Eating Disorders Helped by Equine Therapy

How horses support and enhance eating disorder recovery in patients from the Bio-Psycho-Social aspects of the disorder

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Hershey Kiss Experience

- What colors do you see, details you can describe?
- What does the wrapper feel like? The crinkles? The paper tag?
- What noises can you create with it?
- What does it smell like?
- Where do you taste it best? Front or back of tongue, side of mouth?

Was this easy? Any emotions?

People with ED’s have heightened experiences with this.
Mindfulness is an important aspect of eating disorder recovery
DSM diagnosis of ED’s

• Anorexia: restricting intake; low body weight; intense fear of gaining weight; distorted sense of body and weight

• Bulimia: recurrent binges plus compensation through vomiting, fasting, exercise, diuretics/laxatives at least 1x/week for 3 months.

• Binge Eating Disorder: episodes have 3 or more of the following
  • More rapidly than normal; feeling uncomfortably full; large amounts when not hungry; secretive eating b/c of the embarrassment of the amount eaten; feeling guilty after eating. And no compensation

• OSFED: Atypical Anorexia, Purging Disorder, Night Eating, ARFID
What causes an eating disorder?
Biological

• Genetically determined temperament, BMI, metabolism
• Weight set point and bone structure
• Onset of puberty, menopause, and body changes
• Neurotransmitters: less stable dopamine and opioid response
• Autonomic nervous system reactivity (heart rate, digestion, respiratory rate, pupillary response, urination, and sexual arousal)
• Attraction to sweet or salty
• Hypothalamic centers in the brain monitoring appetite

• **Natural balance of eating and movement**
Psychological

• **Personality factors: avoid emotions, avoid setting boundaries**
• Variety of foods available
• Stress and mood
• Learned responses and coping skills
• Unconscious thought processes
• Expectations and interpretations
• Behavioral inflexibility – always have to have the “right way” done
• Identity and self image
• **Perfectionism**
• Co-morbid diagnosis
Social / Environmental

• Cultural factors – on food preference and on body image
• Pressure to “fit in”
• Normalization of dieting
• Media influence, weight stigma
• Childhood experiences, including bullying
• Social support system
• Trauma or Adjustment events
• Resources available
“Genes load the gun, the environment pulls the trigger”

~Scott Kahan, MD
What causes an eating disorder? 

**Biological**
- Natural Balance of Eating and Movement

**Psychological**
- Difficulty Setting Boundaries & Perfectionsim

**Social / Environmental**
- Social Support System
Natural Balance of Eating and Movement

- Naturally grazers but we manage their food
- Stalls, pasture, paddock
- Supplements
- Digestive needs
- Exercise regimen

*When we mess with the natural balance and homeostasis of eating and movement, we need to manage the consequences*
Comparing medical complications for **Humans** and **Horses**

- Bone thinning
- Heart issues
- Digestive problems
- Brittle hair, dry skin and nails
- Low body temperature
- Seizures
- Inflammation/rupture of esophagus
- Infertility
- Dental erosion

- Muscle wastage
- Heart disease
- Decreased gut bacteria
- Digestibility decreased
- Cold intolerance
- Impacts pregnant mares and nursing foals
- Dental erosion
Refreeing in Humans and Horses

• During starvation, body reserves of fat and protein are used for energy. Likewise, electrolyte and mineral stores, especially phosphorus, decrease.

• Whenever the animal eats again, these levels shift and can cause complications.

• Refeeding syndrome in horses can result in colic, diarrhea, and laminitis, and in humans inability to breath, high blood pressure, heart failure etc. In both, it can even cause death.
Activity Ideas to focus on when working with food issues

• Food is fuel – educate on the horses’ need for different nutrition
• Normalize eating balanced meals
• Allow clients to feed, and be mindful while doing so, at dinner time
• Observe grazing in pastures
• Observe gaits in natural environment – none are judged or wrong
• Body Scale Card and Processing, idea cited by Equine Approach LLC
  • Measure height and weight, scale the horse’s body type, process the impact that had on their opinion of the relationship/likeability with that horse
• Ideas from audience?
ED’s and Avoiding Assertiveness and Boundary Setting

• Caretakers, Peacemakers, Passive, Self Loathing, Unworthy feelings come from mental, emotional, physical and / or sexual abuse; learned family dynamics, praise for compliance, avoiding anxiety etc

• Self Esteem and issues of deservedness

• Secretive eating, bingeing, purging, over exercise.

• While eating disorders avoid, horses are about honesty and openness
Ideas for Assertiveness Activities?

• Need to adjust posture, having the right to take up space
  • Picking hooves, leading a horse and indicating direction turns

• Becoming more comfortable with physical, emotional, informational boundaries and saying “no”
  • Observing the herd in pasture – which horses show which boundaries or lack of?

• Need to SAY what one needs, having the right to ask for help
  • Lunging a horse would require appropriate tone, non verbal body posture, and using a common language the horse knows

• Ideas from Audience?
Perfectionism

• People with ED’s tend to be unhappy with themselves, but the ED enhances a sense of control and happiness and reduces anxiety
• Perfectionism and negative urgency predict the development of ED’s
• Values achievement and sense of discipline
• All – or – nothing thinking, cannot tolerate unknown
• Perfectionism allows the person to control how others perceive them
Ideas to challenge perfectionism?

• Validate the discomfort, plus use of humor during exposure to the “grey area”

• Have the client set standards which are likely unattainable

• Experience the unconditional regard when not being perfect

• Need to tolerate not completing the task fully or “perfectly”
  • Use the horse as a creative pallet, encourage creativity, not the end result. Paint on the horse using a brush or hands. There is no erasing/washing off. Practice fear of getting started, trepidation of it not looking the way they want, tolerating it being there

• Ideas from Audience?
Social Support System

- Eating disorders are isolative
- Stem from feelings of rejection or shame/guilt
- Fear of asking for, and accepting, help
- Personification of “Ed”; the breakup voice doesn’t want change
- Lack of Social Skills needed in interpersonal effectiveness
- Previous relationships may be controlling
Ideas to address fear of asking for support

• Practice verbal and non-verbal social skills to initiate closer relationships with people
• Respecting physical boundaries
• Challenge helplessness
• Activities that require initiative and directedness to express needs and rights more effectively
  • Have the family saddle a horse with only the patient giving verbal commands from afar. Create barriers to communication such as adding music at different volumes, letting patient only face the horse 3 times total, and/or allow the family to ask questions only after 5 minutes of not being able to.

Ideas from Audience?
Resources


• Cumella, E.J., Simpson, S. *Efficacy of Equine Therapy: Mounting Evidence.* Remuda Ranch Center for Anorexia and Bulimia, Inc


