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Is Animal-assisted intervention (AAI) a feasible treatment in a recovery-oriented psychiatric rehabilitation program ?

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Introduction: Physical contact with the animal appears, on the basis of the latest research, acts as powerful calming factor on heart rate and breathing (Nose et al., 2022). Moreover, taking care of an animal stimulates a sense of responsibility and promotes empathy and kindness (Walsh et al., 2009). Studies have suggested that animals may serve as “social catalysators” involving feelings of safety and facilitation of interpersonal interactions. These effects are related to biophilia hypothesis which describes the affinity of humans to other living species (Tyssedal et al., 2023).

Objectives: Our project aimed to assess effectiveness and feasibility of animal assisted intervention (AAI) in patients with psychotic spectrum disorders following a recovery-oriented psychiatric rehabilitation program.

Methods: In the present study ten patients from psychiatric residential facilities belonging to the EPASSS Foundation were approached to participated in this study. Patients followed a rehabilitation project named “Animal-Mente” and originated from the collaboration of the psychiatric residential facilities belonging to the EPASSS Foundation with “La coda di Ulisse”, a Third Sector Organization (ETS) which represents the Apulian reference centre for AAI. An observational study design was followed in which the new intervention based on AAI was added to treatment as usual (usual rehabilitation intervention and/or psychopharmacological treatment). All sessions were performed following the Italian National Guidelines for animal assisted interventions and required a multidisciplinary team capable of managing the complexity of the human-animal relationship. Outcome assessments were conducted at recruitment (time 0) and after animal-assisted intervention (time 1). Outcome assessments were conducted at recruitment (time 0) and after animal-assisted intervention (time 1). They included: Personal and Social Functioning Scale (FPS of the V.A.D.O.), Brief Rating Psychiatric Scale (BPRS), Recovery Evaluation Scale (RAS), Quality of Life Index (Q-Index), S.T.A.I.-Y questionnaire.

Results: All patients followed a psychosocial rehabilitation intervention and all but one had psychopharmacological treatment in the last six months. BPRS (p-value = 0.022) and RAS scale (p-value = 0.006) showed a significant variation at time 1 compared to time 0. No one reported worsening of psychotic or other symptoms during entire program.

Conclusions: Our data highlighted the feasibility of Animal-Assisted Interventions (AAI) in community mental health services. Moreover, our study underlined the opportunity of AAI in an

integrative recovery oriented psychiatric rehabilitation program involving mental health department, psychiatric residential facilities and third sector organizations in a network activity.

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Game On: Assessing the Therapeutic Benefits of Board Games in Schizophrenia Management

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Introduction: Schizophrenia is a complex psychotic disorder characterized by positive symptoms (such as delusions, hallucinations, and disorganized speech and behavior), negative symptoms, and cognitive impairment. Cognitive deficits, including impairments in executive function, memory, and social cognition, are particularly persistent and significantly impact daily functioning and overall quality of life. While cognitive remediation has proven effective, recent research has explored the potential of board games as a therapeutic tool.

Objectives: This study aims to assess the therapeutic benefits of board games on cognitive function, specifically executive function, in patients with schizophrenia.

Methods: A literature review was conducted using articles from PubMed, focusing on the terms “board game”, “schizophrenia” and “cognition”.

Results: Cognitive deficits in schizophrenia contribute significantly to poor functional outcomes and daily functioning. Improving cognitive function and social behaviors has been a major focus of psychiatric rehabilitation techniques. Board games have been found to improve various aspects of cognitive function, including attention, working memory, speed of processing, verbal learning, visual learning, reasoning and problem solving, as well as social cognition. They are expected to enhance knowledge, interpersonal interactions, and increase participant motivation. Ideally, an effective board game for this population should be behaviorally oriented, emphasize positive reinforcement and shaping, and be sensitive to cognitive limitations through repetition and procedural learning. Additionally, they should be engaging and fun to address negative symptoms.

Conclusions: Board games present a promising therapeutic avenue for managing schizophrenia, particularly in enhancing cognitive function and social skills. While cognitive remediation programs have already demonstrated efficacy, board games offer a more accessible and engaging alternative. Despite these positive findings, the limited number of studies and inconsistent long-term data highlight the need for further research. Future studies should evaluate the durability of cognitive and functional improvements from board game interventions and explore their integration into comprehensive treatment programs for schizophrenia.

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