Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and the Veteran

How horses can help reshape, reintegrate and rebuild

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Objectives

- Discuss the process of creating a program bringing horses and veterans together.
- Discuss methods of approach utilizing EAGALA model and complementary therapies with veterans.
- Discuss current research and outcomes in the field of Equine Assisted (Facilitated) Psychotherapy.
Getting started
The Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Center (PRRC) began a group called Experiences with Horses in July of 2012.

The group is a collaboration with Fieldstone Farm Therapeutic Riding Center in Chagrin Falls, Ohio.

50 Veterans have participated in 6-10 session, 90 minute groups.

Participants are all diagnosed with serious mental illness: psychotic spectrum disorders, major affective disorders and chronic PTSD.
Beginning a partnership

- Started the process in June 2011 first group started in July 2012
- Cooperation between VA staff and TRC staff
- Funding
Our Program

- 8 weeks

- EAGALA model EFP

- Variety of mental health diagnoses including PTSD, Major Depression and Schizophrenia. Men and Women.
PATH Intl. EFP definition

- EFP is defined as an interactive process in which a licensed mental health professional working with or as an appropriately credentialed equine professional partners with suitable equine(s) to address psychotherapy goals set forth by the mental health professional and the client.
EAGALA standards

- Code of Ethics
- All exercises on the ground
- Solution Oriented Approach

Team Approach:
- Licensed Mental Health Professional
- Equine Specialist
- Horses
Why Horses? Why This Way?

- Horses as Mirrors (Mirror Neurons).
- Horses are guides on how to be present in the moment.
- Horses ask us to become aware of our fears and learn to move through them.
- Like humans, horses are social animals, with defined roles within their herds.
- In order to learn from the horse, we enter their world.
Complimentary approaches

A number therapeutic approaches lend themselves to work in the corral including:

- Person-Centered
- Strengths-Based
- Recovery oriented
- ACT
- DBT
- CBT
- Mindfulness
- Gestalt
Use of Metaphor

- EFP sessions utilize direct and indirect metaphors to draw parallels between the work with horses and client’s everyday life experiences.
  - Direct Metaphors—Are established at the beginning of a session and are built into the activity.
  - Indirect Metaphors—Are established by the client during the processing of an exercise and may be utilized in future sessions.
Session Structure

- Prior to client arrival, the space will be prepared for the day's activity with any needed props, correct number of horses in the space, etc.
- Upon client arrival team will ask clients if they have any questions/comments from previous session or the week.
- Equine specialist will describe the activity
- Clients begin the activity. The team observes.
Observing a session

- Typically there is little interaction with the clients during the completion of the activity (exceptions...safety checks, rules, individuals with active psychotic symptoms or cognitive impairment)

- MH professional and Equine specialist look for SPUD’S:
  - Shifts
  - Patterns
  - Unique events
  - Discrepancies
  - ‘Self-awareness (“my stuff”)
Processing the experience

- Upon completion of the activity (client determined), the team and client discuss the experience and observations.

- Team uses objective statements ("I noticed when you walked up to the horse he put his ears back, did you notice that?")
Processing the experience

- Client directed processing (if you observed it and they didn’t notice it, let it go)

- Process indirect metaphors brought up by client

- Utilize reflective listening/clarifying statements
“Trust the Process”

- It is important to remember that the horses are considered an active part of the therapy team.

- Equine assisted (facilitated) work is about the process, not the solution or completion of an activity.
Listen to the horses

• The most successful EFP practitioners take on the role of observer/reflector

• It is important to stay “where the client is” and not to overemphasize events that happened which were insignificant to the client upon reflection.

• Process the client’s experiences/observations to help them gain key insights.
Benefits of EAP

In general, EAP appears to benefit participants in the following areas:

- Building Trust
- Hope
- Confidence
- Assertiveness
- Acceptance
- Decreasing Emotional Avoidance
Experiences with Horses

- 8 sessions

- Focus is on relationship building, moving through uncomfortable emotions/experiences, and relating experiences back to life outside the arena.
Orientation Session
Session 1: Getting to know you
Session 2: Life’s Obstacles
Session 3: Walking With
Session 4: Telling your story
Session 5: moving through your obstacles
Session 6: Outside the box
Session 7: The “Stuff” we take with us
Session 8: Till we meet again
What Veterans are Saying:

- “I learned how to handle my problems better, work as a team, and adapt my goals to the problem at hand.”
- “I can be a leader!”
- “If I continue through anxiety and not stop I can succeed.”
- “You walk away each week feeling enlightened, like someone has opened a new door for you. Each week you learn something new about yourself.”
“Relax, be present, understand.”

“You overcome fears and develop trust with the horses as well as others and you will learn things about yourself you never knew and you can apply what you do here to your life problems.”
What Veterans are Saying:

- “looking beyond positive and negative self. Facing issues from a different context.”
- “The more I attended sessions the more my confidence level has grown and I was able to also talk to my fellow vets and establish bonds with them.”
- “I never realized how much effort it takes to truly be focused.”
Women and Horses

- In 2014 we offered a group of women veterans with trauma the opportunity to participate in a 10-session women’s group. The group was conducted in partnership with Women’s Mental Health.
- Three women completed this group and two completed both pre and post outcomes.
- This pilot group showed benefit on several measures including the PCL-5 (PTSD symptoms), Adult Hope Scale (motivation and goal driven energy), and DERS (Emotional Avoidance.)
Selby & Smith-Osborne (2013)

- Meta analysis of 10 years of articles building on anecdotal evidence
- Mostly single subject designs
- Future research needs to focus on the elements of the therapeutic relationship.
- Evidence from the preliminary studies reviewed is promising, but they underscore the need for more rigorous investigation, including longitudinal studies and clinical trials
Anestis, Et Al. (2014)

- Meta analysis of studies encompassing both therapeutic riding and equine assisted psychotherapy as a form of treatment for mental illness.

- Study found threats to validity of all the studies currently published and called for more scientific study designs that include random assignment, manual-based treatments with fidelity checks and control for novelty and rater bias.
Nurenberg, Et Al. (2014)

- Randomized control group study of EAP, Canine Assisted Therapy, environmental change, and treatment as usual.
- Study looked at aggression in long-term psychiatric inpatients with serious mental illness.
- EAP treatment (EAGALA model) was the only therapy in the study associated with reduced violence during and for several months after treatment. This was correlated with reduced intrusiveness.
- 1:1 clinical observation was reduced by both AAT.
- Age, sex, race-ethnicity, diagnosis, symptom severity, legal commitment status, attitudes toward animals or length of hospitalization did not predict benefit.
- Violent and regressed patients received equal benefit.
Earles, Vernon and Yetz (2015)

- Decrease in PTSD and anxiety symptoms
- Increase in Mindfulness
- Decreased alcohol use
- No significant effect on physical health, proactive coping, self-efficacy, social support or life satisfaction
- Lacked control and random assignment
Ongoing Research

- Horses and Humans Research Foundation
  - “Examination of effects of Equine Assisted Activities on PTSD symptoms, quality of life and participation in combat veterans.” Baylor University. Completion date 12/31/2015. (TR model)
Citations

Questions?