

# LITERATURE REVIEW OF EQUINE ASSISTED LEARNING AND THERAPY

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A work commissioned by Sherony Park Equine Facility (Sutton, NSW) with research conducted by Dr Stephanie Koorey (Canberra, ACT)

**DISCLAIMER:** Dr Koorey is an academic and a volunteer in the Equine Assisted Learning and Therapy program and riding school activities at Sherony Park, commissioned to undertake this review in June 2019. Any questions, or for further details of the studies cited, please contact Dr Koorey at [stephanie.koorey@gmail.com](mailto:stephanie.koorey@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

The academic literature on what can be broadly termed “equine therapy” is both global and growing. Much of the literature – reports, case studies, clinical trials – acknowledges that for participants experiencing physical, mental and/or physical disabilities there is a strong indication that positive results are often reported or observed after their exposure to a program of equine therapy. This review evaluates a selection of peer-reviewed materials on the topic and a recent online resource. It finds that there appears to be a strong case that structured professional programs with appropriately qualified facilitators and counsellors using horses in unmounted activities can be an effective form of therapy for a range of mental, emotional and behavioural behaviours regardless of culture, country, age or gender.

## INTRODUCTION

The academic literature on what can be broadly termed “equine therapy” is both global and growing. Much of the literature – reports, case studies, clinical trials – acknowledges that for participants experiencing physical, mental and/or physical disabilities there is a strong indication that positive results are often reported or observed after their exposure to a program of equine therapy. In an emergent, and largely unquantifiable field, such as this, it is not unusual to find there remains a lack of strong causal or correlational positive results that indicate conclusive evidence that equine therapy is beneficial in all situations – more often the conclusion is that it can, or may, be beneficial, and is a therapeutic program that would benefit from greater quantitative research. Observational and self-reporting studies largely report significant benefits from an equine therapy program, and locally, a large foundation grant awarded to the Remount horsemanship program in Yass, NSW, in 2017 for a program of equine therapy for military veterans and their families “to manage the impacts of loss, work stress, combat stress or post-traumatic stress disorder”<sup>1</sup> indicates emergent public and private support for this form of therapy. This also shows that there is also strong personal and/or anecdotal evidence that equine therapy can be highly effective, meaning that greater qualitative research is also needed to build a more comprehensive understanding of this form of therapy.

## Definitions

Equine Therapy or Equine Assisted Psychotherapy<sup>2</sup> can be defined as “a form of experiential therapy that includes horses and a specialist psychologist or counselor [sic] working together with a client to create positive change.”<sup>3</sup> It can involve both mounted and unmounted activities, whereby in the latter, the “horses are able to act more naturally because they are not controlled by riders.”<sup>4</sup> As explained by Cantin et al:

[I]t is designed to provide a short-term, intensive treatment programme. Sessions usually last between 60 to 90 minutes and require setting up activities involving horses, which are facilitated by a therapist and horse practitioner. These activities require the client or group to convey certain skills, for instance, verbal communication, assertiveness, creative thinking and problem-solving, leadership, taking responsibility and teamwork.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Han Nguyen, “Boost for Veterans and Families as Remount Gains Sponsorship”, *The Canberra Times*, 11 September 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Also referred to as Equine Facilitated Therapy, Equine Assisted Learning, Equine Assisted Learning and Therapy.

<sup>3</sup> Azmaira H Maker, “Equine Assisted Therapy: A Unique and Effective Intervention”, *Psychology Today*, available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/helping-kids-cope/201903/equine-assisted-therapy-unique-and-effective-intervention>. Accessed 13 June 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Ping-Tzu Lee, et al, “Narrative Synthesis of Equine-assisted Psychotherapy Literature: Current Knowledge and Future Research Directions”, *Health and Social Care in the Community*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2016, p. 226.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Cantin et al, “Examining the Literature on the Efficacy of Equine Assisted Therapy for People with Mental Health and Behavioural Disorders”, *Mental Health and Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2012, p. 52.

## **Method**

This review was compiled from selected academic materials using ANU library database searches, the Elsevier “Mendeley” software program, Internet searches, and materials provided by those conducting equine therapy as practitioners. The literature included studies from case studies of a sample size of one to a sample size of 31, across the demographics of primary school children to adult males and females, including Indigenous children and adolescents, and adults from different professions. The literature reviewed also included studies that were focussed on people with a range of psychological conditions (antisocial behaviour, anxiety, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Axis II disorders, conduct problems, depression, dissociative disorders, dysfunctional behaviour, eating disorders, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, suicide ideation, substance abuse and sexualised behaviours). The studies were conducted in Australia, Italy, Norway and the United States. As Sherony Park does not offer mounted equine therapy, the studies that focussed on riding or sitting on horses were not included in this review, however the studies that included both mounted and unmounted results have been noted and the discrepancy between mounted and unmounted results disaggregated. A more comprehensive literature review was unable to be conducted due to time and resource constraints, although such a resource would be a welcome and valued resource for practitioners of equine therapy as well as scholars and research institutes.

An entire list of works cited is listed in the Reference List at the end of this review, along with a list of videos of equine therapy uses in Australia, France, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, and two recent public online articles about horses and therapy. Page numbers and ranges have been cited when provided in the original article. The hyperlinks in this review including those in-text, are active, and correct as at the time of publication.

## REVIEW

Animal Assisted Interventions also known as Animal Assisted Therapy is the “deliberate involvement of animals within a treatment to realise specific therapeutic goals” with horses and dogs being the most common.<sup>6</sup> These animals in particular are seen as “providing unconditional positive regard, without judgement”, which can often be lacking in the case of those suffering psychological distress or dissociation.<sup>7</sup>

Cantin et al note equine therapy gained traction in the 1970s as one of the alternatives to the more traditional clinic-based talking,<sup>8</sup> and Klontz et al note that pets as therapy animals has been present in the literature since the mid-1990s.<sup>9</sup> Klontz et al note also that animals have been used to treat mental health problems in people at least as far back as 1792.<sup>10</sup> The benefits of animals in therapy are multi-fold, with the animal providing unconditional non-judgmental positive responses, providing an “emotional bridge” that eventually leads to a relationship with a therapist, calming children with hyperactive tendencies and relieving the “hyper-vigilance” in those experiencing PTSD.<sup>11</sup> Disappointingly, despite a therapeutic ancestry dating back at least three centuries, it is still a practice considered to be “in its infancy”.<sup>12</sup>

Many studies note the defining feature of equine therapy is the singular nature of horses as a herd animal of prey - as opposed to other animals frequently used as therapy or companion animals such as dogs, for example. Dogs are pack animals, and seek to stay in the pack for survival. Therefore dogs remain loyal in order to remain in the pack irrespective of how they may be treated by the owner/pack leader. However, horses, always seeking to avoid being predated upon, are “instinctively tuned to the emotions and body language of other animals (including humans), as their survival relies on the ability to interpret such actions into intentions”.<sup>13</sup> Earles et al note horses not only respond to “human gestures”, in particular they can “provide immediate feedback about a person’s nonverbal behavior [sic], (eg. horses may crowd a person who is hunched ... or back away from a person who is approaching quickly with prolonged eye contact)”,<sup>14</sup> in other words horses respond with curiosity and compassion, or with caution, and even retreat from, a person behaving

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<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Kemp et al, “Equine Facilitated Therapy with Children and Adolescents who have been Sexually Abused: A Program Evaluation Study”, *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, Vol. 23, 2014, p. 559.

<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Kemp et al, “Equine Facilitated Therapy with Children and Adolescents who have been Sexually Abused: A Program Evaluation Study”, *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, Vol. 23, 2014, p. 559.

<sup>8</sup> Anna Cantin et al, “Examining the Literature on the Efficacy of Equine Assisted Therapy for People with Mental Health and Behavioural Disorders”, *Mental Health and Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2012, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> Bradley T Klontz et al, “The Effectiveness of Equine-Assisted Experiential Therapy: Results of an Open Clinical Trial”, *Society and Animals*, Vo. 15, 2007, pp. 257-258.

<sup>10</sup> Bradley T Klontz et al, “The Effectiveness of Equine-Assisted Experiential Therapy: Results of an Open Clinical Trial”, *Society and Animals*, Vo. 15, 2007, p. 257.

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Kemp et al, “Equine Facilitated Therapy with Children and Adolescents who have been Sexually Abused: A Program Evaluation Study”, *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, Vol. 23, 2014, p. 559.

<sup>12</sup> Kathleen Kemp et al, “Equine Facilitated Therapy with Children and Adolescents who have been Sexually Abused: A Program Evaluation Study”, *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, Vol. 23, 2014, p. 559.

<sup>13</sup> Kathleen Kemp et al, “Equine Facilitated Therapy with Children and Adolescents who have been Sexually Abused: A Program Evaluation Study”, *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, Vol. 23, 2014, p. 560.

<sup>14</sup> Julie L Earles et al, “Equine-Assisted Therapy for Anxiety and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms”, *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vo. 28, April 2015, p. 150.

like an aggressor or predator. Klontz et al note this as “hypervigilance”, which participants who have experienced trauma “relate to”.<sup>15</sup> Johansen et al further state “[T]he horse’s high sensitivity and responsiveness to body language is used as an aid for the client to improve awareness of his/her emotions, bodily response and communication”,<sup>16</sup> a sentiment echoed by Earles et al,<sup>17</sup> and Ferrulo is not alone in noting horses’ ability to “mirror” human emotions as well as a “metaphor” for a participants’ problems “to reflect back onto the participant his or her way of being and interacting in the world”.<sup>18</sup> Klontz et al also noted the use of horses as “metaphors”, further noting “horses elicit a range of emotions and behaviors [sic] in humans, which can be used as a catalyst for personal awareness and growth”, further noting:

“[H]orses can also give accurate and unbiased feedback, mirroring both the physical and emotional states of the participant during exercises, providing clients with an opportunity to raise their awareness and to practice congruence between their feelings and behaviors” [sic].<sup>19</sup>

Further, Johansen et al point out that the goal in equine therapy is “to modify the way individuals relate to themselves and others by focussing on new experiences and understandings that are **illustrated** by the relationship with the horse”<sup>20</sup> (emphasis added).

In a study from 2017, Usadi and Levine also emphasise the importance of eye contact in unmounted activities, and while admitting to the benefits of mounted activities to the physical body, unmounted activities, and the horse’s “mirroring” allows the participants to reveal their “deep feelings and intentions” allowing the psychotherapist access to “an inner world that may not yet be known to the client, or, if known, may have been difficult for the client to articulate.”<sup>21</sup>

Equine therapy has been cited as being effective for children, youth and adults where traditional verbalising in a clinical or office environment between the client and the therapist proves ineffective – such as in cases of wariness of all adults or dissociation from the trauma the participant experienced.<sup>22</sup> Naste et al identify three components of equine therapy that seem to assist in clients being treated for trauma: safety and mutual respect (shared relational safety between themselves and the horse, and the equine environment); attachment (relationship building, including

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<sup>15</sup> Bradley T Klontz et al, “The Effectiveness of Equine-Assisted Experiential Therapy: Results of an Open Clinical Trial”, *Society and Animals*, Vo. 15, 2007, p. 259.

<sup>16</sup> Siv G Johansen et al, “Facilitating Change in a Client’s Dysfunctional Behavioural Pattern with Horse-Aided Psychotherapy. A Case Study”, *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, Vol. 16, No. 3, September 2016, p. 222.

<sup>17</sup> Julie L Earles et al, “Equine-Assisted Therapy for Anxiety and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms”, *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vo. 28, April 2015, p. 150

<sup>18</sup> David M Ferruolo, “Psychosocial Equine Program for Veterans”, *Social Work*, Vol. 61, No. 1, January 2016, p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> Bradley T Klontz et al, “The Effectiveness of Equine-Assisted Experiential Therapy: Results of an Open Clinical Trial”, *Society and Animals*, Vo. 15, 2007, p. 259.

<sup>20</sup> Siv G Johansen et al, “Facilitating Change in a Client’s Dysfunctional Behavioural Pattern with Horse-Aided Psychotherapy. A Case Study”, *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, Vol. 16, No. 3, September 2016, p. 223.

<sup>21</sup> Eva J Usadi and Sean A Levine, “Why We Don’t Ride: Equine Assisted Psychotherapy, Military Veterans and Moral Injury”, *Journal of Trauma and Treatment*, Vol. 6, No 2, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Kathleen Kemp et al, “Equine Facilitated Therapy with Children and Adolescents who have been Sexually Abused: A Program Evaluation Study”, *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, Vol. 23, 2014, p. 559.

“attunement” as well as communication); and regulation (of their body language and behaviour).<sup>23</sup> Naste et al also note the importance of routines and rituals in equine therapy “that create an environment reflective of safety, predictability, and consistency”.<sup>24</sup> Further, a clinical environment can be unsuited to some cultures or ethnicities, and Kemp et al note this appears to be the case particularly for those from Indigenous backgrounds unused to talking with a “‘stranger’ about family matters and ... feelings and emotions”.<sup>25</sup> In addition, they state that “therapies that are mono-culturally biased and conducted in a clinical environment may be unsuited to some cultures, particularly Indigenous clients.”<sup>26</sup>

An earlier review of the literature from 2012 “revealed promising results in the use of EAT in increasing positive and reducing negative behaviours as well as in proving beneficial for those suffering from general mental health problems”.<sup>27</sup> The more recent studies reviewed for this review found the case continued to be so. For example, Johansen et al (2016), noted that “interaction with horses can have a therapeutic effect”, with self-reporting of reduced feelings of anger and aggression, depression, and increases in self-esteem, self-control, and trust.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, a 2015 study of adults suffering from anxiety and PTSD symptoms found positive self-reporting after a six week long equine therapy program, stating “participants reported significantly reduced posttraumatic [sic] stress symptoms, less severe emotional responses to trauma ... less generalized anxiety ... and fewer symptoms of depression”.<sup>29</sup> Importantly, in relation to trust, “gaining an alliance with a horse may be less threatening, less complicated and less charged with human expectations than participating in regular psychotherapy.”<sup>30</sup> This supports the strong assertion put forward in a 2014 study of Australian children and youth by Kemp et al, who surmise that “Overall, the results show that EFT proved an effective therapeutic approach for the children and adolescents referred to the service. Of particular note was the finding that efficacy was similar across gender, age and Indigenous/non-Indigenous status.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Tiffany M Naste et al, “Equine Facilitated Therapy for Complex Trauma (EFT-CT)”, *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*, August 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Tiffany M Naste et al, “Equine Facilitated Therapy for Complex Trauma (EFT-CT)”, *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*, August 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Kathleen Kemp et al, “Equine Facilitated Therapy with Children and Adolescents who have been Sexually Abused: A Program Evaluation Study”, *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, Vol. 23, 2014, p. 559.

<sup>26</sup> Kathleen Kemp et al, “Equine Facilitated Therapy with Children and Adolescents who have been Sexually Abused: A Program Evaluation Study”, *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, Vol. 23, 2014, p. 559.

<sup>27</sup> Anna Cantin et al, “Examining the Literature on the Efficacy of Equine Assisted Therapy for People with Mental Health and Behavioural Disorders”, *Mental Health and Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2012, p. 51.

<sup>28</sup> Siv G Johansen et al, “Facilitating Change in a Client’s Dysfunctional Behavioural Pattern with Horse-Aided Psychotherapy. A Case Study”, *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, Vol. 16, No. 3, September 2016, p. 222.

<sup>29</sup> Julie L Earles et al, “Equine-Assisted Therapy for Anxiety and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms”, *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vol. 28, April 2015, p. 149.

<sup>30</sup> Siv G Johansen et al, “Facilitating Change in a Client’s Dysfunctional Behavioural Pattern with Horse-Aided Psychotherapy. A Case Study”, *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, Vol. 16, No. 3, September 2016, p. 223.

<sup>31</sup> Kathleen Kemp et al, “Equine Facilitated Therapy with Children and Adolescents who have been Sexually Abused: A Program Evaluation Study”, *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, Vol. 23, 2014, p. 558.

In finding that in their study the “[P]articipants’ PTSD symptoms, emotional distress, anxiety symptoms, and alcohol use decreased significantly” as well as mindfulness increasing after participating in the equine therapy program,<sup>32</sup> Earles et al concluded “equine therapy could be an effective therapeutic technique for treating PTSD and other anxiety symptoms” not least due to the “significant increases in mindfulness”.<sup>33</sup>

In a later review of the literature from 2016, including both qualitative and quantitative studies, Lee et al conclude:

The reviewed qualitative research provides initial evidence for the value of EAP for enhancing adolescents’ communication and relationship skills. The reviewed experimental and quasi-experimental research provides initial evidence for the value of EAP for enhancing children’s and adolescents’ emotional, social and behavioural functioning.<sup>34</sup>

Much of the literature, Lee et al included, rightly notes methodological limitations point to the difficulty in forming causal, rather than correlational conclusions regarding the efficacy of equine therapy. For example, it is difficult to quantify factors that may also be influencing the participants’ improvements, such as changes that may simply occur over time or due to increased maturity, outside factors such as changes in the participants’ personal lives, small sample sizes, or the lack of a control group. Many of these methodological limitations require further studies to be conducted, however Cantin et al refer to a 2005 study where a control group was able to be used, in splitting a group of 29 teenagers experiencing a range of mental, emotional and behavioural problems into two (15/14).<sup>35</sup> The conclusion was “that the adolescents who received EAT experienced greater total therapeutic change in psychosocial functioning than those not exposed to EAT. Both adolescents and caregivers reported statistically significant changes in symptoms of depression, anxiety and self-harm but only the caregivers reported significant change in other symptoms.”<sup>36</sup> Borgi et al also note the use of a control group in a more recent study of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), (15/13), concluding “[R]esults indicate an improvement in social functioning in the group attending EAT ... and a milder effect on motor abilities. Improved executive functioning was also observed ... at the end of the EAT program.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Julie L Earles et al, “Equine-Assisted Therapy for Anxiety and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms”, *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vol. 28, April 2015, p. 150.

<sup>33</sup> Julie L Earles et al, “Equine-Assisted Therapy for Anxiety and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms”, *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vol. 28, April 2015, p. 151.

<sup>34</sup> Ping-Tzu Lee, et al, “Narrative Synthesis of Equine-assisted Psychotherapy Literature: Current Knowledge and Future Research Directions”, *Health and Social Care in the Community*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2016, p. 225.

<sup>35</sup> Anna Cantin et al, “Examining the Literature on the Efficacy of Equine Assisted Therapy for People with Mental Health and Behavioural Disorders”, *Mental Health and Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2012, p. 58.

<sup>36</sup> Anna Cantin et al, “Examining the Literature on the Efficacy of Equine Assisted Therapy for People with Mental Health and Behavioural Disorders”, *Mental Health and Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2012, p. 58.

<sup>37</sup> Marti Borgi, et al, “Effectiveness of a Standardised Equine-Assistance Therapy Program for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder”, *Journal of Autism Development Disorder*, Vol. 46, 2016, p. 1. The motor abilities referred to in this study appear to be related to horse-riding, which was conducted as part of the EAT program.

While Lee et al caution that “conclusions about the effectiveness of EAP must still be considered preliminary due to various methodological limitations in the reviewed research”,<sup>38</sup> Johansen et al also point out that “30-35% of patients who are offered evidence-based psychotherapies do not improve”.<sup>39</sup>

More recently, in an article in the public online magazine *Psychology Today* dated March 2019, the author was more adamant, stating “Studies have resulted in a body of literature supporting the therapeutic value of the human-animal interaction. Equine Assisted Therapy can help clients with depression, anxiety, ADHD, conduct disorders, addiction, trauma, eating disorders, spectrum and health difficulties, dissociative disorders, Alzheimer’s disease, dementia, and other mental health difficulties.”<sup>40</sup>

In sum, despite identified limitations in the studies, and in Equine Therapy as a complementary and specialised means of improving or managing emotional, mental and behavioural problems in children, adolescents and adults, it seems fair to conclude that “Equine Assisted Therapy is being recognized as a more integral part of psychotherapy and mental health and can serve as a unique and effective intervention that should be considered as a resource by parents and professionals.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ping-Tzu Lee, et al, “Narrative Synthesis of Equine-assisted Psychotherapy Literature: Current Knowledge and Future Research Directions”, *Health and Social Care in the Community*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2016, p. 225.

<sup>39</sup> Siv G Johansen et al, “Facilitating Change in a Client’s Dysfunctional Behavioural Pattern with Horse-Aided Psychotherapy. A Case Study”, *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, Vol. 16, No. 3, September 2016, p. 229.

<sup>40</sup> Azmaira H Maker, “Equine Assisted Therapy: A Unique and Effective Intervention”, *Psychology Today*, available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/helping-kids-cope/201903/equine-assisted-therapy-unique-and-effective-intervention>. Accessed 13 June 2019

<sup>41</sup> Azmaira H Maker, “Equine Assisted Therapy: A Unique and Effective Intervention”, *Psychology Today*, available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/helping-kids-cope/201903/equine-assisted-therapy-unique-and-effective-intervention>. Accessed 13 June 2019

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## **APPENDIX**

Selected video links to equine therapy programs.

[Jacob in Cincinnati](#)

[Peyo visits patients in hospital.](#)

[Teens in the UK](#)

[Tyson in a retirement village](#) (Facebook link)

[Counsellor and survivor of trauma in the USA](#)

[Fostered youth in the USA](#)

[Youth at Risk South Africa](#)

## **PUBLIC LINKS**

<https://horseandrider.com/horse-health-care/horses-helping-seniors>

<https://www.treehugger.com/animals/ptsd-scores-plummet-veterans-who-try-therapeutic-horseback-riding.html>