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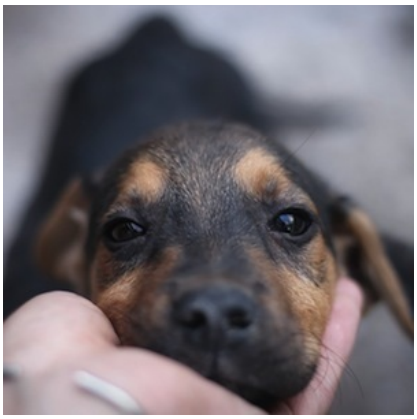
Who Let the Dogs Out?



Rush University Medical Centre is developing an innovative programme for helping relieve medic stress and burnout; bringing in four-legged friends for a petting session.

Animal therapy, as it is known, has been proven to help decrease stress and anxiety of hospital patients.

The university's Pet Pause programme is now being extended to hospital staff.

Healthcare facilities increasingly use animal therapy to help young and old patients who are hospitalised forget about their ailments for a short period of time. Now, nursing researchers at Rush are trying pet therapy with the Medical Centre's own clinicians to see if it has measurable health benefits for these caregivers as well.

Doctors, nurses, technicians and other clinical staff members line up for the chance to pet the specially-trained and groomed dogs during the animal therapy session, which is held once a month for three hours.

Each participant is asked to take a survey to identify their level of stress on a scale of one to 10, from least stressed to most stressed. They also have their blood pressure taken.

Then each person can pet one or all of the therapy dogs as long as they want. After their petting session, the researchers take each employee's blood pressure again.

"Working in a hospital can be very stressful," says Patricia Nedved, MSN, acting chief nursing officer at Rush, who started the Pet Pause program as an employee satisfaction initiative more than a year ago in collaboration with Rush's human resources department. "Caring for acutely ill patients and their worried loved ones can add up."

Nedved adds that early research indicates that interacting with pets may decrease blood pressure, lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels and combat feelings of loneliness. "We wanted to see if we can measure these positive effects of pet therapy on clinical staff and a workplace environment. Ensuring that nurses, doctors and other clinicians get some stress relief is not only good for them, but also for all the lives they touch."

So far, the programme has been very popular and successful among the employees who pet therapy dogs provided by Chicago-based Canine Therapy Corp. and the Anti-Cruelty Society of Chicago. Volunteers bring the dogs, which come in all sizes and breeds.

The Pet Pause Programme and study is one of many innovative pet therapy programs Rush is offering. Rush was the first hospital in Illinois to implement a Patient's Own Pet policy allowing hospitalised patients to bring in

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their own pets, subject to certain conditions such as having the cat or dog groomed 24 hours before the visit. Rush also hosts a monthly miniature horse therapy program for hospitalized children and adults.

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