

Equine-Assisted Mental Health Therapy Literature Review

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Introduction

Horses have played many significant and diverse roles in human societies for centuries including transportation, military service, work, status, and sports. Due to technological and industrial advancements over time, horses are no longer necessary for physical needs such as transportation, military service, and work. Although the role of horses in society has changed, the emotional connection and bond between horses and humans has persevered. This emotional connection is the foundation for equine-assisted therapy techniques and is the key to obtaining mental, emotional, spiritual, and behavioral health.

Equine-Assisted Mental Health Therapy Overview

Equine-assisted mental health therapy, or equine-assisted psychotherapy, is the most used type of equine-based therapies and broadly describes the inclusion of horses in clinical mental health treatment. Equine-assisted mental health professionals utilize a variety of psychosocial and evidence-based techniques to provide services to individuals suffering from a wide range of issues including abuse/trauma, anxiety/depression, developmental delays, autism spectrum disorders, anger, relationship issues, addiction, and other mental/behavioral health concerns.

There are many ethological characteristics of horses that allow them to be beneficial when used in clinical mental health therapy services. Some researchers believe that the nonverbal communication and size of horses helps clients become present-minded and focus on nonverbal cues of socialization (Ford, 2013). Other researchers note that the herd mentality of horses allows them to focus on cooperation and competition and are therefore more sensitive and allow for stronger bonds to be formed with clients (Bachi, et al., 2011). Lastly, the casual nature and

location of equine-assisted therapy allows the therapist to be more approachable to clients and provides more of an authentic experience (Carlsson, et al., 2014).

According to Hallberg (2018), equine-assisted mental health therapy has several key principles that build the foundation of practice. One key principle is that professionals view the horse as an independent co-facilitator, and feedback from the horse enhances the therapeutic session. Another key principle, as mentioned before, is the importance of the relationship between the horse and the client. Finally, Mindfulness and “present-moment awareness” is another principle that is encouraged with clients including integrating the mind, body, and spirit (Hallberg, L., 2018).

Equine-assisted mental health therapy is complex and incorporates a wide range of activities on a case-by-case basis including grooming, leading, riding, and engaging with the horse. Clients are also taught to recognize basic horse communication and behavior and educated on safety, respect, patience, assertiveness, and mindfulness/meditation practices that are extrapolated into their everyday lives. Many of the activities help the client build relationships and increase self-awareness and self-actualization. Sensory activities are also added as needed for individuals suffering from autism spectrum disorders and other sensory processing disorders.

Equine-assisted counseling is another form of equine-assisted mental health therapy that has similar principles with CBT and choice and reality therapies. According to Hallberg (2018), this approach focuses on problem-solving and present-moment techniques with clients. Clients are encouraged to challenge themselves and practice new skills in order to view their limitations and successes. Because this therapy is present-focused, mindfulness and meditation techniques are used to help the client focus on the “here and now”. Equine-assisted counseling addresses relationship issues, control issues, assertiveness, and responsibility for one’s thoughts, feelings,

and actions. Clients learn evaluation, planning, and practice techniques that are then extrapolated into their daily lives (Hallberg, L., 2018).

Because equine-assisted mental health therapy sessions are developed on a case-by-case basis and rooted in relationship building and self-discovery, many of the sessions are unscripted and move at the client's pace. However, equine-assisted therapists are encouraged to develop session goals and create activities that follow a specific client's treatment plan. Hallberg (2018) notes that it is important for the therapist to collaborate with the client to determine long- and short-term session SMART goals. The clinical therapist then matches the client's goals with equine activities. These activities need to be tailored to the client's specific needs and must allow the client to stay engaged without being overwhelmed (Hallberg, L., 2018). Clients always start with groundwork and while some may eventually move up to riding, many only utilize non-riding activities in their treatment.

Literature Review

Who Uses It

Equine-assisted mental health therapy is used by certified/licensed mental health professionals who have specialized training in emotional/mental/behavioral health as well as equine services. Equine-assisted therapists have a unique role from other mental health professionals in the sense that they not only have to look out for the emotional/cognitive wellbeing of their clients, but also the physical safety of their clients and the emotional/physical safety and wellbeing of the horses involved. Hallberg (2018) states it is imperative for equine-assisted therapists to understand the communication and behaviors of horses, including

dominance relationships, fight/flight/freeze/appease, and responses to physical/emotional distress (Hallberg, L., 2018).

Models of Equine-Assisted Therapy

The most common model of equine-assisted mental health therapy is the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) model. EAGALA is solution-oriented and focuses on the process of the therapeutic session rather than the end goal. Facilitators allow the client to problem-solve in his/her own way and take more of a “hands off” approach by observing the client and providing limited instruction. EAGALA therapists utilize observation statements, reflective listening, clarification, metaphors, and question-asking to guide the client and allow him/her to process his/her activity (EAGALA, 2009).

Natural Lifemanship is another model of equine-assisted therapeutic intervention that is commonly used by mental health professionals. This model encourages therapists to incorporate an understanding of neurobiology into sessions and focuses on relationship-building techniques (Natural Lifemanship, 2018). Therapists certified in Natural Lifemanship utilize the Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics (NMT) developed by Dr. Bruce Perry. This model shows how trauma affects brain functioning and provides assessment and intervention techniques for different stages of trauma (Perry, 2006).

Populations Impacted – Services & Efficacy

The services provided by equine-assisted mental health therapy are directly related to the training/certification of the therapist and the population being served. Mental health is a very broad topic and includes a wide variety of issues that are treated in vastly different ways. The

efficacy of treatment differs among specific populations as well. Listed below is how equine-assisted therapy is used with specific populations and the efficacy of that particular treatment.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is characterized as a developmental disorder that affects communication, sensory processing, socialization, and behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). There are many ways that equine-assisted therapy can benefit children with ASD. Equine-assisted therapy activities include grooming and groundwork that allows for the creation of an emotional bond between the horse and the ASD client. Children with ASD communicate physically rather than verbally with the horse, which can be used to help them associate and express their feelings. Clients are also given a wide range of fun activities (including therapeutic riding activities) and are encouraged to follow directions. The excitement of the activities motivates the child to participate and communicate, and following directions increases cognitive functioning. Lastly, sensory processing is enhanced when around the horse, and the client learns to improve his/her balance and spatial orientation (Autism Spectrum Disorder Foundation, 2020).

Multiple research studies have shown the efficacy of equine-assisted therapy within the ASD population. Borgi, et al. (2016) showed that equine-assisted therapy enhanced adaptive, executive, and social functioning in children with ASD. They also found an improvement in motor functioning and communication/language skills (Borgi, et al., 2016). Another study showed significantly improved social and sensory functioning in children who participated in equine-assisted therapy (Coman, et al., 2018).

Trauma & Abuse

Victims of trauma and abuse have a unique set of challenges they face and may have posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and anxiety. Many individuals suffering from trauma experience fight/flight/freeze in response to situations. This response can be correlated with horses' natural response to acute stress as well, and part of the therapy intervention is showing the similarities and how horses recover. Mindfulness techniques are also used to help decrease anxiety and allow the client to focus on the present rather than the traumatic history he/she experienced. Groundwork with the horse allows the client to develop a relationship with his/her horse and build trust. Horses are highly responsive to verbal cues and may provide immediate feedback to one's actions, which helps increase clients' awareness of their behaviors and emotions (Earles, Vernon, & Yetz, 2015).

The Natural Lifemanship Trauma-Focused Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy Model (TF-EAP) provides specific guidelines and insights in working with victims of trauma. This model utilized the Neurosequential Model of Therapeutic (NMT) to integrate the four major regions of the brain to allow for better communication among the neurological systems. This model of therapy has two components: rhythmic riding, and relationship logic. Groundwork allows for a foundation to be built and facilitators to observe patterns. Therapeutic riding deepens the relationship between the rider and the horse and allows for trauma processing. Emotional connection and regulation are maintained throughout the therapy experience (Shultz-Jobe, 2017).

Studies show that equine-assisted therapy has been very beneficial in decreasing anxiety and PTSD symptoms in trauma victims and has had a positive impact (Earles, Vernon, & Yetz, 2015). Another study that specifically evaluated the Natural Lifemanship TF-EAP showed a

decrease in anxiety, depression, and somatization as well as an increase in adaptability in trauma victims (Alexander, 2017).

Emotional & Behavioral Issues

Emotional and behavioral issues vary from person to person and include anxiety, depression, anger, ADHD, conduct disorders, attachment disorders, etc. These issues may be rooted in biological, genetic, social, and/or environmental causes. Equine-assisted therapy techniques used for this population include relationship building, mindfulness practice, non-violent communication, and attachment theories. Some of the core principles used with this population include the creation of a safe space, ability to make decisions/choices, acceptance, relationship-centered, learning through modeling, focused on process rather than task or end goal, and the concept of “being” rather than “doing” (Burgon, Gammage, & Hebden, 2017).

A study done at a therapeutic horsemanship centre in the UK found that clients were able to safely form relationships with the horses and set respectful boundaries (Burgon, Gammage, & Hebden, 2017). Another study showed that the unique connection and bond that clients make with the horses allows for emotional transference, where clients are able to model the calmness in horses and sense the world in a different perspective which leads to decreased anxiety and improved social skills (Scopa, et al., 2019). Lastly, Kern-Godal, et al. (2015) showed that utilizing horses in mental health treatment increased success rates and completion rates due to increased motivation in clients to participate in their treatment (Kern-Godal, et al., 2015).

Veterans & Military

Veterans and military personnel experience a variety of mental health issues and a unique perspective of the world. Some of the most common mental health issues this population faces

are depression, stress, PTSD, and relationship issues. Within equine-assisted therapy facilities, veterans can participate in individual, group, and/or couples therapy sessions. These programs incorporate mindfulness-based techniques, grounding techniques, and elements of natural horsemanship. Therapists encourage clients to explore their challenges and behaviors and become aware of their responses. Therapy does not focus on past experiences, but instead focuses on the present with relationship building and socialization strategies.

A study by Romaniuk, et al. (2018) showed that symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, and PTSD were significantly reduced in participants in individual therapy program but returned after three months. Participants in the couples' program showed significant reduction in the same symptoms but continued to have improvement after three months. The conclusion of the study was that equine-assisted therapy is in fact beneficial for veterans and military personnel but has better results when their spouses are involved as well (Romaniuk, et al., 2018).

How I Plan to Use Equine-Assisted Mental Health Therapy

Equine-assisted mental health therapy is a multi-faceted, complex form of therapy that can be beneficial for many clients. As an advanced social work practitioner, I hope to eventually become certified in equine-assisted therapy. There are several different types of equine-assisted therapy and there are a multitude of organizations that provide various trainings and certifications. This can cause quite a bit of confusion for those looking to be certified, such as myself, as well as clients seeking services.

During my internship at Mending Arrow Ranch, I have had the privilege of speaking with multiple equine-assisted therapists who have certifications from different organizations. The most common certifications from those I have spoken to seem to be through EAGALA and

Natural Lifemanship. I have compared these certifications, but each offers a unique perspective and attributes that the others do not. EAGALA is more well-known in the equine community and provides more of a cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and adventure-based therapy approach with a “hands-off” approach to sessions. Natural Lifemanship connects neurological functioning with physical and emotional well-being and seems to take more of a holistic approach to therapy. There are many other certifications as well, and I will need to do more research to find the best route to take. I will most likely attend several trainings and incorporate multiple perspectives in my therapy with clients to provide the best care.

Conclusion

In conclusion, equine-assisted mental health therapy has been shown to be quite effective in mental health treatment including depression, anxiety, PTSD, ASD, conduct disorders, and other behavioral/emotional issues. There are several models and frameworks that are used in equine-assisted therapy, and different types of therapy are beneficial with diverse populations of clients. The main foundation for equine-assisted therapy is relationship-centered and seeks to enhance emotional regulation, social skills, and relationship skills. As an advanced social work mental health clinician, I hope to one day incorporate equine-assisted therapy in my practice and will use a variety of skills and techniques to provide an expansive array of services to clients in need.

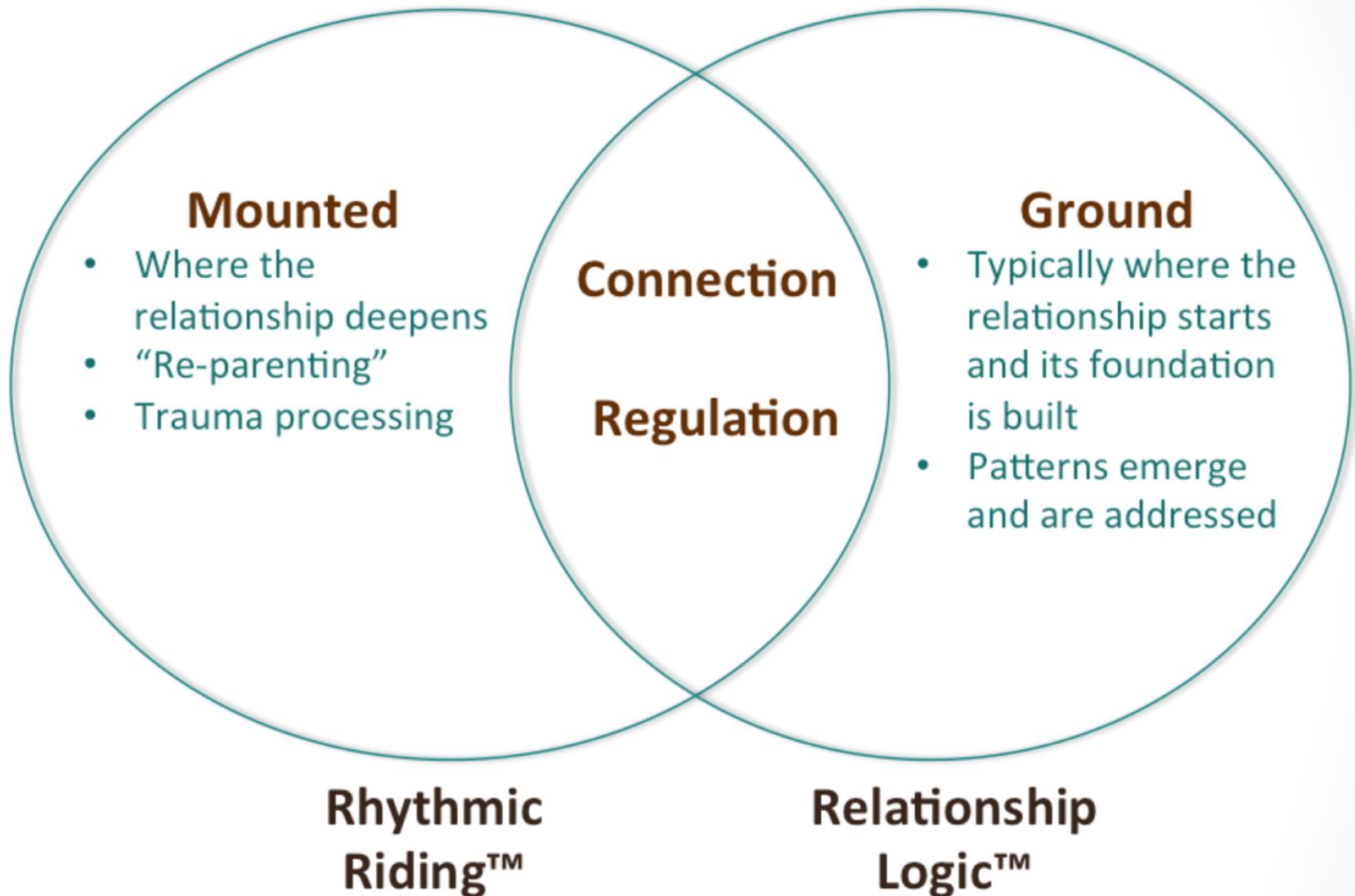
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Two Components of TF-EAP™



Whether mounted or on the ground, the connected relationship is the goal
---Connection with self (regulation) and connection with other (horse)---

Body language

Your horse cannot communicate with words, but you can tell a great deal about what he's feeling by observing his stance and his most expressive body parts.

Physical clues to your horse's moods.

EMOTIONAL STATE	HEAD & NECK	EARS	EYES	NOSTRILS	MUZZLE	LEGS/ FEET	TAIL	OVERALL STANCE
angry/ annoyed	neck out-stretched, "snaky"	pinned	closed to slits		pursed	stomping, striking, kicking	swishing	
bored/ at rest	head down	held at "half mast"	droopy		slack	inactive, disengaged	low, still	slack
challenging	head and neck stretched up and out, may move slowly back and forth	extremely active	focused	flared, active	active: lipping, chewing	prancing	held high, swishing	tense, collected
content/ satisfied	head held steady, neither high nor low	neutral	open, unfocused			casual, one foot may be cocked	relaxed with some casual movement	relaxed but engaged
curious	head and neck extended toward object of curiosity	intently pricked forward	intently focused	sniffing, blowing	pursed	squarely planted	held up	moving stiffly
expectant	head shakes, neck "snakes"	darting	dilated, attentive	quivering	lip smacking, vocalizing	restless, pawing	switching	restless
fearful	head turned toward source of fear, neck pulled in	fixed on source or flicking if source has not been identified	wide open with whites showing, fixed on source	alternately flared and snorting		stands frozen or flees	clamped	crouches, backs up or wheels away and presents hind end defensively
submissive	head held low and averted	held at "half mast"	averted		low, clamped with lip smacking or chewing in foals and yearlings			placid
uncertain	head up, neck tense	flicking rapidly back and forth	darting, focus unfixated	quivering		may be frozen in place or moving around gingerly		tense, alert, possibly sweating