

Equine Assisted Survivors of Trauma Therapy: Horses and Healing for Survivors of Sexual Trauma

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EASTT (Equine Assisted Survivors of Trauma Therapy) Group

Sexual abuse, rape, military sexual assault, and human trafficking are terms we each hear almost daily in both online news and traditional media. The 2014 National Crimes Victims Survey reports that an American is sexually assaulted every 109 seconds. Statistics show that 1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men will experience some form of unwanted sexual violence in their lifetime.¹

Sexual trauma exacts significant social and economic costs in our country and across the world². Negative impacts on earnings, job performance, family dynamics, and increased over-lifetime health expenses impact survivors of sexual trauma, their families, and their communities. Sexual trauma can deeply affect the emotional, cognitive, and spiritual well-being of the survivor.

Advancing studies of the neurobiology of trauma show that experiential therapeutic approaches such as equine facilitated learning and psychotherapy have positive outcomes and can reduce PTSD-like symptoms, depression, and associated somatic issues, thus increase the well-being while decreasing negative impacts on survivors³. Equine facilitated learning and psychotherapy programs designed specifically to address this need are an opportunity to offer high quality, trauma-informed experiential programming that can improve quality of life and address the impact of sexual abuse in our communities.

EASTT is a unique program that began in 2011 in Lexington, Kentucky through a collaboration between The Bluegrass Rape Crisis Center's existing Building Blocks Program and Central Kentucky Riding for Hope, a PATH, Int. Premier Center.

¹ <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence>

² <http://endsexualviolence.org/where-we-stand/costs-consequences-and-solutions>

³ Handbook of Experiential Psychotherapy 1998; Guilford Press, New York: NY p. 328

EASTT combines psychoeducation and equine assisted activities to address symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, depression, and relationship issues common for survivors of sexual trauma⁴. This a non-mounted group; participants do not need any prior horse experience. The environment and the horse partnership framework allow participants to practice and learn new life skills while promoting self-awareness and relationship building. The goal is to create a safe, non-judgmental, non-critical environment with in-the-moment experience that improves participants' coping and relationship skills, and enhances overall quality of life .

This group is specifically designed to address and normalize symptomology, provide psycho-educational information, real-time opportunities to put new skills in practice with the equine partner, and provide a safe social experience for survivors of sexual trauma.

The EASTT model for both groups and individual therapy is:

- Trauma-informed and intended to specifically address issues common to survivors of sexual trauma
- Based on a one client /one horse relationship model
- Non-mounted, with focus on relational awareness without direct horsemanship skill building
- Focused on empowerment, relationship skills, communication, and self-care
- Created from EAGALA, PATH, and integrated psychoeducation approaches and abides by ethical standards of PATH, Int., EAGALA, and all MH Professional licensing board standards of care

The following are fundamental to the structure and success of the EASTT model:

- Attention to environmental safety, equine safety, and care
- Training for all staff both in trauma techniques and equine assisted group skills
- A team of four that includes a MH professional, ES, BRCC Group Coordinator, and one other staff/intern (all trained in crisis management and having prior experience with survivors of sexual trauma, group dynamics, and the herd)
- Group size of five to six clients
- Two and a half hour groups for six weeks

1. Overview of the purpose (Discussion of the Importance of each step to success of the program)

- Create a unique experience and opportunity for support and connection in the group setting
- Provide a real-time experience in relationship building and increasing emotional tolerance through individual partnership with the horse
- Provide opportunities for creativity and empowerment through activities with horse partner

2. Set-up for Group and Orientation

- Receive referrals from individual therapists for participants
- In-person interviews to explain structure of group and commitment

⁴ <http://www.joyfulheartfoundation.org/learn/sexual-assault-rape/effects-sexual-assault-and-rape>

- Selection of appropriate herd partners
- Orientation held the week before first group
 - Participant paperwork including pre and post surveys, informed consent, Non-Mounted Equine Assisted Therapy Releases
 - Ground rules
 - What to expect
 - Meet and greet other members

3. Weekly format

- Each group begins and ends at a designated space
- Each group begins with a check-in, an hour long skills building/ educational discussion of a specific topic, an hour and a half of equine activity, and a check-out. Journaling homework will be given each week
- Group will catch and halter and release their horses each week

4. Outline of Weekly Psychoeducational Topics:

- Self-care
- Neurobiology of trauma
- Effects of traumatic stress; skills to manage stress, identifying triggers, grounding and relaxation techniques
- Relationships, boundaries, handling pushback, intimacy, trust, preferences and deal breakers (two weeks)
- Empowerment and closure

5. Horse/Environmental/Facilitator Concerns and Care

- Individual horse work with ES and/or trainer before group and during week
- Environmental control for groups (creating a safe place)
- Facilitator time to check in and out to address personal experience of the process and create support

6. Starting your own Program

- Collaboration with other agencies
- Funding: getting creative, plus funding sources we have used
- Listing of suggested resources for information on trauma, equine behavior, trauma informed care, etc.

7. Q&A