

The Four-Legged Cure for Stress and Loneliness on Campus

Stress and loneliness are possible companions for many college students as they navigate the demands of coursework, jobs, and personal growth. Among these challenges, one curious solution has emerged—one with four legs, wagging tails, and the ability to transform lives.

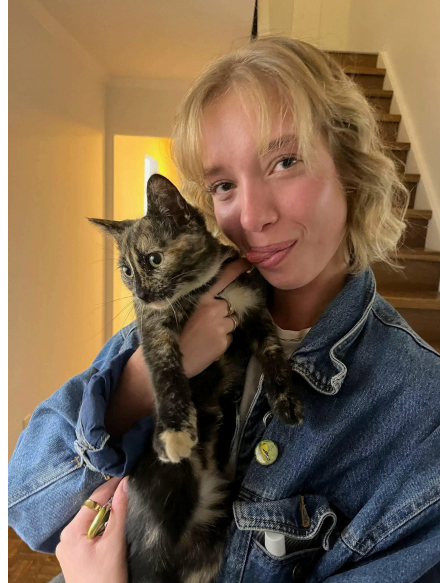
In a quiet corner of Carleton University's MacOdrum library, Magnus, a certified therapy poodle, lounges calmly as students line up to meet him. Some sit cross-legged on the floor, smiling as they stroke his curly fur. While others share stories about their own pets back home. Gwenn Beaupre, Magnus's handler and society volunteer, observes the interactions with pleasure.

"I love bringing Magnus into the university. Every time he sees his little harness, he knows it's time to work," said Beaupre. "He's not just helping students relax—he's creating connections between people."

Magnus is part of a growing community of therapy programs on Canadian campuses, designed to ease the weight of academic life. But the benefits of animals for student well-being extend far beyond these sessions. For students like Emma Matheson and Emily Sokay, pets have become indispensable companions, offering emotional support, fostering routine, and even encouraging healthier habits.

Research shows that interacting with animals can significantly reduce stress levels. A study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* revealed that petting animals for just 10 minutes can lower cortisol levels, the hormone responsible for the body's stress response. Unlike information from general health websites, these findings are grounded in scientific research and peer review, offering insight into why animals are such effective stress relievers.

For Emily Sokay, her cat, "Bink," has been a source of comfort through difficult times. "Sometimes when I would cry, she would come and comfort me and lie on my chest," said the Algonquin College student. "Being depressed without a cat would have been way worse than being depressed with a cat."



Emily Sokay with Bink
[Credit: Isabella Schroeter, Nov. 2024]

This emotional bond extends to the physical act of petting animals, which can lower blood pressure and promote a sense of calm. Even watching a fish swim in a tank can provide a moment of relaxation.

The transition to post-secondary life often comes with a period of isolation. Pets may provide a form of unconditional companionship that can ease these feelings of loneliness.

“I live alone, and if it weren’t for my dogs, I’d be very lonely,” said Matheson, a Carleton student and owner of two Shih Tzus. “They greet me at the door and see me on my way out, every day. They really have made me whole.”

Pet ownership acts as a potential conversation starter as well. Sokay noted that her cats often come up in conversation with new friends. “The first thing I usually say is, ‘You have to meet my babies,’” Sokay said with a laugh.

Feeding schedules, daily walks, and other caregiving tasks may create a sense of routine. This can be grounded in the unpredictable world of student life.

Matheson says her dogs encourage her to engage in physical activity. “My coursework involves a lot of writing. If I’m really in the groove, I can sit at my desk or kitchen table for five to six hours without getting up at all. But, Brandy and Eeyore always make sure I get off my butt at some point,” she said with a chuckle. “I honestly love walking them, it gives me time to get out of my head for a little bit.”

For students who can't own pets due to financial constraints or housing restrictions, therapy animal programs offer a chance to experience these benefits without a long-term commitment. According to the Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy, nearly half of Canadian universities now host these programs. Trained animals and their handlers visit campuses to interact with students.

"I enjoy seeing students make new friends through their interest in Magnus," Beaupre said. "Animals have a unique ability to bring people together."

