**To be Touched or Not: A Comparative Study on dogs and horses**

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The importance of choice in human-animal interactions is often disregarded. We examined the impact of consensual and non-consensual touch on stress-related behaviours and approach/avoidance tendencies in therapy dogs (n=18) and horses (n=10). Volunteers (n=44 and 49 respectively) interacted individually with dogs and horses in both non-consensual (on leash/tethered) and consensual (loose in the pen) touch. During the non-consensual treatment, the participant touched the dog/horse continuously. In consensual treatment, they touched the animal only if they came within arm’s reach. Sessions were videoed for retrospective behavioural coding and analyzed using a GLMM for repeated measures. Stress-related behaviours in dogs (Lip-licking, panting and yawning, all p>.40) did not differ between treatments, while in horses, oral behaviours (1.25±0.13), restlessness (4.25±0.41) and tail swishing (4.68±0.18) were higher during non-consensual than consensual treatments (0.55±0.07, 1.75±0.18 and 4.20±0.19 behaviours/min; all p<.0017 respectively). In dogs, avoidance behaviours (moving/leaning away from the participant) were more frequent during consensual (3.0±0.31/3min) than non-consensual (0.4±0.33/3min) sessions (P<.0001). Conversely, dogs displayed more approach behaviours (actively engaged with the participant) during non-consensual (17.6±0.04/3min) compared to consensual sessions (14.5±0.04/3min; P<.0001). The results demonstrate subtle behavioural differences in therapy animals during consensual and non-consensual touch interactions emphasizing the importance of choice to ensure animal well-being.Top of Form

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