

Practice Perspectives

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Frequently Asked Questions about Equine Therapy: What Clinical Social Workers Should Know

The use of animals in therapy is seen as a valuable tool in promoting physical and emotional healing for individuals of all ages. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) recognizes the benefit of both humans and animals in their interactions and relationships. Treatment modalities such as equine-assisted therapy have been found to be increasingly popular and effective treatment option in mental health. Today, many mental health providers including clinical social workers incorporate equine therapy into their practice. This practice perspective provides an overview of equine therapy and answers frequently asked questions related to clinical social work practice.

What is Equine Therapy?

Equine therapy is a type of experimental therapy that utilizes horses to help individuals with a variety of mental and behavioral conditions. This treatment shows promise, but its effectiveness continues to be evaluated. The various terms used to describe this approach include equine-assisted mental health, equine-assisted counseling, equine-facilitated

psychotherapy, and equine-assisted therapy.¹ It has gained attention among clinical social workers in recent years, and for good reasons. The use of horseback riding for therapeutic purposes is not a new concept and can be found in ancient Greek literature with formal research studies dating back to the 1960s. The evolution of equine therapy gave way to organizations such as the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), which is regarded as being one of the first to develop professional standards aimed at integrating equine therapy into mental health treatment.²

Therapy sessions are done with a licensed equine therapist and a horse professional, who is responsible for handling the horses. Each session will differ depending upon the client's treatment goals. During a typical session, the client may engage in grooming, feeding, walking, and playing games with one or multiple horses. One of the key benefits of equine therapy is that it often leads to discussions and processing of feelings. This unique type of interaction can be incredibly therapeutic, as it helps clients to better

¹ Woolen, M. (2017). Social Work Perceptions of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. California State University, San Bernardino Scholar Works Library. <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1536&context=etd>.

² Bid

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understand their own actions and needs. Through working with horses, clients learn to identify and regulate their emotions, develop greater self-awareness, trust, empathy, and improve their interpersonal skills.³ This can be particularly beneficial for individuals who struggle to express themselves in more traditional therapy settings.

What are the Benefits?

Establishing a conscious and intentional connection with the natural environment and animals has been shown to offer remarkable emotional and physical benefits. Horses continue to be a popular therapeutic animal due to their immediate feedback and innate capacity to reflect emotions of their rider or handler.⁴ Today equine therapy has been used to successfully treat a wide variety of issues including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance use disorders, autism, eating disorders, and other mental and physical health problems.^{5,6}

What does the Research say?

As the interest in animal assisted therapy continues to grow, the need for further research is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of its potential as an effective form of treatment. There is a growing amount of literature that supports the therapeutic benefits of human-animal interaction to treat chronic mental health conditions. Experts note that equine therapy can help with developing confidence and self-efficacy through the learning and mastery of horsemanship.⁷ This encourages them to take on challenges in other areas of recovery. Self-concept can be improved by the awareness of the client's size in relation to the horse, which is especially important in treating clients with eating disorders or aggression problems. Additionally, horses are sensitive to non-verbal communication, helping clients to become more aware of their emotions and the role of non-verbal cues in relationships.

The increasing acceptance of equine-assisted social work has significant implications for current

and future clinical social workers in practice and education. A qualitative study was conducted to explore the experiences of master's level social workers who are certified in equine-assisted services. Results highlighted the importance of improving equine-assisted social work in the following areas:⁸

- » Creating a competency framework
- » Enhancing ethical practice
- » Developing core knowledge and skills

Addressing these areas can be helpful as the social work profession continues to evolve to meet the diverse needs of clients.

What are Other Factors to Consider?

As with any treatment approach, clinical social workers should carefully determine if their clients are appropriate for equine therapy. This may involve assessing their physical and emotional health, as well as their level of comfort and experience with horses. Contraindication for this type of therapy may include, but are not limited to:^{9,10}

- » severe allergies (i.e. hay, dust, horse hair, etc.)
- » deterioration in respiratory function
- » violent behaviors that are threatening to others
- » history of animal abuse
- » uncontrolled seizures

It is important to consider any potential risks and limitations to ensure that clients are adequately prepared and supported throughout the therapy process. Cost is another factor to consider as fees for services may vary and may not be covered by health insurance.¹¹ Prior to providing services, clinical social workers should verify with clients' health insurance if this service is covered. Some equine programs may offer financial assistance and discounts. So, it may be helpful to contact the equine facility beforehand for information on cost of services.

8 Dana Spett (2023) Towards Ethical and Competent Equine-Assisted Social Work/ A Qualitative Study, Smith College Studies in Social Work, DOI/ 10.1080/00377317.2023.2216275.

9 Equine-assisted therapy faqs. NCEFT National Center for Equine Facilitated Therapy. (2020, January 15). <https://nceft.org/equine-assisted-therapy-faqs-2#:~:text=Contraindications%20for%20equine%20assisted%20therapy,%2C%20hdromelia%2C%20and%20certain%20allergies.>

10 Speech Language Pathology in Motion. (n.d.). Precautions & contraindications for Hippotherapy. Speech Language Pathology in Motion. <https://speechinmotion.com/precautions>.

11 Clarke, J. (2022, December 8). Using Equine Therapy as Mental Health Treatment: What Horses Bring to the Therapeutic Process. Verywell Mind. www.verywellmind.com/equine-therapy-mental-health-treatment-4177932#toc-thin-gs-to-consider.

3 Equine therapy: Knowledge center. Sheppard Pratt. (n.d.).

www.sheppardpratt.org/knowledge-center/treatment/equine-therapy.

4 Equine assisted therapy. The Anxiety Treatment Center. (2016, June 13). <https://anxietytreatmentexperts.com/equine-assisted-therapy>.

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6 Young C, Horton J. Canine and Equine Therapy for Mental Health: A Review of Clinical Effectiveness [Internet]. Ottawa (ON): Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health; 2019 Aug 30. Available from: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK549209.

7 Cumella, Edward & Simpson, Sharon. (2023). Efficacy of equine therapy: Mounting evidence. Available from www.researchgate.net/publication/228793576_Efficacy_of_equine_therapy_Mounting_evidence/citation/download

In addition, clinical social workers who are interested in providing equine-assisted therapy should also purchase supplementary coverage on their existing professional liability policy. This is essential to protect against potential risks and liabilities associated with this specialized form of therapy.

How can I Become an Equine Therapist?

Currently no specific certification is mandated for equine therapy practitioners. However, certifications are available through specialized professional organizations such as the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association. To be eligible, clinical social workers must be licensed to practice psychotherapy in their state or jurisdiction.¹² It is also important to keep in mind that additional requirements may vary.

Incorporating equine therapy into clinical social work practice can be an effective approach to treat mental health issues. However, they should have specialized training, an understanding of the nature of horses, and access to appropriate equine facilities to ensure that the client's needs

are met effectively. It is important for social workers to stay attuned to evolving best practices and guidelines in equine therapy and to engage in ongoing professional development.

Clinical social workers may visit the following resources for more information:

- » **The Certification Board for Equine Interaction Professionals (CBEIP)** provides voluntary independent certification to mental health and education professionals.
- » **Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA)** offers certification and support to professionals to become proficient in the EAGALA practice model.
- » **The National Center for Equine Facilitated Therapy (NCEFT)** is a non-profit organization that offers an array of equine related services that include but are not limited to mental health resilience, special education, and physical therapy. Educational resources are also available.
- » **Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.)** is a federally registered 501(c)3, that provides accredits centers and certifies professionals in the Equine-Assisted Services industry.

¹² Splane, B. (2022, August 2). What Is an Equine Therapist? A Psychotherapist Who Uses Horse Interactions to Help Patients. Verywell Health. www.verywellhealth.com/what-is-an-equine-therapist-3227129.

There is a growing amount of literature that supports the therapeutic benefits of human-animal interaction to treat chronic mental health conditions. Experts note that equine therapy can help with developing confidence and self-efficacy through the learning and mastery of horsemanship.

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