

What to Look for in Equine-Based Therapy



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Recently, there has been a lot of publicity about horses being used for therapy for individuals with a diagnosis of a mental and/or physical disorder. However, it is not as simple as going to the barn and riding a horse. There are three basic forms of equine therapy: therapeutic riding, hippotherapy, and equine facilitated wellness. Understanding what each one means can help you decide if this form of therapy is right for your client and know what to help them look for in a therapy experience.

Therapeutic Riding

Therapeutic riding (TR) provides children and adults with disabilities the opportunity to challenge themselves and achieve a sense of greater wellbeing through time spent with horses. TR is an activity offered to individuals with physical and intellectual challenges, as well as those with Autism Spectrum Disorder.¹ The focus of TR is to provide holistic therapy through teaching riding and horsemanship skills, which may result in increased mobility and other physical benefits, improvement in life skills such as communication and social functioning, and a sense of accomplishment and wellbeing.² The Canadian Therapeutic Riding Association (CanTRA) is a registered charity recognized as the national standard-setting body for TR, including instructor certification and centre accreditation. Certified instructors and trained volunteers work together with medical and/or therapy personnel to offer safe and effective programs.



Hippotherapy. Photo courtesy Les Amis de Joey

Hippotherapy

Hippotherapy, or horse therapy, is derived from “hippos,” the Ancient Greek word for horse. It uses the horse as a therapeutic “tool” rather than for horsemanship skills or goals. In a hippotherapy session, the goals and focus may be to improve a client’s functional abilities such as communication, gross or fine motor skills, or self-help skills. These improvements are then assessed using standardized measures to evaluate whether the activity and treatment are effective. Unlike TR, hippotherapy therapists must be trained and credentialed in their respective professional area (i.e., physical therapist, occupational therapist, speech-language pathologist).

Treatment exercises may include verbal commands to encourage the horse to go forward and to halt (speech therapy), clients squeezing their legs to move the horse forward (physical therapy), or the process of grooming the horse (occupational therapy). The focus is on improving the individual’s functional ability and not necessarily on personal growth or mental health issues. Treatment goals depend on the initial evaluation prepared by the therapist with the help of the rider’s medical team.

Many report that both TR and hippotherapy are fun and do not feel like therapy³ – one of the biggest benefits of such therapy, especially for children.^{4, 5} There is also an increasing body of research from multiple disciplines that supports the efficacy of these forms of therapy.

Equine Facilitated Wellness

Equine-facilitated wellness (EFW) incorporates a range of counselling, education and personal development approaches, strategies and techniques that bring humans and equines together in healing and learning environments. Terms currently used in this area of practice include: equine-facilitated counselling, equine experiential learning, equine-assisted/facilitated psychotherapy, and equine-assisted personal development.

EFW includes a variety of activities with horses, such as grooming, longeing (technique for training horses), riding and driving. In this type of therapy the horse is not a “tool” but a partner in the therapy process and is treated with great respect.

Using horses in mental health therapy is a much newer type of therapy, and guidelines and policies for EFW are not as well developed as those for the other two forms of equine therapy. If your client is considering this wellness practice for mental health concerns, consider that CanTRA’s best practice is to have a credentialed mental health professional (e.g., social worker, psychologist) or education professional and a certified equine professional working together to provide therapy to the client.*

Once a thorough assessment is completed in EFW therapy, treatment goals are developed with the client and may



EFT/EAT.

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include self-esteem and self-help issues, boundary awareness and other personal growth and development concerns. The environment is carefully supervised and the process is professionally facilitated so that interactions occur with specially selected, trained equine partners.

While there are an increasing number of empirical studies showing that the blending of therapeutic activities with animals is helpful,^{6, 7} as yet, there is no strong evidence-based research that supports EFW for mental health disorders. Researchers are, however, beginning to explore this new approach to mental health care⁸ – studies are currently underway to evaluate the effectiveness of EFW therapy for depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.

If your client decides to give EFW a try, it is strongly recommended that they follow the standards set by CanTRA. The organization suggests a team approach is best and that the team should include a certified mental health professional (e.g., psychologist, social worker) or education professional, horses that are specifically chosen for their suitability to do this kind of work, and a certified equine professional. It may also be helpful to ask others who have tried the specific therapy being considered about their experience. Because of the nature of working with animals, CanTRA advocates for proper professional supervision and that only one client and one horse be together in the arena at a time.

When implemented appropriately, these various forms of equine-based therapy can be a novel way to experience self-growth and healing. Anyone interested in learning more about equine therapies is encouraged to consult www.cantra.ca and www.equinefacilitatedwellness.org.

*<https://cantra.ca/en/our-services/equine-facilitated-wellness>

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References and links

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