Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) as a Valid
Means of Treatment for Some Survivors of Sexual Abuse

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Equine Assisted Therapy

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While equine assisted therapy (EAT) has been performed since the 1970s, the formal utilization of equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP), sometimes called equine facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) came about much later, and has often gone unnoticed or misunderstood. Although the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association was founded as long ago as 1996 (Masini, 2010), in a Delphi Poll gauging the probable credibility of equine therapy for the treatment of eating disorders, around 70% of professionals involved in the poll were unfamiliar with the practice, and the average professional who was familiar with this treatment thought it “possibly discredited” (Norcross, Koocher, & Garofalo, 2006). Among professionals working with EAP, however, the credibility is well understood despite the lack of evidence-based research. Because of poor research practices, the convincing, yet intangible, proof found in many successful case studies fails to validate equine assisted psychotherapy beyond the confines of the groups and clients involved in its practice. (Burgon, 2003) Of course, EAP would not be appropriate for everyone, nor for every therapeutic need. Yet, this paper aims to illustrate equine assisted psychotherapy’s usefulness in treating survivors of sexual abuse.

The bad news is that sexual assault finds a victim every two minutes in the US (RAINN, 2010). The good news is that overall child abuse rates have decreased over the last five years, including a reduction to only 9.5% of child abuse victims having been sexually abused, according to the current report on Child Maltreatment published by the US Department of Health and Human Services (2010). This is presumably due in part to an increase in specific types of programming that reduce recidivism rates among sex offenders and child abusers (Borduin, Schaeffer & Heiblum, 2009, Chaffin, Funderburk, Bard, Valle & Gurwitch, 2011, Olver & Wong, 2009).
Still, those who have suffered from sexual abuse are subject to a variety of pervasive social and functional problems beyond well-known issues such as difficulty with affection, mistrust, powerlessness, low self-esteem, sexual distress, communication problems, and shame. Other effects range from adult-onset depression (Thomas, DiLillo, Walsh & Polusny, 2011, Weiss, Longhurst, James & Mazure, 1999), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Wolf, Cozolino, Reinhard, Caldwell & Asamen, 2009), risky behaviors, as well as substance abuse (Kingston & Raghavan, 2009), and re-victimization (Ullman, Najdowski & Filipas, 2009). Studies also suggest many neurological effects of major depression and PTSD previously unknown to the mental health industry, including alterations of the hippocampus (Bremner et al, 2003, Bremner et al, 1999), dysregulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis function (Weiss et al, 1999), and higher concentrations of a cerebrospinal fluid substance (Geracioti et al, 2006).

Fortunately for sex abuse survivors, participating in therapy can have a substantial impact on a survivor’s adaptation and mood (Green, 2008). Classen et al (2011) performed a study of trauma-focused group therapy vs. present-focused group therapy for survivors of child sexual abuse. Trauma-focused therapies seek to understand and integrate the trauma through revisiting it per the survivor’s rhythm. Meanwhile, present-based therapies look to expose maladaptive cognition and behaviors that can be modified to obtain personal regulation goals. Both aim to liberate present impairments to interactions with self and others. It was found that neither proves to have a substantial treatment advantage, but both produced better results than a control group on a waiting list (Classen et al, 2011). Equine assisted psychotherapy, like some other treatment methods, has the potential to be used in either application: present or trauma-based, as well or group or individual. In fact, the beauty of equine facilitated psychotherapy is its capacity to
address virtually all of the issues that survivors of sexual abuse face, within one versatile methodology. Equine assisted psychotherapy might prove most beneficial while supplementing other methodologies or distinct client types. Many inaccessible youth, for example, have found EAP to be helpful where other kinds of interventions were not (Donaghy, 2006, Masini, 2010). Again, EAP may not prove beneficial to all. Some users may have grave aversions to animals, allergies, or may simply be disinterested in this type of therapy.

In order to understand this concept, it is useful to examine how EAP typically works. For the purposes of this study, the concept of EAP has been limited to those programs utilizing a team of certified professionals in a recognized EAP program or facility. Equine facilitated learning (EFL) and equine facilitated psycho-therapy (EFP) accrediting organization NARHA (North American Riding for the Handicapped Association) requires that EAP programs be facilitated by certified horse professionals and certified mental health professionals, while accrediting body EAGALA (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association) allows for the use of one professional certified in both areas when preferred (EAGALA, 2011, NARHA, 2002). Generally, EAP will involve an experiential session followed by an evaluative conversation about the experience.

Like other therapies, equine assisted therapies begin with an assessment. The process of selecting, retrieving and grooming the horse allows for the facilitator to infer and ask about the client’s present state. The rhythmic act of brushing a horse provides a comfortable ambiance for discussions, warm up conversations, or even direct projections (Masini, 2010). Later, a specific activity is engaged in that embodies objectives and experiences relevant to the participant’s personal process. Finally, the goals achieved and obstacles left to confront will be evaluated in a review process with the client, producing lesson objectives for subsequent sessions (Rothe,
Vega, Torres, Soler & Pazos, 2005). When EAP occurs with a group, problem solving is often done as a collective task, which reveals patterns of verbal and non-verbal communication, boundaries, self-efficacy, and trust (Masini, 2010).

For some groups, EAP involves no mounting or riding but includes only the interaction with the horse on the ground. This process is meaningful because of the size and symbolism of the horse, as well as its demeanor. Professional horsewoman Melanie Gray of the Partner in Process Equine Learning Center summarizes the benefits of using a horse to facilitate personal development, stating, “Horses have an intuitive nature and an incredible capacity to mirror who we are. They can help us to change how we react and respond to others (Shenfeld, 2009, p. 4).”

Horses are decidedly honest and perceptive. This, coupled with their size, demands respect. Yet, one of the main objectives in EAP involve learning how to earn the trust of and lead this naturally submissive animal. Suddenly it is revealed just how vulnerable these huge creatures are. Perhaps this strange combination of vulnerability and stubbornness may be why Rothe et al (2005) point out that many young clients will readily identify with animals. Other EAP endeavors may include vaulting or riding as a part of the therapeutic process. Either case involves interaction with the horse, which is the most essential part of the EAP process. Often times it is the initial relationship built with the horse that will later give way to other relationships with staff and peers (Donaghy, 2003, Mansini, 2010). In EAP sessions, individuals and groups will inevitably begin a process of self-observation and critical thinking regarding behaviors and emotions that arise during the process. Exercises are designed around the acquisition of new personal skills, like leadership combined with teamwork, assertiveness as it relates to respect, assuming responsibility and engaging in creative problem solving (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005).
Understanding the role of the horse in treating sexual abuse survivors requires understanding the nature of the abuse itself. Because its survivors tend to display a myriad of symptoms, this paper will focus on major relationship-based subjects of powerlessness, re-victimization, communication, and trust, as well as functionality-based subjects such as motivation, self-esteem, PTSD, depression, and neurological effects.

How does EAP relate to powerlessness, communication, trust, and re-victimization?

Perhaps the best ways to illustrate the cognitive changes that occur in survivors of sexual abuse within the context of EAP are to highlight case studies involving the personal assessments and testimonies of program participants and to review control groups that have had measurable changes. In one program involving adult female survivors of abuse, women began to associate the power and leadership they must use while working with horses as power they also possess when confronting an abuser. Overcoming timidity or fear toward a huge, imposing horse translates into the potential to overcome an abuser. Also, they felt more powerful after learning to be present and aware of their bodies during their interactions with the horses (Meinersmann, Bradberry & Roberts, 2008). The perceptive nature of horses force us to become perceptive of our non-verbal communication, including body language and energetic projections. Awareness of body and feelings of empowerment are important tools in the prevention of re-victimization. In addition, equine interactions encourage our expression of feelings, expand our capacity for trust, and provide tools for healthy relationship development in the safety of the non-judgmental equine world (Schultz, Remick-Barlow & Robbins 2007).

How does EAP affect depression, motivation, self-esteem, and PTSD?
Various researchers have studied the effects of animals on mental health. One article reviewing the therapeutic connection between humans and animals found that pet owners have longer life spans than non-pet owners. The same article found that, particularly with survivors of childhood sexual abuse, pets can serve as a source of refuge or support where there is otherwise none, and bonds with animals contribute to reduced anger and abusive behavior later in life (Barker, 1999). Hippotherapy, which is traditionally used with clients having physical disabilities, has long been appreciated for its ability to improve feelings of self-confidence and autonomy in riders. Today, those same benefits are being seen by survivors of sexual violence through the gratifying process of shifting the locus of control to an internal reference point. In one case study of adult mental health patients, users were found to have an increased sense of motivation, self-confidence, and success after continually overcoming the urge to withdraw and instead responding to the challenges presented in the program over a six month review period. Participants were more confident after their own successful achievement of goals they thought themselves incapable of accomplishing before the program. Users rated confidence levels higher after the six month period, and there was a noticeable difference of less depression, increased motivation to continue with the program, and more engagement in intimate and consistent interactions with peers (Burgon, 2003).

In both quantitative and qualitative studies, EAP has been found to reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Ewing, MacDonald, Taylor & Bowers, 2007, Lentini & Knox, 2009). Research regarding EAP for children who have experienced intrafamilial violence, including sexual abuse, tracked Children's Global Assessment of Functioning (GAF) scores after a mean number of 19 EAP sessions per child. All GAF scores revealed improvement, and the greatest improvements were found among the youngest participants. Additionally, there was an
apparent correlation between the rate of improvement and the number of sessions attended (Schultz et al, 2007).

**What are the neurological effects of EAP?**

While trauma causes alterations in the brain, affecting its functionality and creating a constant arousal level, the same sensitivity caused by this process also allows the brain more open to enriched environments (Yorke, 2010). Although no studies were found directly linking equine facilitated psycho-therapy with neurological changes, recent evidence indicates that neurogenesis of functional neurons is possible within the adult hippocampus (Van Praag, Schinder, Christie, Toni, Palmer & Gage, 2002). Other research has linked voluntary physical activity, learning, and an enriched environment, including increased social interactions and larger spaces, with hippocampal neurogenesis in adult mice (Ernst, Olson, Pinel, Lam & Christie, 2005, Van Praag, et al 1999,). Equine assisted therapy provides opportunities for increased voluntary physical activity, learning, and an enriched environment that should differ substantially from the home environment of many recipients of EAP. While those participating in EAP might choose to limit their social interactions to ones involving mainly equine friends, intimate, touch-based animal interactions have shown evidence of reducing stress levels and promote trauma recovery (Yorke, 2010). Major depressive disorder (MDD) and PTSD have been shown to alter the hippocampus of survivors of trauma, including sexual abuse. (Bremner et al, 2003, Ernst et al, 2005) Equine assisted psychotherapy is among those therapies most qualified to promote neurogenesis in the hippocampus per these recent studies.

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is a relatively new concept in treatment within the professional realm. Although horses have been used in therapy since the 1970s, the validity of
Equine Assisted Therapy, in general, is still under question. Although evidence-based research is lacking to validate equine assisted psychotherapy in a quantitative way, the positive results that do exist among case studies and controlled studies indicate EAP as a potentially effective treatment method for some survivors of sexual abuse. Certainly, each client and therapeutic team must evaluate the best treatment option for every distinct situation. The objective of this paper is merely to expose those aspects of EAP that link it with issues of sexual abuse and trauma. While EAP may not be the best fit for every person or situation, this review illustrates how equine assisted psychotherapy should at the very least be considered as a valid form of supplemental therapy in the treatment of issues related to sexual violence, among others.
EAP as a Treatment Method for Survivors of Sexual Abuse

References


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