

Green, S. (2017). Equine assisted psychotherapy. In J. Carlson & S. Dermer (Eds.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of marriage, family, and couples counseling*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy

One of the most exciting new developments in the mental health field is one that includes a unique participant—the horse. Equine assisted psychotherapy, an approach that has grown and developed rapidly over the past 15 years, will be described here in terms of its theoretical and applied focus, its relevance and utility within mental health approaches, and its range of applications with diverse populations and presenting problems.

Humans have, for centuries, partnered with horses to accomplish tasks that would otherwise be arduous or impossible—transportation, labor, battle, and agriculture have all been fundamentally changed in some way because of the participation of our equine partners. While our 21st century, hi-tech lives require little from these magnificent animals in terms of their previous utilitarian offerings, we have continued to integrate them into our lives in many ways—for sport, recreation, competition, and simple pleasure and companionship. Horses’ powerful beauty, their ability to adapt to our needs, and their social nature have combined to insure that our partnerships with them continue across centuries.

In recent years, a unique and potentially transformative idea has been harnessed and developed, with the inclusion of horses within the mental health context. Inspired by years of awareness that human interactions with horses offer many potential benefits to the humans, therapists and “horse people” began combining their expertise and bit by bit, began demonstrating that spending time with horses, caring for and riding them, and simply being in their presence, seemed to ignite positive change in troubled adolescents, those struggling with addiction, and others who had not consistently benefitted from more traditional, talk-therapy approaches. Prompted as well by the tremendous gains evidenced throughout the 40-year history of hippotherapy and therapeutic riding for individuals with physical limitations, professionals in the mental health and equine fields advocated to expand this relationship to include mental health, and began to explore innovative ways to incorporate horses into diverse treatment approaches.

An experiential approach, equine assisted psychotherapy offers a unique context for clinical work, taking the client out of the traditional office setting, and incorporating the beneficial but often unpredictable effects of nature. Typically provided by a team consisting of both a mental health and an equine professional, the equine assisted sessions allow clients to engage in structured activities with horses while the clinical team observes and determines how best to utilize their observations therapeutically.

As the field has grown and interest has increased, numerous training and certification programs have been developed to establish credibility, provide ethical and clinical guidelines, and offer experiential and didactic training. For example, the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) provides training and credentialing internationally, focusing on mental health practices as well as on corporate and team development and leadership training. The EAGALA approach specifies that each EAGALA-based session be conducted by a clinical team including both a mental health and an equine specialist, and EAGALA provides training and certification for both of these professionals. With its historic roots in hippotherapy and therapeutic riding for

individuals with disabilities, the Professional Association for Therapeutic Riding, International (PATH, Intl) has in recent years also developed a focus on equine facilitated mental health approaches, offering certification specifically for equine professionals who then partner with mental health providers to offer clinical services. Other programs also provide training, certification, and hands-on experience from a wide range of theoretical and clinical assumptions. Additionally, coursework is being developed at the college and university level to prepare both equine and mental health professionals to conduct this work.

Given that horses are large, potentially dangerous, and often intimidating animals that require a tremendous amount of care and financial investment, it's not necessarily obvious why professionals who could conduct mental health services in the relative peace and quiet of the office setting would choose to embrace such a practice. However, the more encompassing field of animal assisted therapies has been growing exponentially in recent years, with research and clinical practice demonstrating the benefits of the human-animal bond for physical health, improvement of medical conditions, alleviation of grief and suffering, management of anxiety and depression, and a host of other issues.

As prey animals whose very survival over thousands of years has depended on their exquisite sensitivity and attunement with their environment, horses offer a unique response to humans that makes equine assisted psychotherapy different from any other animal assisted approach. Because of this acute sensitivity, horses respond immediately and honestly to any change in their environment—their genetic code tells them they must in order to survive. When humans approach them, they respond with caution, inquisitiveness, and a readiness to flee if anything seems to indicate imminent risk. This highly attuned nature, combined with their sheer size, power, and speed, allow them to become a significant partner in the therapeutic process. They can provide immediate feedback about clients' efforts to establish a relationship, develop trust, engage cooperation, and accomplish a task. If they feel threatened, they will not engage, and they will not maintain proximity; this alone can increase clients' awareness of how they may be approaching their relationships with others in their lives, allowing them to try something new and potentially have a different, and more positive, outcome.

Clinical work incorporating these beautiful animals has been developed and implemented with a wide range of clients and presenting issues, including trauma and PTSD, eating disorders, substance abuse and addictions, domestic violence, anxiety and depression, as well as grief and loss. Perhaps most notably in recent years has been the integration of therapeutic riding with equine assisted mental health approaches to treat PTSD and traumatic brain injury (TBI) in veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. The power of these animals to connect with veterans who have experienced physical and emotional trauma has been well-documented; as prey animals, they offer a unique connection with veterans who, traumatized by their experiences in a war zone, have learned to remain hypervigilant to any perceived threats. The power of this growing field is just beginning to be revealed.