EQUI-ASSIST: HORSES AND HUMANS WORKING TOGETHER TO OVERCOME TRAUMA

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Research Exchange Group on Human Animal Interactions
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With thanks to...
Overview

- Introduction of the team
  - Researcher/Practitioner
- Researcher
  - Theoretical framework
  - Empirical evidence
- Practitioner
  - The EAGALA model of EAP
  - Equi-Assist (Avalon Equestrian Centre)
- Preliminary Evaluation Findings
- Next steps
What is equine assisted practice?

- Using horses to address treatment goals
- Based on principles of Experiential Education
- Used alone or to augment other treatment modalities
Solution-focused Approach:

- Explore alternative ways of approaching and perceiving their problem
- Drawing on one’s strengths and resources that produces a change
- Sessions consist of the client(s) engaging in activities with the horse
- Metaphor is a key part of the approach
Theoretical Framework: Animal Human Bond

- Evolution Theory – a collective consciousness of the valuable role played by animals

- Social Cultural Theory – in western society for example we learn that individuals receive love and acceptance from their animals

  - Trotter, 2012
Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT)

- Children have been found to read more fluently when a dog is present (Beck & Katcher, 2003)
- Therapy dogs found to reduce stress when children asked to read aloud (Odendall, 2001)
- Effective with students who have attentional difficulties, disruptive behaviour, or lack of interest in reading (Katcher & Wilkins, 1998)
Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) and Animal Assisted Activities (AAA)

- AAT focuses on the use of animals in facilitating a client’s progress (Brooks, 2005)

- AAA provides opportunities for motivational, educational, recreational, and/or therapeutic benefits (Fine, 2010)
Attachment Theory: ‘bond’ meets the following criteria ...

(a) proximity maintenance-preference in being near the attachment figure;

(b) using the attachment figure as a symbolic “safe haven” that may provide comfort or support to relieve distress;

(c) use of the attachment figure as a “secure base”;

(d) development of separation distress when the attachment figure is unavailable (Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011).
Cont’d

- viewing the animal within a therapeutic context as a “safe haven” or “secure base” may facilitate awareness in regards to client projections of a part of themselves onto the animal (Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011).
Types of Equine Assisted Practice:
“Horses change lives. They give our young people confidence and self-esteem. They provide peace and tranquility to troubled souls. They give us hope!”

- Toni Robinson
Movement

- Movement of the horse... is similar to the human gait – riding a horse at a walking gait provides the stimulation of walking exercise proving motor and sensory inputs in the treatment of individuals with physical disabilities (Hallberg, 2018)

- See
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDeVC0m0nAg
Ethological (behavioural) characteristics

- the size of a horse, its strength, congruent non-verbal communication, prey animal nature, herd dynamics, sensitivity, ability to ‘mirror’, also the idea that early humans relied on prey species for their safety - suggesting that humans may be soothed by a calm animal (Steward, 2017)
Distinct Personalities

- An innate curiosity and desire for connection
- Are social herd animals
- Have distinct personalities and moods, just like people
- Provides humans the opportunity to think differently about the value of connectedness (Thomas & Lytle, 2016)
Hierarchical Structure

- Like people, horses form special relationships with one another, give and accept affection, and set boundaries.
Mirroring

- Non predatory equines, tending to mirror rather than direct human responses, may have a therapeutic advantage for some patients over more predatory species such as dogs and humans.” (Nurengen et al., 2015, p. 85)
Motivation

- Offers a fun and unique environment that engages clients who are less motivated by an office setting (Kern-Godal et al., 2015)
Authenticity

- Horse as non-judgmental rapport builder
- Clients perceived the horses to lack a negative judgmental stance (Meinersmann, 2008).
Farm environment

- Time spent in nature away from the typical stimuli of daily living helps the brain rest and replenish
- Attention Restoration theory (Hallberg, 2018)
- “...a healing, positive warmth...” (Yorke et al., 2008, p.25)
What do EAP sessions look like?

- Avoidance of directive teaching about horses/horsemanship;
- Use of the Socratic Method: observation statements, reflective listening, and asking questions without of judgment, criticism;
- Focus on the process, and long-term solutions.

(Craven, 2013)
How does it work?

■ “People who self-distance focus less on recounting their experiences and more on reconstructing them in ways that provide insight and closure.”

(Kross & Ayduk, 2011)
Why does it work?

- Therapeutic Alliance
- Meeting on an equal footing
- Use of Touch
- Use of Metaphor
Therapeutic Alliance

- The intimacy/nurturing bond between horse and client simulates therapeutic alliance (Meinersmann, 2008)
Yorke et al. (2008) found that the intimacy/nurturing component of the horse-human bond did seem to echo the same characteristics of the therapist-client alliance with features such as mutual liking, warmth, trust, and respect.
Meeting on an equal footing...

- Clients can choose how close to get, and where to touch the horses, the horses also have choices to move away or move closer (EAGALA, 2009)

- Natural Horsemanship: Understanding the nature of horses shapes our way of being with them (Trotter, 2012)
Touch

- Touch can be especially beneficial when clients are in a time of emotional vulnerability and feel the need for closeness and touch, something the therapist is unable to provide (Lefkowitz, Paharia, Prout, Debiak, & Bleiberg, 2005).
Use of Metaphor

- The use of a horse in intervention has also served as a safe projection object for uncomfortable feelings.
- Common activities may include the building of obstacles that the client is asked to navigate the horse(s) through.
- Clients may be asked to label or identify an obstacle or horse, creating room for metaphorical dialogue and thought about parallels to the client’s life.

(Craven, 2013)
Trauma

- Decreases in trauma symptoms of sexual assault (Kemp et al., 2013; Meinersmann et al., 2008)

- “I Can Have Power, ...”
  - Survivor
Social functioning

- Social, emotional, and behavioral improvements in EAP (Trotter et al., 2008)
- Greater improvements in psychosocial functioning (Shultz, 2005)
- Improvements in communication and social skills (Tetrault, 2006)
Communication

- Together the human and horse must develop a system of communication.
- Participants of EAP are thus challenged to rethink their methods of communication ... a skill that may benefit them outside of the arena (Brandt, 2004).
Confidence

- Increase in self-confidence and developed a sense of empathy toward the horses (Burgon, 2011)
- Decrease in social stress (Trotter et al., 2008)
Application to deployment related PTSD

- Diagnostic Criteria
  - PTSD is an operational stress injury
  - Symptoms following extreme traumatic event (traumatic stressor) e.g. combat exposure
  - Intrusive thoughts, numbing/avoidance, hyper-arousal
Cont’d

- Mental injuries are highly stigmatized amongst ‘traditionalist’ views of combat

- Importance of alternative interventions for those who resist treatment (Bomyea & Lang, 2012) and to augment traditional treatment (Shalev et al., 1996)
EAP with Military Personnel and Veterans

- Focuses on interaction between client and horse (non-stigmatizing)
- Emphasis is on objective observations rather than analysis
- Client takes ownership of session facilitating control and self-awareness
- Addresses both hypervigilance and detachment
- Greater treatment compliance (Craven, 2013)
AVALON EQUESTRIAN CENTRE
Equi-Assist
A Teacher. A Healer. A Horse
We each hold the key to our own healing inside us. Sometimes we forget where we put it.

EAP helps us move from conscious to subconscious ...

which is where we will find that key!
Objectives

✓ EAP and EAL

✓ The EAGALA Model

✓ How equine assisted therapy works

✓ Applications / effectiveness
Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP)

• An experiential modality
• Horse an essential member of the team
• 100% on the ground. No riding or teaching horsemanship
• Learning occurs when client connects what’s happening in ring with real life
EAP (cont’d)

Involves:

- Trial & error **problem-solving** (learning by doing)
- Reflection on **interactions** among clients & horses
- Identifying current **beliefs & attitudes**
- Practicing **new strategies** to achieve goals
- Outcomes not known – **experience & solutions unique** to each client – horse group
eagala

The Global Standard for Equine Assisted Psychotherapy & Personal Development ™
EAGALA is the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association.
EAGALA

- Nearly 20 years old
- A set practice model and practice standards
- Resources, education, and professional support
- 4,500 members in 50 countries
- Certification training program, including quality assurance (ethics and protocol committees)
EAGALA Model

- Team:
  - Licensed Mental Health Professional
  - Qualified Equine Specialist
  - 1 or more horses
- 100% on the ground (no riding)
- Solution-focused model
- Code of Ethics
Mental Health Professional (MH)

- university-level educational training and degree in a mental health field
- must stay within his/her scope of practice and follow region, country, or state laws
- needs to be under a governing board/body or member of an association that can hold him/her accountable

Standards for EAGALA Team Members
Equine Specialist (ES)

- must have 6,000 hours experience hands-on work with horses
- has completed at least 100 hours of continuing education in the horse profession
- 40 hours of CE must be within last 2 years

Standards for EAGALA Team Members
EAGALA Certified:

■ Completion of the 3-day Fundamentals of EAGALA Model Practice Part 1 training

■ Submission of the Professional Development Portfolio

■ Completion of the 3-day Fundamentals of EAGALA Model Practice Part 2 training

EAGALA Advanced Certified:

■ Additional training and requirements, including participation in the mentoring program
EAGALA certification also requires a renewal every two years which involves continuing education for ongoing learning and development in the model and discipline.

www.eagala.org
Purpose of the Horse

- Reads /reacts to non verbal communication
- Confronts behaviour and attitudes
- Acts as a metaphor for relationships
Working with Horses in Therapy

• Unique organizational culture – herd (family) provides vast opportunities for metaphors

• Distinct personalities, attitudes and moods – what works with one may not work with another

• Prey animals – exceptional ability to read non-verbal communication

• Size and strength
Horse/Family Structure

- Herd – a hierarchical social structure
- Structure based on rank & requires boundaries
- Understanding and enforcement of boundaries are key to emotional & physical safety
- Horses develop behaviours to deal with demands of living in the herd
- They have keen observation skills
- Respect leadership
Family System (herd dynamics)

- Work requires focusing on the process
- Changes in “system” can be planned or unplanned
- How does "herd" shift?
- Watch interaction or social exchanges between horses
Facilitation

- Creating a safe space for clients to tell their life stories and draft future chapters (client-directed)
- Prompt insight and awareness
- Exploring metaphors created by the horses
- Reflecting back learning – bring to conscious level and universal relevance
Focus Is on Non-Verbal

EAGALA developed a framework to guide that focus: **SPUD’S™**

S – Shifts
P – Patterns
U – Unique
D – Discrepancies – non-verbal vs verbal
’S – Our stuff - countertransference

*Observations are non-interpretive & non-judgmental. Interpretation comes from the client.*
EAP – SESSION TRACKING / PROGRESS RECORD

OVERVIEW – SESSION SUMMARY

DATE: ___________  CLIENT/GROUP: ____________________________________________________________  SESSION #: ___________

SESSION TEAM: MH ______________________  ES ______________________  HORSES ______________________

SESSION EXERCISE: ____________________________________________________________

OVERVIEW / THERAPY GOALS:  □ Beginning  □ Middle  □ End

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

STRUCTURING HORSE EXPERIENCES

□ OBSERVATION  □ RELATIONSHIP  □ MOVEMENT / NO MOVEMENT  □ CREATE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Words</th>
<th>Symbols</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Metaphors</th>
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**SPUD'S**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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Mental Health Issues & Learning Goals Addressed

**EAP**
- Depression
- Addiction
- Eating Disorders
- PTSD
- Couples Therapy
- Anxiety
- Sexual Abuse

**EAL**
- Teambuilding
- Leadership Development
- Communications
- Problem-solving
Equine Assisted Therapy and PTSD

- Mindfulness
- Creates a safe place
- Reconnection with authentic self and abilities
- Immediate non-verbal feedback
- Experiential
- 100% non-judgmental
- Focus is on present
Equine Assisted Therapy vs Traditional Therapy

- Non-talk
- Setting
- Use of metaphors
- Immediacy
- Application for real life
- Truly client-centered
Benefits of EAP / EAL

- Confidence
- Self efficacy
- Communication
- Trust
- Anxiety reduction
- Resilience
- Impulse modulation
- Social skills
- Assertiveness
- Boundaries
- Creative freedom
- What are the effects of EAP (Equi-Assist) on symptoms of PSTD?
- What are the effects of EAP (Equi-Assist) on social functioning and interpersonal relations?
- What are the effects of EAP (Equi-Assist) on negative and positive affect?
Research Challenges

- Concept clarity
- Lack of control or comparison groups
- Anecdotal and qualitative evidence but little quantitative
- Small sample sizes
- Inconsistency in length of treatment
- Unpredictability of animal – human interactions
- Fidelity of treatment
- Equine well-being
Research Plan/Data Collection (Phase One)

- Logic Model
- Ethical Research
  - voluntary informed consent
  - confidentiality
- Pre/Post standardized well-being test
- Facilitator Observations
  - Psychosocial Session Forms (Chandler, 2012)
  - EAP Session Tracking Forms
- Focus Group with Facilitators
- Qualitative Post-Interviews with Participants
Logic Model Approach to Evaluation Research Design

- Social Problem: mental health and wellbeing of military families
- For Whom: current serving military members and their immediate families (spouses, children, youth)
- Identify: Assumptions, Inputs, Outputs, Activities, Intermediate and Long Term Indicators
Logic Model: Assumptions

1) Well being is negatively affected by stress associated with military lifestyle (disruption of family, hours of work, frequent absences, trauma related loss or injury, transitions, stigma, lack of programming)

2) Participation in EAP will increase well-being as expressed quantitatively (pre and post well-being scales) and qualitatively (session notes and in-depth interviews)
Logic Model: Inputs

- Logistical support to recruit participants (MRFC PSI)
- Subsidy for travel and child care for participants (MFRC, TPL)
- EAP program offered by certified practitioners with appropriate facility, props, and animals (Equi-Assist)
- Evaluation plan and tools (Gail)
- Funding for provision of program (TPL)
Logic Model: Outputs

- Group EAP sessions where clients are supported in their efforts to achieve their goals in relation to stress management; building emotional strengths, connection with self, feelings, emotions; and enhancing communication skills.

- Specific treatment objectives and planning developed in collaboration with client groups.
Logic Model: Activities and Indicators

- Program activities: Weekly 1-1.5 hour group sessions for 3 groups for 6 weeks (spouses, children, groups) over each of 3 semesters (Fall, Winter, Spring)
- Evaluation activities: attendance check, pre and post well-being test, team de-briefing observation notes, Psychosocial Session Form
Preliminary Findings: Client Goals

- to learn about horses and spend time together
- to address bullying, aggression
- to address grief, to appreciate uniqueness of self, build communication, increase self-esteem
- to reconnect relationships
- to address boundaries, control issues, assertiveness
- to overcome debilitating anxiety, be in the moment
- to recover from abusive relationship
- no specific therapeutic goals just wanted to spend time together
When we keep doing the same things we get stuck!
Learned what can work better for us as family.
Recognized role of other family members in their lives.
Expressed feelings of powerlessness – like a ball rolling wherever (the role of loss in one’s life).
Sometimes we need a push to deal with our grief.
Facilitator Observations:

- More authentic quiet assertiveness, growth in self assurance
- Is building insight and awareness of self, not quite there yet
- Developed own voice, shows increased depth and maturity
- Opened up about own growth and change
- Expressed a very strong sense of self satisfaction and accomplishment
- Visible change in physical presentation since session one – showing more self confidence and connection to others
Challenges:

- Did not recognize the therapeutic nature of sessions
- Not sure made connections re goals and exercises
- Ongoing desire for clarification, frustrated when none received
- Learn to go with the flow, following orders is important in a military career, leaves little room for own decision making
- I felt like I was being psychoanalyzed and judged [as a parent], I don’t want to dig deeper ... digging deeper wasn’t where we were at
- I worried about my kids – wanted instruction about how to be safe with the horses
Phase Two: Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS)

- Organizes and focuses treatment
- A coherent pursuit of relevant, feasible outcomes
  - What are your needs? What led you to attend this program?
  - What do you need to achieve from attending this program?
Revised process:

- an initial Goal Attainment questionnaire before you start the program that is designed to identify the therapeutic goals you choose to work on – the MFRC social worker will assist you with this

- a weekly marker of your progress using the Goal Attainment Scale

- a ½ hour follow up interview with the researcher after all your sessions are completed to describe your experience of equine assisted therapy.
## Sample GAS (Self Affirmation and Communication)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of expected outcome</th>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Self Affirmation</th>
<th>Family Engagement and Communication</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Behavioural Statement of expected outcomes (Goal 1) – how I felt about myself this week</td>
<td>Behavioural Statement of expected outcomes (Goal 2) – this week our family spent time together at dinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much more than expected</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>Generally positive</td>
<td>6-7 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than expected</td>
<td>+1</td>
<td>More positive than negative</td>
<td>4-5 times</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expected outcome</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Equal positive and negative</td>
<td>3 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than expected</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>More negative</td>
<td>2 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much less than expected</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>Generally negative *</td>
<td>Once or not at all *</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Denotes pre-treatment status
“It is possible that as the field of EAP progresses with continued research and further empirical support, it may also succeed in maintaining a sense of mysterious, immeasurable worth beyond our scientific comprehension.” (Craven, 2013)
Next Steps:

- Continue to expand program to more families and to Veterans
- Consider relevance to ‘moral injury’ (additional facilitator training)
- Reflect on tools (GAS) and data collection processes
Avalon Equestrian Centre

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