

equine therapy for trauma

Equine Therapy for Trauma: A Healing Partnership

Trauma, a deeply distressing experience, can leave lasting emotional and psychological scars. For many survivors, traditional therapies offer valuable support, but the journey to healing can be complex and multifaceted. Equine therapy, also known as Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) or Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL), presents a unique and powerful approach to trauma recovery. This holistic modality harnesses the profound connection between humans and horses to facilitate emotional processing, build trust, and foster resilience. By engaging in guided interactions with these sensitive animals, individuals can explore their trauma in a safe, non-judgmental environment, unlocking pathways to profound healing and self-discovery. This article will delve into the multifaceted benefits of equine therapy for trauma, exploring its underlying mechanisms, common applications, and the transformative impact it can have on individuals seeking to overcome the challenges of past experiences.

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Understanding Trauma and Its Impact

Trauma is a response to an event or series of events that are experienced as

physically or emotionally dangerous or life-threatening. These experiences can overwhelm an individual's ability to cope, leading to significant distress. The impact of trauma is far-reaching, affecting not only mental well-being but also physical health and interpersonal relationships. Common responses to trauma can include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), flashbacks, nightmares, and a pervasive sense of fear or hypervigilance. Furthermore, trauma can disrupt a person's sense of self, their ability to trust others, and their overall capacity to engage with the world. Understanding these profound effects is crucial when considering therapeutic interventions, as effective treatments must address the multifaceted nature of trauma's imprint.

Types of Trauma Addressed by Equine Therapy

Equine therapy for trauma is not limited to specific types of traumatic experiences. It has proven effective for a wide spectrum of adversities. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Combat trauma and experiences of war
- Childhood abuse and neglect
- Sexual assault and harassment
- Natural disasters and accidents
- Loss of a loved one and grief
- Domestic violence
- Emotional abuse

The Psychological and Physiological Effects of Trauma

The human body and mind are profoundly affected by trauma. Psychologically, individuals may experience emotional numbing, detachment, intrusive thoughts, and difficulty regulating emotions. Physiologically, trauma can lead to chronic stress responses, impacting the nervous system and increasing the risk of various health issues. Symptoms such as sleep disturbances, fatigue, and gastrointestinal problems can manifest. The body's "fight or flight" response, designed for acute danger, can become dysregulated in individuals who have experienced trauma, leading to persistent states of heightened alert

or shutdown. Recognizing these intricate connections underscores the need for therapies that can address both the psychological and physiological manifestations of trauma.

What is Equine Therapy for Trauma?

Equine therapy for trauma is a specialized form of psychotherapy that integrates horses into the therapeutic process. It is not about riding horses, though that can be a component. Instead, it involves guided interactions with horses, facilitated by a trained equine-assisted therapist. These interactions can include grooming, leading, feeding, or simply spending quiet time with the horse. The core principle is to leverage the unique characteristics of horses – their sensitivity, non-judgmental nature, and instinctual awareness – to help individuals explore and process their traumatic experiences. This experiential approach allows for a more intuitive and embodied form of healing, often bypassing the verbal limitations that can hinder traditional talk therapy for some trauma survivors.

Key Components of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy

Equine-assisted psychotherapy for trauma typically involves several key components designed to create a safe and effective healing environment. These components work synergistically to foster progress:

- **Facilitated Interaction:** A trained therapist guides the interaction between the client and the horse, setting specific objectives and observing the dynamics.
- **Non-Verbal Communication:** Much of the work involves observing and interpreting the horse's body language and the client's responses, promoting awareness of non-verbal cues.
- **Mirroring Behavior:** Horses often mirror the emotional state of the person interacting with them, providing immediate and honest feedback that can be insightful for the client.
- **Goal-Oriented Activities:** Sessions are structured around therapeutic goals, such as building trust, developing communication skills, or managing anxiety, all within the context of the horse-human interaction.
- **Debriefing and Processing:** After each activity, the therapist facilitates a discussion to help the client process their experiences, emotions, and insights gained during the session.

Distinguishing Equine Therapy from Other Animal-Assisted Therapies

While other animal-assisted therapies involve working with animals like dogs or dolphins, equine therapy for trauma stands out due to the specific nature of the horse-human relationship. Horses are prey animals with a strong instinct for self-preservation, making them highly attuned to their environment and the emotions of those around them. This sensitivity allows them to be powerful mirrors of human emotion and behavior. Unlike domesticated pets, horses maintain a degree of independence, which can be crucial in building trust. The sheer size and strength of horses also require individuals to develop confidence, assertiveness, and clear communication, skills that are often compromised by trauma. The partnership with a horse is therefore a dynamic and reciprocal one, offering unique opportunities for healing that differ from interactions with smaller or less inherently sensitive animals.

The Mechanisms of Healing in Equine Therapy for Trauma

The effectiveness of equine therapy for trauma stems from a combination of psychological, physiological, and relational mechanisms. Horses are highly attuned to subtle cues and emotional states, making them exceptionally skilled at mirroring the internal experiences of individuals. This mirroring can bring unconscious feelings to the surface in a safe and contained manner. The non-judgmental nature of horses allows clients to feel accepted, which can be a powerful antidote to the shame and self-blame often associated with trauma. Furthermore, the physical act of engaging with a horse, such as grooming or leading, can be grounding and calming, activating the parasympathetic nervous system and reducing the effects of chronic stress.

The Horse as a Mirror and Co-Regulator

Horses possess an uncanny ability to sense and reflect the emotional states of humans. When a person is anxious, a horse might become restless. If a person is calm and confident, the horse is more likely to be relaxed. This mirroring effect provides immediate, tangible feedback to the client, allowing them to observe their own emotional impact on another living being. This can be incredibly insightful, helping individuals recognize patterns of behavior and emotional regulation they may not have been aware of. As the client learns to influence the horse's behavior through calm, assertive communication, they also learn to regulate their own emotions, fostering a sense of self-efficacy and control that trauma often erodes.

Building Trust and Attachment Through Horse-Human Interaction

Trauma frequently shatters an individual's ability to trust, both in themselves and in others. The process of building a trusting relationship with a horse can be profoundly healing. Horses require patience, consistency, and gentle leadership. As clients engage with their equine partners, they gradually learn to establish boundaries, communicate their needs, and respond to the horse's cues. This reciprocal interaction, characterized by mutual respect and understanding, can create a safe space for the client to practice forming healthy attachments. The trust developed with the horse can then generalize to human relationships, facilitating a greater capacity for connection and intimacy.

Grounding and Somatic Experience

Trauma often manifests as a disconnect between the mind and body, with individuals feeling dissociated or trapped in a state of hyperarousal or shutdown. Equine therapy provides a grounding experience through the physical presence and tactile interaction with the horse. The rhythmic act of grooming, the warmth of the horse's coat, and the shared physical space can bring individuals back into their bodies, promoting a sense of present-moment awareness. This somatic experience is crucial for trauma recovery, as it helps to release stored tension and re-establish a sense of safety and embodiment. The tactile nature of the interaction can be particularly effective in grounding individuals who experience dissociation.

Benefits of Equine Therapy for Trauma Survivors

The advantages of incorporating equine therapy into trauma recovery are numerous and impactful. Beyond the general therapeutic benefits, the unique human-horse connection offers specific pathways to healing that address the core issues often left by traumatic experiences. Survivors often report a significant reduction in symptoms associated with PTSD, anxiety, and depression. The experiential nature of the therapy allows for a deeper understanding of self and the impact of trauma, fostering resilience and empowering individuals to reclaim their lives. The skills developed in these sessions are often transferable to everyday life, leading to improved relationships and overall well-being.

Reduction in PTSD Symptoms

One of the most significant benefits of equine therapy for trauma is its reported efficacy in reducing the debilitating symptoms of PTSD. The structured yet flexible environment, combined with the calming presence of horses, can help individuals manage hypervigilance, intrusive thoughts, and nightmares. By engaging in activities that require focus and presence, clients can learn to redirect their attention away from traumatic memories and towards the here-and-now. The controlled exposure to stimuli that might otherwise trigger anxiety, within the safe context of the equine partnership, can also desensitize individuals to their trauma triggers.

Improved Emotional Regulation

Trauma can severely impair an individual's ability to regulate their emotions, leading to intense mood swings, outbursts, or emotional numbing. Equine therapy provides a safe arena to practice emotional awareness and regulation. As clients learn to interpret and respond to a horse's reactions, they also gain insight into their own emotional states and develop strategies for managing them. The horse's consistent, non-reactive presence can be a stabilizing force, allowing individuals to explore difficult emotions without the fear of overwhelming judgment or rejection. This practice in a live, dynamic environment translates into better emotional control in everyday situations.

Enhanced Self-Esteem and Confidence

Trauma can significantly damage self-esteem, leaving individuals feeling inadequate, powerless, and ashamed. Successfully navigating interactions with a large, powerful animal like a horse can be incredibly empowering. Achieving small victories, such as successfully leading a horse or gaining its trust, builds a sense of accomplishment and competence. As clients witness their ability to influence and connect with the horse, their belief in their own capabilities grows. This renewed sense of self-worth is a critical component of healing from trauma, allowing individuals to re-engage with life with a greater sense of confidence and self-respect.

Development of Trust and Communication Skills

The foundation of healthy relationships is built on trust and effective communication. Trauma can erode these essential skills. In equine therapy, the entire process is about building trust, starting with the horse and extending to the therapeutic team. Clients learn to communicate their intentions clearly, both verbally and non-verbally, to the horse. They also learn to be receptive to the horse's signals. This practice in a safe, contained environment translates directly to improved communication and

relationship-building skills in their human interactions, fostering healthier and more secure connections.

Applications of Equine Therapy in Trauma Recovery

Equine therapy for trauma is a versatile intervention that can be adapted to meet the diverse needs of survivors. It can be used as a standalone therapy or as a complementary approach alongside traditional talk therapy, EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), or other evidence-based modalities. The focus can be tailored to address specific challenges, such as managing panic attacks, improving social skills, or processing grief. The adaptability of equine therapy makes it a valuable tool in the comprehensive care of individuals who have experienced traumatic events.

Individualized Treatment Plans

Every survivor's journey through trauma is unique, and so too are their therapeutic needs. Equine therapy programs are designed to be highly individualized. Before commencing sessions, a thorough assessment is conducted by the equine therapist to understand the client's specific trauma history, current challenges, and therapeutic goals. Based on this assessment, a personalized treatment plan is developed. This plan outlines the types of activities the client will engage in, the specific therapeutic objectives, and how progress will be monitored. This tailored approach ensures that the therapy is relevant, effective, and responsive to the individual's healing process.

Group Therapy Sessions for Shared Healing

In addition to individual sessions, equine therapy for trauma can also be conducted in group settings. Group sessions offer the opportunity for survivors to connect with others who have similar experiences, fostering a sense of community and shared understanding. Witnessing others navigate their healing journey can be inspiring and validating. Within the group dynamic, individuals can practice social skills, learn from each other's insights, and provide mutual support. The presence of horses can facilitate group cohesion, as participants work together on shared tasks, strengthening bonds and reducing feelings of isolation that often accompany trauma.

Trauma-Informed Equine Practices

It is essential that any equine therapy program for trauma adheres to trauma-informed principles. This means that the therapists and the entire program environment are designed to minimize the risk of re-traumatization.

Therapists are trained to recognize the signs of distress in clients and horses, and to respond with sensitivity and care. The horses themselves are carefully selected and trained to be calm and responsive, and their well-being is prioritized. The focus is always on creating a safe, predictable, and empowering experience for both the client and the equine partners.

Finding the Right Equine Therapy Program for Trauma

Selecting an appropriate equine therapy program for trauma is a crucial step in the healing process. Potential clients should seek out programs with certified and experienced equine-assisted therapists who have specialized training in trauma-informed care. It is important to research the program's philosophy, approach, and the qualifications of their staff. Visiting the facility, meeting the horses, and discussing your specific needs with the program director can provide valuable insight into whether the program is a good fit. Prioritizing safety, expertise, and a genuine commitment to the well-being of both clients and animals is paramount.

Questions to Ask Potential Providers

When considering an equine therapy program for trauma, it is advisable to ask prospective providers the following questions:

- What are the qualifications and certifications of your equine-assisted therapists?
- Do your therapists have specific training and experience in working with trauma survivors?
- What is the typical session structure and duration?
- What is the program's approach to client safety and the well-being of the horses?
- How do you assess client progress and tailor treatment plans?
- Are there opportunities for individual and group sessions?

- What are the associated costs, and do you offer any sliding scale options?
- Can I visit the facility and meet the horses and staff before committing?

Assessing the Therapeutic Environment

The therapeutic environment in equine therapy for trauma plays a significant role in a client's comfort and progress. A safe environment is characterized by:

- **Calm and Predictable Setting:** The facility should be well-maintained and organized, providing a sense of order and predictability.
- **Respectful Staff:** All staff members, from therapists to stable hands, should exhibit a respectful and compassionate demeanor towards clients and animals.
- **Well-Cared-For Horses:** The horses should appear healthy, well-groomed, and appropriately handled, indicating a commitment to their welfare.
- **Clear Safety Protocols:** There should be visible and clearly communicated safety guidelines for working with the horses and in the general environment.
- **Comfortable Client Areas:** Spaces for debriefing and discussion should be comfortable and conducive to open communication.

The Role of the Equine Professional

The equine professional, often a licensed mental health therapist with specialized training in equine-assisted psychotherapy, is the linchpin of successful equine therapy for trauma. Their expertise lies not only in understanding therapeutic principles but also in interpreting the complex dynamics between humans and horses. They are responsible for creating a safe and supportive environment, designing therapeutic activities, facilitating client processing, and ensuring the ethical and effective application of the modality. Their presence ensures that the interactions with horses are purposeful and aligned with the client's healing goals.

Qualifications and Specializations

Equine-assisted therapists typically hold master's or doctoral degrees in fields such as psychology, social work, counseling, or marriage and family therapy. In addition to their core mental health credentials, they often pursue specialized certifications from organizations like the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) or PATH International (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship). These certifications indicate a commitment to rigorous training in the specific principles and practices of equine-assisted therapy, with a focus on ethical considerations, client safety, and the well-being of the horses.

Ethical Considerations and Client Safety

Ethical practice in equine therapy for trauma is paramount. Therapists must maintain confidentiality, practice within their scope of competence, and avoid dual relationships. Client safety is a primary concern, encompassing both physical safety around the horses and emotional safety within the therapeutic process. This involves thorough risk assessments, clear communication of safety guidelines, and constant supervision during interactions. Therapists must be adept at recognizing and responding to signs of distress in clients and have protocols in place to manage any potential incidents. The welfare of the horses is also an ethical consideration; they are viewed as partners in the therapeutic process and must be treated with respect and care.

Addressing Common Concerns about Equine Therapy for Trauma

It is natural for individuals to have questions and concerns when considering equine therapy for trauma. Common reservations might include fear of horses, concerns about physical safety, or skepticism about the efficacy of a non-traditional approach. Reputable equine therapy programs are well-equipped to address these concerns by providing comprehensive information, ensuring thorough safety protocols, and offering introductory sessions. The focus on building trust gradually and working at the client's pace helps to alleviate anxieties and allows individuals to approach the experience with confidence.

Fear of Horses (Equinophobia)

For some individuals, a fear of horses can be a significant barrier to engaging in equine therapy. However, this fear can often be addressed within

the therapeutic framework. Therapists are trained to work with clients who have equinophobia, starting with very gentle and controlled introductions to the horses. This might begin with simply observing the horses from a safe distance, then progressing to being in the same enclosed space, and eventually to non-contact activities like grooming. The horses used in therapeutic settings are typically calm, well-trained, and accustomed to human interaction, making them less intimidating. The therapist's guidance and support are crucial in helping individuals gradually overcome their fears and build trust.

Physical Safety and Horse Management

Concerns about physical safety are valid, given that horses are large animals. However, professional equine therapy programs prioritize safety through several measures:

- **Careful Horse Selection:** Only horses that are temperamentally sound, well-trained, and accustomed to working with people are used.
- **Experienced Facilitation:** Therapists and handlers are trained in horse behavior and safe handling techniques.
- **Controlled Environment:** Sessions often take place in enclosed arenas or pastures, limiting the horses' movement and potential for unexpected actions.
- **Client Education:** Clients receive instruction on safe interaction and movement around horses.
- **Constant Supervision:** Clients are supervised at all times during interactions with the horses.

By adhering to these protocols, the risk of injury is significantly minimized.

Conclusion: The Powerful Partnership for Trauma Healing

Equine therapy for trauma offers a unique and profoundly effective pathway to healing for survivors. By harnessing the innate qualities of horses—their sensitivity, non-judgmental presence, and ability to mirror emotions—this therapeutic modality facilitates emotional processing, builds crucial trust,

and fosters essential life skills. The benefits, including symptom reduction, improved emotional regulation, and enhanced self-esteem, underscore its value in trauma recovery. For those seeking a holistic and experiential approach to overcoming the impacts of trauma, the partnership between humans and horses can be a powerful force for transformation, leading to greater resilience, well-being, and a renewed sense of hope.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is equine therapy for trauma?

Equine therapy for trauma, also known as Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) or Hippotherapy, is a therapeutic approach that utilizes horses and the horse-human connection to help individuals process and heal from traumatic experiences. It involves guided activities with horses under the supervision of a licensed mental health professional and often an equine specialist.

How does equine therapy help with trauma processing?

Horses are highly attuned to emotional states and can mirror a client's internal experience. Their presence can create a safe, non-judgmental space for individuals to express emotions, build trust, and develop coping mechanisms. The physical sensations of interacting with a horse, such as grooming or walking, can also ground individuals and promote a sense of calm.

What specific types of trauma can equine therapy address?

Equine therapy has shown promise in addressing a wide range of trauma, including PTSD from combat, sexual assault, childhood abuse, neglect, natural disasters, and the trauma associated with grief and loss.

What are the benefits of equine therapy compared to traditional talk therapy for trauma?

While talk therapy is vital, equine therapy offers a more experiential and somatic approach. It engages the body and emotions in a way that talk therapy alone may not, promoting self-awareness, emotional regulation, and a sense of agency. The non-verbal communication with horses can be particularly helpful for those who struggle to verbalize their experiences.

What kind of activities are involved in equine therapy for trauma?

Activities vary depending on the client and therapist's goals but can include grooming, leading the horse, building obstacles, or simply observing the

horse. These activities are designed to elicit specific emotional and behavioral responses that can be processed with the therapist.

Is equine therapy safe for individuals with trauma?

Yes, when conducted by qualified professionals in a controlled environment, equine therapy is generally safe. Licensed therapists and equine specialists prioritize safety and work to create a secure and supportive experience for all participants.

Who provides equine therapy for trauma?

Equine therapy for trauma is typically provided by licensed mental health professionals (e.g., therapists, counselors, psychologists) who have specialized training and certification in Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) or Equine-Assisted Mental Health (EAMH). They often collaborate with experienced equine specialists.

What does research say about the effectiveness of equine therapy for trauma?

Emerging research suggests positive outcomes for equine therapy in reducing symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression in trauma survivors. Studies highlight improvements in emotional regulation, self-esteem, and social skills. However, more extensive research is ongoing to further validate these findings.

How long does it take to see results from equine therapy for trauma?

The timeline for seeing results varies greatly depending on the individual, the severity of the trauma, and the frequency of sessions. Some individuals may experience initial shifts in mood and self-awareness relatively quickly, while deeper healing and processing can take longer.

Where can I find a qualified equine therapist for trauma?

You can find qualified equine therapists through professional organizations like the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) or the Global Association of Applied Therapeutic Riding (GAATR). Consulting with your primary care physician or a mental health professional can also provide referrals.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to equine therapy for trauma, with descriptions:

1. The Horse Who Healed: Stories of Trauma Recovery Through Equine Assisted Therapy

This collection of personal narratives offers profound insights into the transformative power of the human-animal bond. It showcases individuals who have navigated significant trauma, finding solace, strength, and healing in their interactions with horses. The book highlights how the non-judgmental presence and gentle guidance of equines can facilitate emotional processing and foster profound personal growth. Readers will be moved by the resilience of the human spirit and the unique therapeutic contributions of these magnificent creatures.

2. Riding Through the Storm: Equine Therapy for PTSD and Anxiety

This practical guide delves into the specific applications of equine-assisted therapy for individuals struggling with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and anxiety. It explains the underlying psychological and physiological mechanisms through which horses can help regulate emotions and reduce stress responses. The book provides evidence-based strategies and case studies demonstrating how this modality can be integrated into comprehensive treatment plans. It's an invaluable resource for both individuals seeking help and practitioners looking to expand their therapeutic toolkit.

3. The Silent Witness: Horses as Catalysts for Trauma Processing

Exploring the nuanced communication between humans and horses, this book illuminates how equine interactions can serve as a powerful catalyst for processing traumatic experiences. It discusses how the horse's innate ability to sense and respond to subtle human emotions can create a safe space for vulnerability. Through detailed case examples, the author demonstrates how these interactions can unlock buried emotions and facilitate profound self-discovery. The text emphasizes the trust and connection built, paving the way for deeper healing.

4. Hoofprints of Hope: A Guide to Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy

This comprehensive resource offers a foundational understanding of equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) as a therapeutic intervention. It outlines the core principles, ethical considerations, and practical techniques involved in incorporating horses into mental health treatment. The book provides guidance for therapists on how to design and implement EAP sessions effectively, focusing on building therapeutic alliances and achieving specific client goals. It's an essential read for anyone interested in this growing field and its potential to support trauma survivors.

5. Unbridled Strength: Empowering Survivors with Horses

This inspiring book focuses on the empowering aspect of equine therapy for trauma survivors, emphasizing the development of self-efficacy and resilience. It showcases how the physical and emotional challenges presented in equine sessions can foster a sense of accomplishment and mastery. The

narratives highlight how confronting fears and building trust with horses can translate into greater confidence in navigating life's difficulties. Readers will be encouraged by the stories of regaining control and finding inner strength.

6. Bridging the Divide: Connecting with Horses for Emotional Healing

This insightful work explores the concept of "bridging the divide" between human emotional distress and the grounding presence of horses. It examines how the intuitive nature of equines can help individuals bridge the gap between their internal experiences and outward expression. The book offers practical exercises and insights into building a meaningful connection with horses, fostering a sense of safety and understanding. It's ideal for those seeking to deepen their emotional connection and find a path to healing.

7. The Grounded Horse: Equine Therapy for Dissociation and Emotional Numbing

This specialized text addresses the use of equine therapy for trauma survivors who experience dissociation and emotional numbing. It explains how the physical presence and predictable behaviors of horses can help ground individuals in the present moment. The book offers specific strategies for using the equine environment to re-establish a sense of safety and embodied experience. It's a vital resource for understanding how horses can facilitate re-connection with oneself after profound trauma.

8. Equine Insights: Understanding Trauma Through the Horse-Human Partnership

This book offers a unique perspective on trauma by exploring the insights gained through the partnership with horses. It delves into how observing horses' reactions to human behavior can provide valuable feedback for trauma processing and understanding relational dynamics. The author shares profound observations about the mirroring effect of horses and how this can lead to deeper self-awareness. This is a thought-provoking read for anyone interested in the subtle yet powerful ways horses can illuminate our inner worlds.

9. The Arena of Trust: Building Resilience with Equine-Assisted Trauma Therapy

This title emphasizes the creation of a "arena of trust" within equine-assisted trauma therapy sessions. It highlights the importance of establishing a secure and reliable environment where vulnerability can be explored safely with horses. The book discusses how the consistent and predictable nature of equine interactions builds a foundation of trust for survivors. Readers will gain an understanding of how this trust translates into building personal resilience and coping mechanisms for long-term healing.

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