



Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy: Healing Therapy or Just Hype?

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Whether it's a nuzzle of their wet nose, a game of fetch or a walk around the block, spending time with our pets can make us feel better, calmer and even happier. Indeed, studies suggest that people with pets experience both emotional and physical benefits (Barker, 1999).

But can time spent with an animal truly translate into a meaningful, healing experience? That's the goal of equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP), an increasingly popular experiential treatment where individuals interact with horses in a variety of activities, including grooming, feeding, walking and equine games, for improving their psychological health. Both a licensed therapist and horse professional conduct EAP.

According to the [Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association](#), EAP is used to treat "behavioral issues, attention deficit disorder, substance abuse, eating disorders, abuse issues, depression, anxiety, relationship problems and communication needs."

The [Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association](#) (EFMHA) also includes riding and vaulting as part of treatment.

How Can EAP Help?

- **Providing insight for observation and growth.** According to Brad Klontz, Psy.D., therapists can use clients' reactions to horses' behaviors to understand how clients interact with people and help them gain self-awareness. "A cognitive-behavioral therapist might use a client's interpretation of a horse's movements, behaviors or reactions as a metaphor to identify and change negative patterns of thinking that lead to depression or relationship problems," Klontz said.
- **Offering instant insight.** Because horses offer "instant and accurate feedback," Klontz said, they shed light on the client's thoughts and feelings before both the client and therapist are conscious of them.
- **Fostering a healthy relationship.** According to Amy Gerberry, M.A., L.P.C., director of administrative services at Remuda Ranch — a residential, faith-based eating disorders treatment program that requires equine therapy — "the horses offer a pure, nonjudgmental relationship" for patients. The animals "aren't concerned with their appearance or how much they weigh."

Because of this, horses "allow patients to connect to a living being without the risk of rejection or criticism," said Sari Shepphird, Ph.D., clinical psychologist and eating disorder specialist in Los Angeles. Shepphird refers her patients to equine programs. EAP "makes the transition into healthy relationships less threatening," Shepphird said.

- **Building trust.** Many patients with eating or other mental health disorders have experienced trauma, which makes it difficult for them to trust others and feel safe. Patients might be resistant to opening up to a therapist and expressing their feelings or might not be skilled in verbal communication. EAP can serve as a first step in helping individuals break through these barriers and become more comfortable.

Existing Research

Today, psychologists stress treatments whose effectiveness has been extensively researched and substantiated. The American Psychological Association calls these treatments evidence-based practice in psychology (EBPP). "The purpose of EBPP is to promote

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effective psychological practice and enhance public health by applying empirically supported principles of psychological assessment, case formulation, therapeutic relationship and intervention," according to Rob Heffer, Ph.D., clinical child psychologist and clinical associate professor at Texas A&M University.

With EAP, however, scientific results regarding its usefulness is lacking. Anecdotal evidence, such as case studies, has shown benefits, however. In their comprehensive book about equine therapy, *Horse Sense and the Human Heart: What Horses Can Teach Us About Trust, Bonding, Creativity, and Spirituality*, McCormick and McCormick (1997) describe various case studies where young people with severe behavioral problems were helped by working with horses.

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Last reviewed:
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By John M. Grohol, Psy.D.

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-- J.D. Salinger

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