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Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy:

Partnering with Horses to Provide Mental Health Services

Shelley Green, Ph.D., LMFT

Nova Southeastern University

Equine Assisted Activities and Therapies (EAAT) include a wide range of modalities, and navigating the acronyms, target goals, and populations of each can be a challenge. The Professional Association for Therapeutic Horsemanship, International (PATH, Intl.) offers certifications for professionals and accreditation for centers. PATH Intl. offers instructor certifications in therapeutic riding, driving, interactive vaulting, and equine assisted mental health. The American Hippotherapy Association offers education for physical, occupational and speech therapists using equine movement as a treatment modality, with certification for therapists through the American Hippotherapy Certification Board. The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) offers training and certification for both equine specialists and mental health providers specifically in unmounted work focused on mental health and personal development. Other organizations across the country also provide training and/or certification for professionals in this growing field, and career opportunities continue to expand.

The field of equine facilitated mental health has grown dramatically in the last 15 years. Multiple clinical programs and training opportunities in Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) are available across the country, as well as an increased awareness for the profound benefits this innovative clinical approach can offer. EFP is gaining recognition and respect as a powerful clinical approach that can be particularly effective with clients who may not be open to

traditional talk therapy. For example, adolescents—particularly those who have experienced trauma—are often averse to more conventional therapy settings and practices, preferring not to speak directly about their struggles in a traditional clinical setting (Bowers & McDonald, 2001; Lentini & Knox, 2015; Strauss, 1999). EFP invites clients into a natural, outdoor setting for hands-on experiences with large, powerful, and sometimes intimidating animals, with whom they may explore new ways of interacting. In this unique context, they often discover strengths and resources that may translate well into their daily lives.

The appeal of this work is based on the unique characteristics of the horse as a dynamic partner. Given their nature as prey animals and exquisite sensitivity to their environment, horses will respond with great immediacy and transparency to the humans in their midst. If clients exude anxiety, anger, or fear, they will receive vastly different responses from the horses than if they are able to communicate self-confidence, calm mindfulness, and openness to the experience. While horses are often referred to as a “mirror to the soul,” there is still little scientific evidence regarding exactly how they seem to reflect our own intentions and mental states. However, in practice, horses’ tendency to offer a reflection of the client’s presence can provide an opportunity for clients to increase self-awareness, attempt new behaviors and challenge old patterns, as well as experience positive change in the moment (Green, 2012, 2014).

As an experiential model, EFP is most often (and most effectively) accomplished through a team comprised of an equine professional, a licensed mental health professional, and one or more horses. Typically, the equine professional and mental health professional collaborate to plan equine assisted exercises that offer clients the opportunity to experience a range of emotions—fear, anticipation, joy, uncertainty, anxiety, frustration—and to try new behaviors that help them to also experience some sort of transformation. The power of the session lies with the

horse and in the skills of the professionals to ask the right questions and be attuned to equine behaviors. They must be highly attuned to both human and equine communication, and they must collaborate effectively as a team. Exercises can be simple—such as horse or herd observation, basic grooming, bathing, haltering, or leading—or more elaborate, such as leading horses over obstacle courses and tarps, playing games, tacking up the horse (individually or in teams), maintaining the horse in a certain area, and so on (Faa-Thompson, 2012; Green, 2014; Parelli, 2012; Trotter, 2012). As the clients engage in the exercises with the horses, the mental health professionals observe carefully and utilize a sound theoretical and clinical framework to process the interactions between horse and human, offering thoughtful reflections on what they have observed. Clients can process these reflections with the therapist and may leave the session with newfound awareness and often embodied experiences (Sharpe, 2014) that can create lasting change. Unlike traditional talk therapies, which typically focus on talking *about* the problem, EFP offers clients the opportunity to enact their struggles differently, and to thus create change in the moment that can then be translated back into their lives and relationships.

Sessions can be offered in individual, couple, family, or group formats. The focus is on the process rather than on the specific outcome or the goal of accomplishing a task or exercise. While clients may become invested in accomplishing the stated task (e.g., tacking up the horse or successfully navigating an obstacle course), the clinical team focuses on observing the clients' process during the session. For example, they note how the clients approach their task—do they demonstrate confidence? If they experience fear or anxiety, how do they manage that? Do they ask for help, either from the clinical team or from their partners in the session? If they become frustrated, do they quit or persevere? Do they collaborate with others or work independently? Do they attempt to create connection with the horse or focus only on the task at hand? If the horse

responds by leaving or becoming disengaged, do they try something different? Are they able to alter their behaviors and experience a different response from the horse? These types of questions allow the therapist to respectfully process the session with the clients, exploring how these behaviors and reactions reflect similar struggles and strengths in the clients' current situation.

The equine professional is an essential partner, collaborating with the mental health professional to design and implement appropriate exercises. Throughout the sessions, the equine professional attends to the safety of both horses and humans, while simultaneously observing and commenting on equine behavior that may be relevant. Additionally, the equine professional is responsible for the appropriate selection of horses, for monitoring the health and behavior of horses used in session, and for bringing to the therapist's awareness any potential issues that may compromise the safety of the clients or horses. Given the clinical nature of EFP sessions, equine professionals must also understand and adhere to professional and ethical standards regarding client confidentiality and dual relationships. While equine specialists typically do not have mental health training or licensure, it is essential that they seek continuing education and ethics training to assure that EFP meets the ethical guidelines required by all mental health professionals.

The horses are of course a central element in the success of EFP sessions. No specific training is required of the horses, although it is not unusual for clients to assume the horses have been trained to respond in specific ways. This again reflects the horses' natural tendency to respond immediately and significantly to human behaviors and emotions; their non-verbal communication is undeniable, and clients may experience such transparency as unique and compelling. In most EFP sessions, the horses are allowed to simply "be horses," and may be at

liberty, offering clients the opportunity to find their own ways to approach and partner with them. For some specific activities, the horses may be haltered and “in hand” with the equine professional. However, in either case, the focus on the behavior and communication of the horses provides invaluable data for the session.

EFP has been implemented with a wide range of populations, including at-risk youth (Bachi, Terkel, & Teichman, 2011; Bowers & McDonald, 2001; Burgon, 2011; Epston, 2011; Lentini & Knox, 2015), adolescents and adults struggling with substance abuse and eating disorders (Dell, Chalmers, Dell, Sauve, & MacKinnon, 2008; Sharpe, 2014), individuals dealing with the effects of trauma (Adams, Coady, & Yorke, 2008; Mueller & McCullough, 2017), distressed couples and families (Green, 2014), and survivors of domestic violence (Schultz, Remick-Barlow, & Robbins, 2007). Additionally, EFP has been utilized to enhance social skills, communication, and self-esteem, as well as to alleviate the effects of anxiety, depression, and social isolation (Schneider, 2012; Trotter, Chandler, Goodwin-Bond, & Casey, 2008). While outcome research has been less robust and consistent than practice in this developing field (Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013) current studies are beginning to provide a stronger research foundation to support the anecdotal reports of success (Lentini & Knox, 2015; Mueller, 2017).

EFP is just beginning to hit its stride in terms of clinical potential, research support, and professional recognition. As the field continues to grow and develop, training and education is beginning to be offered within university settings, in addition to the more common certification programs. These university-based programs have the advantage of a research-informed context that can bring funding to support solid outcome studies, thus providing evidence for the efficacy of the approach. Current offerings at the University of Denver, Prescott College, Nova Southeastern University, and Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College are leading the way in creating a

solid educational and training experience for mental health professionals eager to specialize in an equine facilitated model. The horse-human bond has much to offer us as clinicians, and increasing numbers of therapists are up for the ride.

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