

# Study reveals cuddled cows who work as therapy animals show a strong preference for women compared to men

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Credit: cottonbro studio from Pexels

A new study, titled "Cow Cuddling: Cognitive Considerations in Bovine-Assisted Therapy" published in the [Human-Animal Interactions](#) journal, reveals that cows who are cuddled as therapy animals showed a strong preference for interactions with women when compared to men.

In turn, the research, which opens a new era on whether some therapies may be initially stronger based upon gender and not procedure, highlighted that the women also reported greater attachment behaviors towards the steers.

Dr. Katherine Compitus, Clinical Assistant Professor at New York University, and Dr. Sonya Bierbower, Associate Professor at United States Military Academy West Point, conducted the research using the Human-Animal Interaction Scale (HAIS) as a measurement tool.

HAIS is a 24-item self-report instrument designed to describe and quantify behaviors performed by humans and [nonhuman animals](#) during an episode of interaction.

## **Enrichment benefits of cattle involved in bovine-assisted therapy**

The scientists examined the behavioral and cognitive traits of cattle who work as therapy animals and special attention was paid to the welfare and enrichment benefits of cattle involved in bovine-assisted therapy.

Dr. Compitus and Dr. Bierbower, who conducted their study at the Surrey Hills Sanctuary in New York State, U.S., with two steers—named Magnus and Callum—and 11 people aged 13 to 79, say little research has so far addressed the therapeutic benefits of animal-assisted

interventions with farm animals.

Of the research sample, six were females and five were males.

Dr. Compitus said, "We have discovered in the current study that bovine-assisted therapy may not only be an effective treatment model that benefits [human participants](#) but appears to be enriching to the cattle participants as well, as shown by their proximity to and continuous interactions with humans."

## **Integrative model used in conjunction with other methods**

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is an integrative model used in conjunction with other methods such as psychodynamic psychotherapy and [cognitive behavioral therapy](#).

The most common AAT model, the scientists say, is when a companion animal, such as a dog or cat, is integrated into a therapeutic plan.

This model, they add, has been studied with a variety of populations and conditions, from treating substance abuse to autism, often with positive results.

Organizations that certify therapy animals will sometimes certify several species of animals to work as a therapeutic partner, such as llamas, miniature horses, and rabbits.

However, to date there has been little research addressing the therapeutic benefits of animal-assisted interventions with [farm animals](#). Cows have special behavioral traits that allow them to bond with people in a way that is unique to their size and temperament.

Dr. Bierbower said, "Two of the gaps in the research we address in this study are the inclusion of cattle in AAT and an examination of the cognitive processes of animals involved in AAT."

## **Cattle that enjoy human company will have reduced stress signals**

Cattle that are uncomfortable with a human presence, the researchers suggest, will show an increase in stress signals such as vocalizations when involved in therapy work, while cattle that enjoy human company will have reduced stress signals.

Other notable behaviors in cattle during AAT may include lying down and licking or smelling the person. This is indicative of their comfort level with humans, since cows are known to engage in social grooming.

With the two cattle in the study, Dr. Compitus and Dr. Bierbower found that after 45 minutes of contact with the humans, Magnus and Callum often smelled or licked them and accepted food from them.

They also allowed physical human-initiated interactions in the form of hugs, grooming, petting, or kisses.

The animals rarely made unfriendly or aggressive gestures towards them, though they would occasionally decline to interact.

One participant stated that she was worried the bulls would be more aggressive but "fell in love with cows" after the session. All participants reported having an overall positive session with the steers and most stated they would recommend bovine assisted therapy to a friend.

## **Strong preference or interactions with women**

## compared to men

Dr. Compitus said, "The results of this study show that the steers showed a strong preference or interactions with women compared to men, and, in turn, the women reported stronger attachment behaviors towards the steers.

"It is unclear without further testing whether the animals sought out the attention of women in general or if the women were more likely to initiate the actions when compared to the men participants."

The scientists conclude that they discovered in the study that bovine-assisted therapy may not only be an effective treatment model that benefits human participation but appears to be enriching to the [cattle](#) participants, as well, as shown by their proximity to and continuous interactions with humans.

**More information:** Cow Cuddling: Cognitive Considerations in Bovine-Assisted Therapy, *Human-Animal Interactions* (2024). [DOI: 10.1079/hai.2024.0016](#)

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