

Title of Project: Effects of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy on Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms in Youth

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Evaluating effective methods of comprehensive mental health services for youth is increasingly important, as young people are being diagnosed with serious emotional and behavioral disorders at an alarming rate. Often, these disorders are associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms related to childhood trauma. While traditional cognitive behavioral interventions have proven helpful in reducing the symptoms of depression, anxiety, and conduct disorders, they are often not as effective in reducing PTSD symptoms in youth. Because of the difficulties in treating youth PTSD symptoms, particularly when associated with other mental or physical conditions, the development of new, effective treatment techniques is necessary.

One such intervention, equine facilitated psychotherapy (EFP), has been effective in reducing children's anxiety over attending therapy and in treating emotional and behavioral challenges. However, additional research on the efficacy of animal-based/EFP outpatient psychotherapy needs to be conducted in order to assess if EFP is a useful alternative to traditional interventions for PTSD symptoms in particular.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of EFP in the treatment of posttraumatic stress symptoms in children and teens. In addition, we explored the effects of the human-animal bond on the effectiveness of this program. Participants (male youth ages 10 to 18) were selected from a therapeutic treatment facility and placed either in a group of students receiving EFP, or in a group of students who will continue to receive the treatment from the therapeutic facility. Youth in the EFP program attended EFP sessions once a week for 10 sessions during a 12 week period (two extra weeks to allow for absences). All youth were asked to complete a brief survey at the beginning of the program, at week 5, and at week 10.

Generally, the findings from this study will provide additional evidence regarding the role of the human-animal bond in clinically based treatment. The findings of this study will be useful in advancing awareness of EFP as a viable psychotherapeutic intervention. Furthermore, a key goal of the present study is to facilitate the dissemination of evidence-based best practice in the field of EFP. Therefore, a secondary objective of the proposed study was to disseminate the research findings in scholarly venues (e.g., peer reviewed journals, professional conferences) as well as to other EAT practitioners via training and collaboration sessions.