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## Animal Assisted Therapy and the Improvement of Mental Health of Elderly in Skilled Nursing Facilities

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# Animal Assisted Therapy and the Improvement of Mental Health of Elderly within Skilled Nursing Facilities

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## Introduction

- Skilled nursing facilities (SNFs) can be an isolating environment for elderly individuals. Due to this isolation, mental health is an important factor to consider for this community.
- My capstone idea involved promoting and improving the mental health of elderly individuals through animal assisted therapy within SNFs.

## Site Description

- ACTS Retirement-Life Communities Inc. at Indian River Estates
- Located in the city of Vero Beach FL
- ACTS has a skilled nursing facility and an outpatient facility that also provides home health services
- Rehab Department includes: Occupational therapy, Physical therapy, and Speech therapy
- Population: Geriatric community

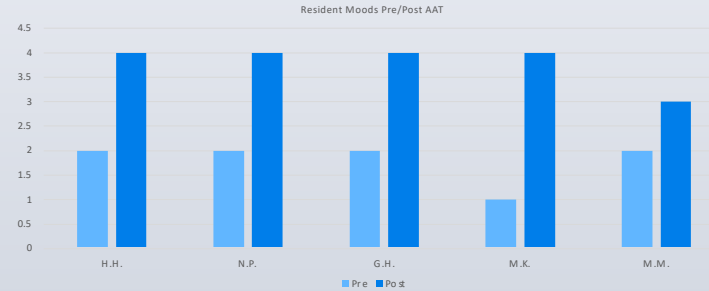


## Summary of Needs Assessment

- There is a need to bring in occupation-based treatments and to consider unconventional forms of interventions to increase engagement in meaningful occupations.
- Limited research on the effectiveness of AAT with a vulnerable population and its correlation to improved engagement in meaningful occupations.

## Literature Review Summary

- Franklin et al. (2022) found that the interaction of dogs and elderly individuals within aged care facilities had positive outcomes in which there was improvement in depressive symptoms and socioemotional behaviors.
- Koukourikos et al. (2019) found that interacting with animals alters the patient's brain's biochemistry and releases neurotransmitters that elevate mood and reduce anxiety.
- Peluso et al. (2018) discovered that interactions with animals improves quality of life and relationship skills in persons with dementia and it additionally reduces aggressiveness and anxiety.



## Capstone Project Description

A six-week program of animal assisted therapy in which residents interacted weekly with dogs for 30-45 minutes.

### Project Goals:

1. To improve overall mental health of elderly individuals residing in SNFs.
2. To provide relief from social isolation or boredom.
3. To help people cope with anxiety, stress, or depression.



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## Learning Objectives Achieved

1. Effectively organized a weekly AAT program with collaboration from the activities department, therapy dogs and handlers, and interdisciplinary team.
2. Advanced clinical practice skills in both the skilled nursing facility and outpatient center.
3. Enhanced communication skills to address resident's needs prior to and post AAT sessions.

## Implications for OT Practice

- AAT can improve quality of life and overall well-being of residents residing in SNFs.
- AAT provides a unique way to engage with residents and encourages active participation in meaningful occupations.



## References & Acknowledgements

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References Available Upon Request