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Vital Signs

Therapies: A Dose of Dolphins for Moderate Depression

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Researchers working in Honduras have taken an unusual approach to treating mild to moderate [depression](#): they teamed their patients up with dolphins.

To test unconfirmed reports that dolphins could help people with learning disabilities and [mental health](#) problems, the researchers offered 10 patients a regimen of surf, sun, sand and dolphins, said Dr. Michael A. Reveley, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Leicester in England and the senior author of the study.

To try to draw a valid comparison, another group got the same regimen, minus the dolphins.

The study found that the patients who took part in the program that let them spend time with bottlenose dolphins for two weeks enjoyed relief from their symptoms.

Patients in the control group, who spent quality time in the sun and the water, without the dolphins, did not experience the same benefit, the researchers found.

The research took place at a marine science institute in Honduras, and the findings were reported in BMJ, the British medical journal.

The patients in the dolphin group were taught about the animals' behavior and water safety. When they were rescreened for depression at the end of two weeks, they scored better than they had on arrival. Based on their own reports three months later, nine of the patients reported lasting improvement.

Dolphin therapy offers some obvious advantages over drug therapy. "No side effects were noted," the researchers wrote, "although accidental injuries may occur."

While the approach is hardly suited to widespread application, the findings shows the importance of maintaining a strong connection to nature, the researchers said.

Some conservationists, however, frown on swim-with-dolphin programs, contending they are stressful to the animals.