

Efficacy of Equine Therapy: Mounting Evidence
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Can grooming and riding horses foster recovery from mental illness? According to a recent article published in the *Psychiatric Times*¹, the answer is “yes.” “[E]vidence has continued to accumulate, more rigorous controlled studies are being conducted, resulting in the emergence of a significant body of literature supporting the therapeutic value of the human-companion animal interaction...” An article reviewing the benefits of animal-assisted therapy has even appeared in the prestigious *Journal of the American Medical Association*².

Benefits of Equine Therapy

Animal-assisted therapy has shown evidenced-based efficacy in patients with depression³, anxiety⁴, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder⁵, conduct disorders⁶, dissociative disorders⁷, Alzheimer’s disease⁸, dementia⁹, autism¹⁰, and other chronic mental illnesses^{11,12}.

In light of research and observational findings, experts suggest that Equine Therapy—a common form of animal-assisted therapy—may yield a variety of psychotherapeutic benefits.

- **Confidence:** The learning and mastery of a new skill—horsemanship—enhances patients’ confidence in their ability to tackle new projects, such as recovery, and leads to improved self-esteem.
- **Self-Efficacy:** Learning to communicate and achieve harmony with a large animal promotes renewed feelings of efficacy. A motivated “I can do it!” replaces feelings of helplessness and amotivation, empowering the person to take on challenges in other areas of recovery.
- **Self-Concept:** Riding helps patients to develop a more realistic view of themselves through awareness of their size in relation to the horse. This is especially important in treating patients with eating disorders as well as those with interpersonal aggression problems.
- **Communication:** Horses’ sensitivity to non-verbal communication assists patients in developing greater awareness of their emotions, the non-verbal cues that they may be communicating, and the important role of non-verbal communication in relationships.

- **Trust:** Learning to trust an animal such as a horse also aides in the development, or restoration, of trust for those whose ability to trust has been violated by difficult life experiences such as physical or sexual abuse, abandonment, neglect, or marital infidelity.
- **Perspective:** Through grooming activities and other types of care for a specific horse, patients are able to put aside the absorbing focus of their mental illness, such as depressive ruminations, and instead to direct their attention and interests outwardly toward safe and caring interactions.
- **Anxiety Reduction:** Many studies of human-animal interaction indicate that contact with animals significantly reduces physiological anxiety levels. Some patients are initially afraid of horses. But horses' genuineness and affection allay these fears, helping patients to embrace exposure therapy for their anxiety issues.
- **Decreasing Isolation:** For many individuals with mental illness, there is a long-term or recent history of feeling rejected by, and different from, other people. Mental illnesses are intrinsically isolating experiences. The horse's unconditional acceptance invites patients back into the fellowship of life.
- **Self-Acceptance:** Many patients are initially concerned that they will do something embarrassing while learning about or riding the horses. Yet patients quickly learn that the other participants are engaged in their own equine experiences, and they observe the comfort of the horses in their own skin. Fears of embarrassment in public are thereby often reduced and self-acceptance increased.
- **Impulse Modulation:** Particularly for those whose mental illness involves the experience of lost control over impulses, the need to communicate with a horse calmly and non-reactively promotes the skills of emotional awareness, emotion regulation, self-control, and impulse modulation. Research clearly indicates that animal-assisted therapy reduces patient agitation and aggressiveness and increases cooperativeness and behavioral control.
- **Social Skills:** Many individuals with mental illness are socially isolated or withdrawn. A positive relationship with a horse is often a first, safe step toward practicing the social skills needed to initiate closer relationships with people.
- **Assertiveness:** Communicating effectively with a horse requires the rider to demonstrate assertiveness, direction, and initiative, important skills that enable the patient to express her needs and rights more effectively in other relationships.
- **Boundaries:** Many patients have experienced prior relationships as controlling or abusive. Healing takes place as patients discover that riding occurs within the context of a respectful relationship between a rider and a horse, and that, although physically

powerful, each horse typically operates within the boundaries of this mutually respectful relationship.

- **Creative Freedom:** Many persons with mental illness have been emotionally inhibited or over-controlled, and have lost some measure of spontaneity. The playful aspects of riding and team equine activities can help restore spontaneity and an ability for healthy recreation and play.
- **Spiritual Growth:** Through Equine Therapy trail rides, patients have a unique opportunity to encounter the outdoors from a new perspective. Feelings of joy and spiritual connection are often discovered or revived as patients experience the earth's beauty in a renewed way.

Example: Equine Therapy in a Residential Treatment Facility

The Remuda Ranch Programs for Anorexia and Bulimia are a specialized treatment system designed exclusively for women and adolescent girls who struggle with anorexia, bulimia and related issues. Located in a ranch setting near a small Western town 60 miles northwest of Phoenix, Arizona, Remuda Ranch is able to offer Equine Therapy as part of its comprehensive balance of medical, nutritional, psychological, spiritual, and recreational treatment components. Remuda is an excellent case example of a mental health treatment facility that utilizes a sophisticated Equine Therapy Program as an integral part of treatment with all patients.

Horses have played an important role at Remuda Ranch since 1926. Before becoming a treatment center, Remuda was an historic guest ranch where working cattle and trail rides were daily routines. The word "Remuda" refers to the string of mounts used to give rest and provide a fresh start for the continued journey and work ahead. Today, Remuda's horses and Equine Therapy Program encourage a fresh start on the journey and work of recovery from eating disorders.

Equine Therapy at Remuda Ranch includes instruction in horse care, grooming procedures, saddlery, and basic equitation. Patients are paired with appropriate horses based on an assessment of their riding experiences and needs. Patients participate in two 90-minute Equine Therapy sessions per week, including a trail ride and an arena session that focuses on more advanced skill levels, riding to music, and team activities. There is also an opportunity for a third trail ride each week depending on patients' therapeutic progress.

The Equine Program also includes a Rodeo, which takes place at the end of each Family Week. Family members are invited to watch as patients participate in this event along with Equine Staff. As patients ride in unison with music, they have the opportunity to demonstrate some of the skills they have learned and the fun they have riding together as a group. Families experience renewed hope when they witness their loved ones' new-found competencies.

Safety issues have been carefully addressed in Remuda's Equine Therapy Program. For example, all staff in Remuda's Equine Department have had many years of equestrian experience and participate in ongoing training. Remuda's Equine Department is a member of the Equine Assisted Growth And Learning Association (EAGALA), a non-profit organization formed to promote, educate, and provide standards of practice, ethics, and safety in the field of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. All Remuda Ranch equine staff are certified by EAGALA in Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. In addition, every ride at Remuda is supervised by Equine Staff. Patients wear safety equipment such as riding helmets and other appropriate attire, and patients may begin Equine Therapy only when a physician determines their medical readiness to do so. The horses at Remuda Ranch are also carefully selected for characteristics that make them suitable to Equine Therapy. The horses receive continuous schooling to maintain and enhance their participation in Remuda's Equine Therapy Program.

Patients' Feedback About Equine Therapy

Many of Remuda's patients have written about their experiences in Equine Therapy, and the benefits of Equine Therapy can be seen in their words. Here is one patient's story:

I was so tense and frightened. Nobody knew my fear, so I had no support. [One day] we rode a ways and ... came to a large hill... I stopped Cecil, my horse, and said 'I can't do this!' But [the Equine Staff] encouraged me and said, 'You can do it! We'll be here! It's OK, Cecil has done this many times. He knows what to do. One of us will go in front of you and one will go behind you.' Next thing I knew Cecil took off to go up the hill, so [the Equine Staff] followed me up and when we got to the top I felt relieved and proud I'd made it... This time I had shared my fear and gotten support. [In the same] way Cecil took charge because of my fear, I think we can look to [our Higher Power] and say 'I'm really scared and I have a lot of fear, but help me get to the other side.'" Because even if we don't know the way, [our Higher Power] does.

Other patients have written comments that echo the research findings about Equine Therapy:

- *There was a bond for me and my horse that gave me a sense of calmness.*
- *I've learned that communication is better than controlling, to relax and have fun without thinking about performance and to be just as assertive with people as you are with your horse.*
- *I was terrified of the horses at first. I have a lot of fears which I run away from but this time I wasn't allowed to flee. I faced the fear and loved it. Exposure therapy in action!*
- *I learned a lot about confidence and being assertive. It also helped me with responsibility. To me, Equine was one of the most important parts of the program. I learned to be more sure of myself.*
- *The biggest attribute that I have learned from riding is ... communication skills to explain my needs, and the strength to stand up for what I need.*

- *I LOVED EQUINE! I could be a poster child for Equine! I learned trust and gained confidence. I discovered something other than the eating disorder that I have a passion for and it made me feel free and alive and desire health.*

Professionalism in an Emerging Field

Recognizing the benefits of Equine Therapy for patients with a variety of psychological difficulties, in 1996 a group of therapists formed the Equine-Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA). The EFMHA sponsors, promotes, and organizes research on the efficacy of Equine Therapy in a mental health context. A variety of publications regarding the effectiveness of Equine Therapy are available from the EFMHA (1-800-369-7433). In addition, the EFMHA hosts an annual conference for mental health professionals to share research regarding Equine Therapy, to exchange ideas and network.

In 1997, Adele McCormick, Ph.D. and Marlena McCormick, Ph.D., two psychotherapists, published *Horse Sense and the Human Heart: What Horses Can Teach Us About Trust, Bonding, Creativity, and Spirituality*¹³. Perhaps the most comprehensive work on the benefits and nuances of Equine Therapy, this book presents a series of case studies on the impact of equine therapy with troubled youth. The book states: “Throughout history, horses have guided humans on external journeys. *Horse Sense and the Human Heart* reveals how horses can take us on a deeper journey--on the path to healing, awareness and spiritual and emotional growth.” The authors explore in depth the healing impact of such key aspects of Equine Therapy as touch, accurate non-verbal communication, fear, aggression, moral relationship, mirroring, empathy, compassion, and mutual trust. By demonstrating the efficacy of Equine Therapy in treating some of the most profoundly disturbed patients—gang members, psychopaths, and sexual predators—the authors recognize that Equine Therapy is not only effective with a variety of DSM-IV Axis I disorders, but is also a powerful adjunct modality in the treatment of patients with the distorted bonding and relational issues predominant in the Axis II disorders.

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