

The psychiatric assistance dog team: Who uses the dogs and why

Dr Laura Johnston, Ms Julia Lewis, A/Prof Janice Lloyd



Abstract

Psychiatric assistance dogs are a specific type of service dog trained to assist their handler with psychiatric disabilities. Our hypothesis was that a psychiatric assistance dog does not need to be a certain gender, size or breed; the dogs provide varied functions and that there is a relationship between the functions that the dog provides and the owners mental health diagnosis.

Understanding of this population and the relationship between the owners and their dogs may help inform the appropriate choice, training and use of assistance dogs for people with mental health issues.

Introduction

Psychiatric assistance dogs are service dogs trained to assist their handler with psychiatric disabilities. Little is published about the population who own psychiatric assistance dogs, the dogs or the functions they provide.

MindDog is a not for profit organisation that exists in Australia to help mental health sufferers procure, train and accredit psychiatric assistance dogs.

Methods

In order to gain a better understanding of the psychiatric assistance dog team, clients registered with mindDog were invited to participate in an anonymous online-survey created using cloud-based software from SurveyMonkey.

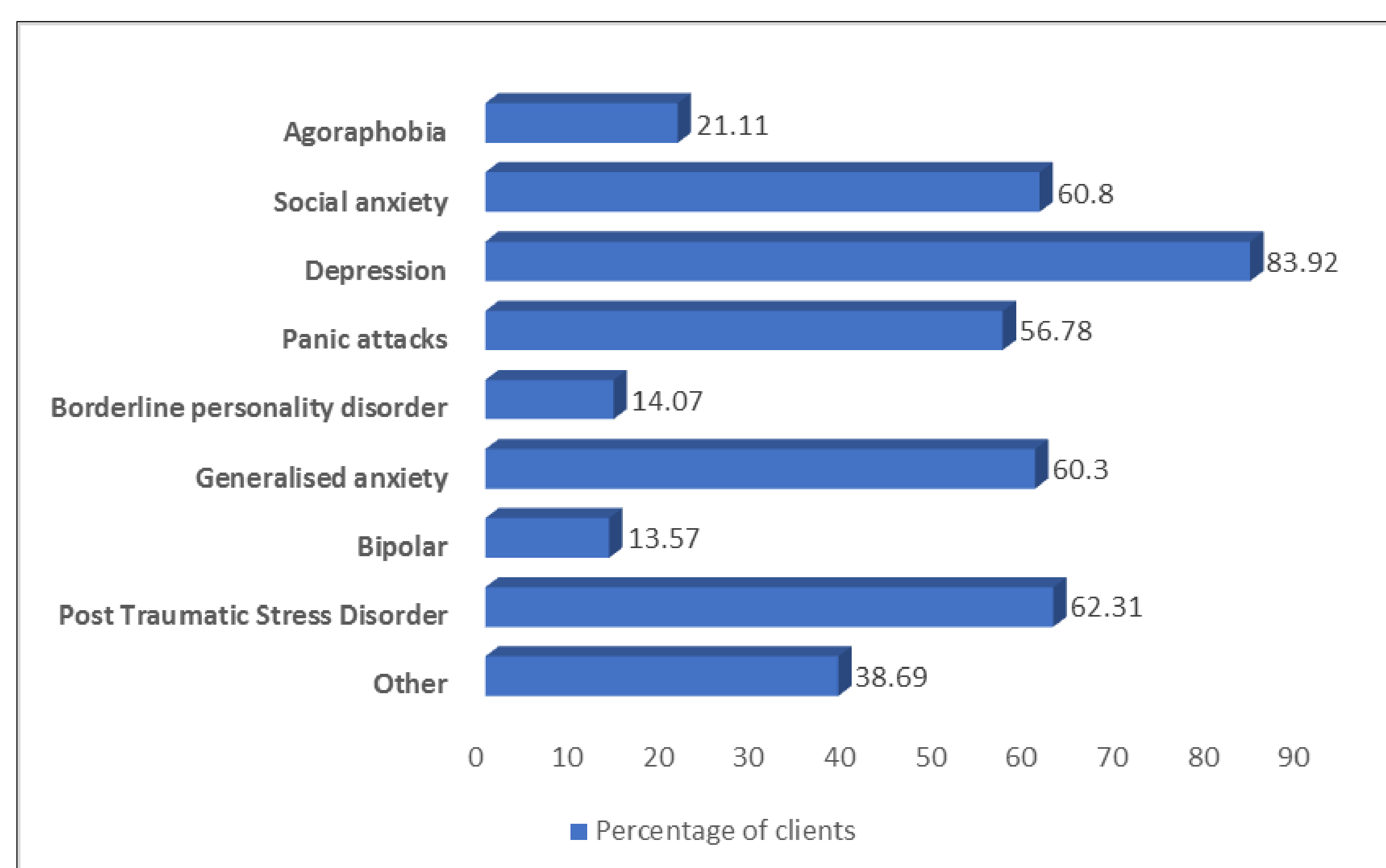
Questions were constructed to require a single binary response (yes/no), forced-choice format or multiple choice format, with a series of fixed potential answers including an option for 'other', providing an opportunity for free text to be inserted.

Results

Owner demographics

199 people completed the survey out of a client base of 850. Participants median age was 47 years old [10-75] and 77% identified as female. Most participants (58%) live in suburban areas. Most clients had multiple diagnoses. Depression (84%), anxiety (generalised 60% and social 60%), PTSD (62%) and panic attacks (57%) were the most common mental health diagnoses of this population. Other common diagnoses included eating disorders, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

Graph 1: List of Mental Health Diagnoses



The internet was the commonest place to find out about assistance dogs (37%) followed by a doctor or health care practitioner (32%) and friends or family (30%).

Dog demographics

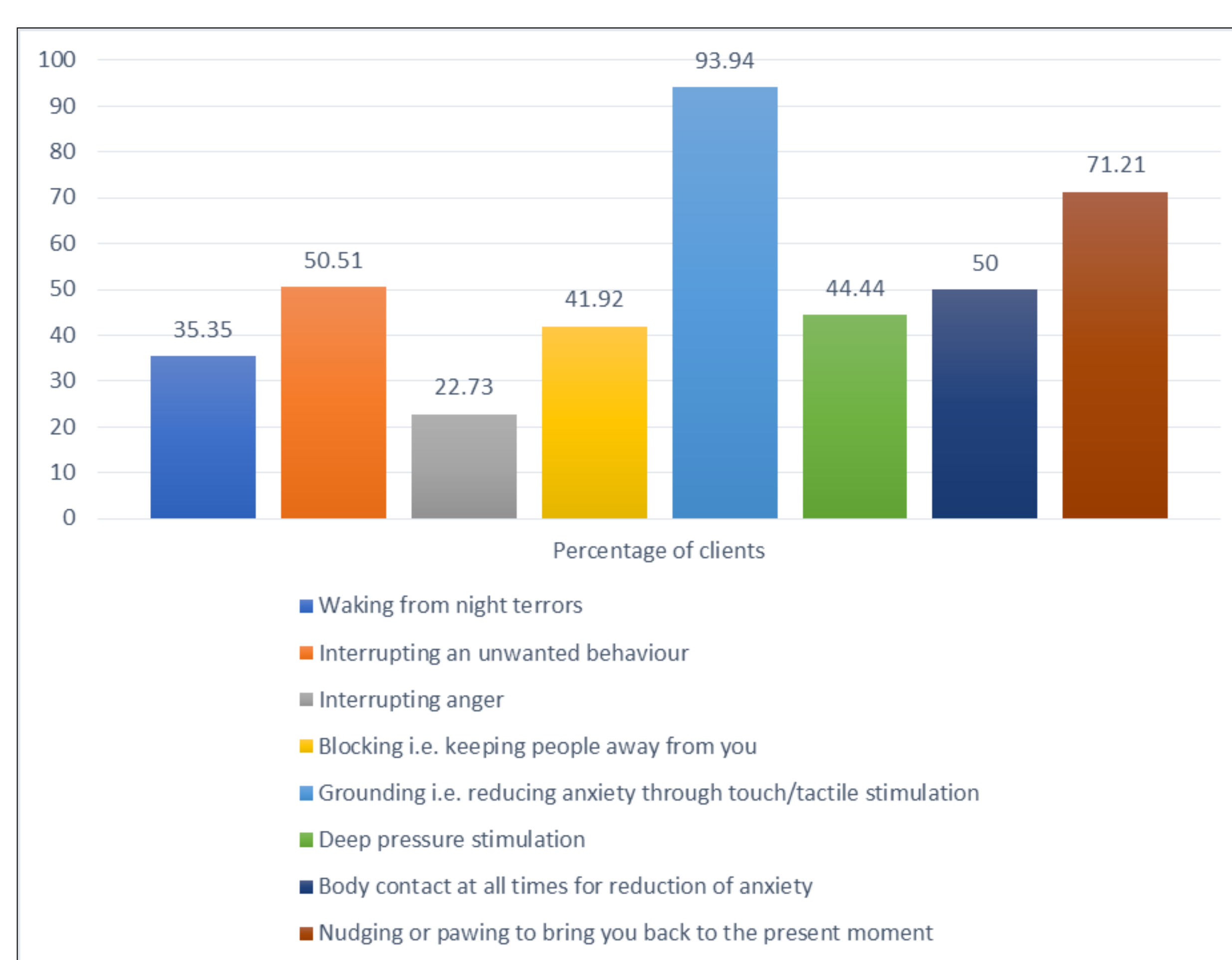
The dogs in the sample were of varying age, gender, breed and size. Most dogs (75%) lived in single dog households. The most common reasons for choosing the dogs were size/weight (48%) and temperament (60%). Other common reasons listed in the free text included intelligence or hypoallergenic breed. Most dogs came from a shelter (48%) or registered breeder (21%). Just under half had been acquired specifically to train as an assistance dog (48%).

There was no statistical correlation between the dog size and the owners mental health diagnoses.

Tasks

The dogs performed multiple tasks for each owner. The most common tasks the dogs performed were: reduction of anxiety through tactile stimulation (94%); nudging or pawing to bring back to the present (71%); interrupting unwanted behaviour (51%); constant body contact (50%); deep pressure stimulation (45%) and blocking contact from other people (42%). The most common free text tasks listed fell into the following categories: making the owner leave bed or the house; medication reminders; safety; sensing an emotion or behaviour before it manifested itself or a "reality check" from anxiety or hallucinations. There was no statistical correlation between the tasks performed and the owners mental health diagnoses.

Graph 2: Tasks the dogs perform



Outcomes

Owning a service dog had decreased (46%), increased (30%) or not changed (24%) participants use of psychiatric or other health care services. Verbatim identified that reduction of service use was mainly due to reduced suicide attempts and medication, whereas increased service use mainly due to ability to attend appointments.

Conclusions and Relevance

Psychiatric assistance dog owners have a variety of mental health conditions and their dogs fulfil different tasks to help in daily life. No statistical correlation was found between dog size and owner diagnosis; tasks performed and owner diagnosis or likelihood in changes to health service utilisation and diagnosis. Our conclusion is that the interaction between each owner and their mindDog is a personal one, determined by the individual owner diagnoses or combination of diagnoses, their needs and their relationship with that individual dog. Understanding this population and the relationship between the owners and their dogs may help inform the appropriate choice, training and use of assistance dogs for people with mental health issues.

Acknowledgements

MindDog clients and their dogs

MindDog board

JCU Ethics Committee

