results of this study add to the body of research on the emotional effects of interacting with farm animals in the population of older adults. Humans are relational beings. Interacting with animals can meet many core psychosocial needs and can enrich the lives of all people, especially older adults. Animals provide pleasure and relaxation; deep affection and steadfast loyalty; and security. When older adults interact with animals, it can bring joy and comfort as well as contribute to healthier, happier, and even longer lives.

Based on the results of this research, Therapeutic Recreation professionals can utilize animals as a therapeutic intervention. Interacting with animals can be used to increase positive emotions and decrease negative emotions in older adults. As a result, people are more likely to flourish and live well.

There are at least two ideas for future research. First, studies should determine why there is a significant effect on negative emotions and a non significant effect on positive emotions. Second, future research should utilize a control group. This would take into account personal and environmental factors that may effect the participant's emotions

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