
Psychosocial Equine Program for Veterans

David M. Ferruolo

Nearly half of all combat veterans suffer from serious psychological disorders and reintegration issues. Veterans shy away from typical talk therapy and are seeking alternative treatments. Equine-facilitated mental health therapy has shown promise in treating veterans with depressive and anxiety disorders and reintegration issues. This article reports on an institutional review board-approved pilot program designed to address the mental health needs of veterans. Furthermore, this article discusses future directions for evolving development of equine treatment programming.

KEY WORDS: *combat veterans; equine-assisted psychotherapy; depression; mental health; posttraumatic stress disorder*

Since 9/11, over 2 million military personnel have seen combat (Cornish, Thys, Vogel, & Wade, 2014; Moore & Penk, 2011; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Diagnosis of psychological disorders in military personnel has increased 65 percent since 2001, with nearly 40 percent of these U.S. soldiers presenting with a psychological disorder (Cornish et al., 2014; Straits-Tröster et al., 2011). Poor mental health may negatively affect psychosocial adjustment and development, significantly increasing instances of unemployment, poverty, criminality, domestic violence, homelessness, and suicide among combat veterans (Cornish et al., 2014; Elbogen et al., 2012; Hawryluk, Ridley-Kerr, & Henry, 2005; Kaplan, McFarland, Huguet, & Valenstein, 2012; Moore & Penk, 2011; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008; Teten et al., 2010). It is projected that more veterans will be out in society than ever before in U.S. history, with the veteran population surpassing 20 million (Howell & Wool, 2011; Veteran Population Projection Model 2014, 2014).

Research into effective therapies that will help this population is critical (Ferruolo & Sollars, 2013; Knapp, 2013; Moore & Penk, 2011). Equine-facilitated mental health (EFMH) is one such modality that shows significant promise in treating depressive and anxiety disorders, as well as elevating self-confidence, self-esteem, self-concept, and overall well-being (Ferruolo & Sollars, 2013; C. Holmes, Goodwin, Redhead, & Goymour, 2012; Klontz, Bivens, Leinart, & Klontz, 2007; Knapp, 2013; Lefkowitz, Paharia, Prout, Debiak, & Bleiberg, 2005; Schultz, Remick-Barlow, & Robbins, 2007; Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010). This article provides a description of one such EFMH

program for veterans and an overview of the results of an ongoing evaluation.

DESCRIPTION OF PILOT PROGRAM

Research (Ferruolo & Sollars, 2013; C. Holmes et al., 2012; Klontz et al., 2007; Knapp, 2013; Lefkowitz et al., 2005; Schultz et al., 2007; Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010) suggests that EFMH may be an effective framework to treat depressive and anxiety disorders, as well as assist with reintegration issues. This specific EFMH pilot program was created to address the psychosocial issues of combat veterans and was approved by an institutional review board. An established therapeutic horse farm in central New England agreed to host the pilot program, and facilitators consisted of myself, at the time a clinical social work graduate student at a New England university, and two leading EFMH experts, a professor and master's level social worker from a New England university, and a professor from a midwestern university with a master's in mental health counseling and a doctorate in education. The convenience sample (see Table 1) comprised volunteers who were being treated at a Veterans Affairs (VA) facility for depressive and anxiety disorders and reintegration issues. It is important to note that the pilot program was not an approved VA program and that veterans volunteered to participate on their own and outside the scope of VA treatment.

The two-day pilot program (see Table 2) consisted of four segments totaling approximately 70 minutes of psychoeducation; nine segments totaling approximately 285 minutes of guided experiential equine activities; eight segments totaling approximately 315 minutes of group processing; and personal reflection, which is

Table 1: Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristic	%	n
Gender		
Male	100	7 ^a
Female	0.0	0
Education		
High school graduate	71.4	5
College graduate	14.3	1
Trade/vocational/technical training	14.3	1
Branch of service		
Army	28.6	2
Marines	28.6	2
Navy	42.9	3
Air Force	0.0	0
Coast Guard	0.0	0
Length of service		
2–3 years	14.3	1
4–6 years	71.4	5
7–9 years	0.0	0
10–15 years	14.3	1
16 or more years	0.0	0
Marital status		
Single, never married	14.3	1
Married	0.0	0
Widowed	14.3	1
Divorced	71.4	5
Separated	0.0	0

^aThere were eight male veterans, but one missed the last page of the survey, which captured demographic data.

Table 2: Components, Frequency, and Duration

Course Characteristics	Frequency	Total Duration
Two-day program		
Psychoeducation	4 segments	70 minutes
Guided equine activities	9 segments	285 minutes
Group processing	8 segments	315 minutes
One-day program		
Psychoeducation	1 segment	20 minutes
Guided equine activities	4 segments	160 minutes
Group processing	4 segments	165 minutes

considered to be an ongoing process throughout the program. The one-day segment of the pilot program (see Table 2) consisted of one segment of approximately 20 minutes of psychoeducation, four segments totaling approximately 160 minutes of guided experiential equine activities, and four segments totaling approximately 165 minutes of group processing. Again, personal reflection is considered an ongoing process. It was intended that only a two-day option be offered. However, after participants who missed day one requested to join for the second day of programming, a unanimous

decision was made by facilitators to allow their participation. This was an opportunity to test differences between two-day and one-day programs, a test that was originally unintended.

Psychotherapeutic Framework

EFMH is not a stand-alone psychotherapeutic treatment (Ferruolo & Sollars, 2013; Knapp, 2013). Evidence-based therapeutic frameworks are used within the EFMH construct. In working with horses, the use of metaphor, analogy, and anthropomorphization leads to therapeutically relevant instances. In these instances, the facilitator will use an evidence-based framework to address the participant's psychological need. In the pilot program, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), motivational interviewing (MI), mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) were the frameworks used. Overarching these evidence-based frameworks was a person-centered, strengths and resiliency perspective rooted in constructivist theory.

It is difficult to quantify the frequency and duration of specific frameworks used, as each therapeutic instance is as unique as the facilitator providing the treatment. It is important, however, for a facilitator to be knowledgeable about various treatment theories and able to use an eclectic mix of frameworks (Coady & Lehmann, 2008; Maguire, 2002; Weber, 2000). Furthermore, therapeutic frameworks overarched all components of the pilot program, not just the equine activities. For example, reality testing was used when conducting psychoeducation about horses. Participants were routinely asked to share their beliefs, judgments, opinions, and thoughts about horses, and in most instances their assertions were inaccurate. These inaccuracies were challenged and truths revealed. Participants would then be asked to think about other areas of their lives in which their thinking might be wrong and cause difficulty for them. This typically leads to rich conversation about closely held inaccurate perceptions that participants then could identify and challenge. Often within these psychoeducational conversations, MI was used in conjunction with CBT to address participant ambivalence about change and to link unconstructive behaviors to experienced negative outcomes. Thus, one can see the difficulty of trying to quantify the frequency and duration of therapeutic frameworks used, as they were continually and constantly used throughout the duration of the program, not just within the experiential equine activities.

Experiential Equine Activities. Experiential equine activities, however, are the core component of the program. Through these activities, the horse is used as a metaphor for problems and for life and also as a mirror to reflect back onto the participant his or her way of being and interacting in the world (Ferruolo & Sollars, 2013; Knapp, 2013; Smith, 2012). Each experiential activity was framed to facilitate psychosocial learning. According to Shulman (2012) reflection time allows for internal processing, and group processing reinforces the lessons learned.

Examples. One example of an experiential equine activity is the “Come with Me, Please” activity. In this activity, the participant, who may never have been exposed to horses before, was handed a halter and a lead line and asked to establish a relationship with a horse enough so that the participant was able to lead the horse to the gate. In framing the activity, the importance of establishing rapport and a solid relationship is discussed. Also discussed, as Goleman (2007) suggested, was how mood and affect can be contagious because of how mirror neurons work. The participant then went in to meet his horse, described as the participant’s teacher. On one occasion, the participant continually tried to pull the horse with the lead line in an otiose effort to move it. The horse refused. Frustrated, the participant brought his face close to the horse’s face and growled at the horse. He then threw the rope to the ground. In this therapeutic instance the facilitators used CBT, MI, and mindfulness. In the discussions that followed, it was revealed to the participant how he routinely used fear and intimidation to get what he wants. Through use of an introspective process, and with the group processing that followed, he was able to look more closely at this aspect of himself and began to change how he interacted with the world. This transfer of knowledge from paddock to life is the ultimate goal of the program.

Another example is when a facilitator asked a participant to ride a horse, facing backward. The participant was then asked to think about what in his current life he needed to leave behind so that he could move successfully into the future. In this therapeutic instance, MBCT and MI were used. After the exercise, the participant stated this was the first time in many years that he looked at himself as a person and not as a “sergeant” in the army. Further discussion revealed that this experiential activity helped this veteran to shed an illusion of himself and start to create a new identity that reflected more congruently who he was and who he wanted to be in the civilian world.

Process Evaluation Overview

The pilot program was specifically designed to fit the mental health needs of veterans presenting with combat-related psychological issues. The pilot consisted of a one-day equine retreat and a two-day equine retreat. The two-day retreat was conducted over two consecutive Sundays and was seven hours each day. Participants who did not make the first Sunday were able to join in on the second Sunday, and this one-day experience was considered the one-day retreat. The objective of the investigation was to analyze de-identified self-report evaluation data from retreat participants to assess the following: (a) participants’ rating of the retreat facilitators; (b) participants’ personal feelings about the retreat; (c) what value participants placed on the retreat; (d) whether participants felt the program helped reduce symptoms of their psychological issues, specifically depression and anxiety; (e) whether the participants felt the program helped with social skills; (f) any common themes from open-ended questions; (g) demographic information; (h) if there is a difference in reported data between the one-day and the two-day retreats.

It was hypothesized that the analysis would reveal the following: (a) that participants would rate the equine retreat as either good or excellent; (b) that participants would either like or love the equine retreat; (c) that participants would find value in the equine retreat; (d) that participants would report whether the equine retreat elevated their self-confidence, lowered their anxiety, lessened their depression, helped with their ability to communicate effectively, helped develop empathy, improved their social skills, helped with their confidence, or helped with their problem solving skills; (e) that a two-day retreat would be more beneficial than a one-day retreat.

Summary of Participant Responses

Although the following results are not shown, several chi-square analyses were run on the data. When asked the questions (a) How would you rate the usefulness of the content? (b) How would you rate the hands-on activities? (c) How would you rate the facilitators’ knowledge of equine therapy for individuals with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)? and (d) How would you rate the facilitators’ style of presenting? 100 percent respondents ($N=8$) responded with “excellent.” These results confirmed the hypothesis that participants would rate the program as either good or excellent and were better than expected.

All eight respondents replied “loved it” to the following five questions: (1) How do you feel about working with horses? (2) How do you feel about being around horses? (3) How do you feel about horse therapy? (4) How did you feel about working with a group? and (5) How did you feel about the Ironstone Farm facility? These findings were also better than hypothesized, as all respondents reported loving all aspects of the retreat.

The primary hypothesis of the third set of questions was whether respondents found the experience valuable. All eight respondents replied yes. This result supported investigators’ notions that the experience was of value to participants. All the respondents also agreed with the statement, that they found the program valuable and that participation helped lessen their depression and lower their anxiety. These results are in line with the hypothesis that the equine program helps combat veterans by having a positive effect across multiple psychosocial domains.

Differences between the One-Day and Two-Day Retreats

Of particular concern was the pace of the retreat. It was hypothesized that the two-day retreat would have more benefit than the one-day retreat. Results suggest that there was no difference in reported outcomes between the one-day and the two-day retreat. Further inquiry was made to see if there was any variability between the retreat types and the pace of the retreat and the reported themes (see Table 3).

Retreat type (one-day versus two-day) was looked at to see whether there were any differences between how respondents rated the pace. Chi-square analysis was conducted to ascertain whether this difference was statistically significant (Table 3). Of the respondents who participated in the one-day retreat, 100 percent reported the pace was excellent. Of the respondents who participated in the two-day retreat, 80 percent reported the pace to be excellent. Chi-square test results revealed no statistically significant difference between the groups [Pearson’s $\chi^2(1, N = 8) = .686, p = .408$]. It appears from these results that participants rate the pace approximately the same regardless of retreat type.

Themes from Open-Ended Questions

Four distinct themes emerged from the analysis of open-ended questions: (1) learning about self, (2) spiritual connection, (3) trust, and (4) respect.

Table 3: Pace of Retreat/Qualitative Themes, by Retreat Type

Characteristic	%		p
	One-Day Retreat	Two-Day Retreat	
Pace of retreat			.686
Good (<i>n</i> = 1)	0.0	20	
Excellent (<i>n</i> = 7)	100	80	
Reported learning about self			.686
Yes (<i>n</i> = 1)	100	80	
No (<i>n</i> = 7)	0.0	20	
Reported a spiritual connection			.850
Yes	33.3	40	
No	66.7	60	
Reported the theme trust			.850
Yes	33.3	40	
No	66.7	60	
Reported the theme respect			.850
Yes	33.3	40	
No	67.7	60	

Learning about Self. All (100 percent) of the respondents who participated in the one-day retreat and 80 percent of respondents who participated in the two-day retreat reported the theme of learning about self. Chi-square analysis revealed no statistically significant difference between the groups [Pearson’s $\chi^2(1, N = 8) = .686, p = .408$]. These results suggest that this theme was reported approximately equally regardless of which retreat the respondent participated in.

Spiritual Connection. Of the respondents who participated in the one-day retreat, 33.3 percent reported the theme of spiritual connection. Forty percent of respondents who attended the two-day retreat reported this theme. Again, there was no statistical significance [Pearson’s $\chi^2(1, N = 8) = .036, p = .850$] between the groups. Respondents who attended either the one-day or the two-day retreat reported the theme of spiritual connection approximately equally.

Trust. Once again, there was no statistical significance [Pearson’s $\chi^2(1, N = 8) = .036, p = .850$] between participants of the one-day and the two-day retreat in reporting the theme of trust. This theme was also reported at approximately the same rate.

Respect. As with the prior three themes, respondents who participated in the one-day and the two-day retreat reported the theme of respect approximately equally. There was no statistical

difference between the groups [Pearson's $\chi^2(1, N = 8) = .036, p = .850$].

Anecdotal Information about Themes

Learning about Self. One respondent commented on what he learned about himself by stating, "It taught me a lot about how I carry myself and interact with people. . . . Working as a team is far more effective than working by myself." Another respondent said, "Learning about how I act with the animals relates to how I can act with humans in a better way." Regarding PTSD, one respondent stated, "It will make me view my difficulties with PTSD in a completely new positive light."

Spiritual Connection. Although spiritual connection, per se, was not an intentional outcome of the equine retreat, connection with self, others, and the horses was. . . . One respondent stated that working "with the horses was . . . probably the most spiritual experience I had in a long time." Other responses included the following: "my biggest takeaway . . . was the beauty, power, serenity, and majesty of God's creation, the horse," and "what I take away from this program is peace, pride, and joy."

Trust. One respondent stated that trust was one of his takeaways; another stated that "trust . . . was strengthened by my experience here," and that it "can be transferred to everyday life."

Respect. A respondent stated that mutual respect was one of his takeaways; another noted that "the interaction will help me respect people and their different personalities."

DISCUSSION ABOUT FINDINGS

These results imply that EFMH is an effective treatment modality for combat veterans who are presenting with reintegration and psychological issues. The results support Schultz et al.'s (2007) hypothesis that EFMH will migrate to other populations. Furthermore, these results are congruent with statements by Schultz et al. (2007) and Klontz et al. (2007), that EFMH assists with anxiety and depression and that EFMH can increase psychological well-being. Results of this research also support the assertions of Meinersmann, Bradberry, and Roberts (2008) and Palley, O'Rourke, and Niemi (2010), that EFMH is not only effective in diminishing symptomology of psychological issues, but also facilitates elevated self-esteem and trust.

Built into the equine retreat are reflective processes for participants to introspect. According to Knapp (2013) this mirroring can reveal things to participants

that they did not know about themselves. Palley et al. (2010) stated that participating in equine activities can lead to heightened self-awareness and a better knowledge of self. This supports Knapp's assertions and Kakacek's (2007) findings that EFMH fosters elevated social skills and increased self-awareness. Mindful inquiry is used to solicit responses from participants throughout the equine retreats. According to Smith (2012), "Inquiry should contribute to the development of awareness and self-reflection in the inquirer and may contribute to the development of spirituality" (p. 37).

Because participants in the pilot program were unemployed, homeless, and living in a central New England VA hospital at the time of the program, demographic information about employment and income was not collected, hence the lack of discussion and analysis of these variables.

LIMITATIONS OF PILOT STUDY

This research may not be generalizable to female or ethnic minority combat veterans, as the sample comprised mainly white men. Most participants were veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, thus further research is indicated for older combat veterans of previous wars. With the small sample size, conclusions cannot be generalized over the entire combat veteran population; however, this study can be replicated nationwide and include more equal proportions of women and minority veterans. In addition, this study was limited to veterans living at a VA hospital; further studies should include more diverse demographic variables. Moreover, because participants were in treatment at a VA facility, it is important to consider the contribution of this treatment on stated outcomes. Further inquiry should be done with veterans who are not undergoing treatment at the time of the program.

Selection bias may be another limitation. All the participants of this pilot study were volunteers who self-admitted themselves into treatment at the VA. According to Kakhnovets (2011), people who seek help could possess characteristics that might be more conducive to positive therapeutic outcomes. Reactivity may have had an effect on the results, as the novelty of EFMH may engender positive outcomes in the short term.

This study may have other threats to internal validity. Because of their histories, participants may be familiar with the construct and procedure of psychotherapy. Participants may also either want to please

researchers by answering favorably, or, due to issues of self-esteem or stigmatization, may not answer correctly. Researcher bias must be controlled for, as researchers have a stake in a positive outcome.

The questionnaire used to collect these data is not an empirically researched, valid, and reliable instrument. Further, no pretests were given, so no comparisons were made. Limitations of the questionnaire caused a lack of response variability. This lack of response variability might lead to inaccurate inference through regression analysis. It is suggested that in the future reliable instruments are used in a pretest–posttest capacity. Thirteen of the questions were yes/no questions. It is suggested that if this questionnaire continues to be used, responses should be given on a Likert scale.

It is important to note that the four themes were not discovered through yes/no questions and that respondents reported these themes in open-ended responses. It may be worth to conduct further exploration by asking specifically about these four themes.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Since the pilot program, over 50 veterans have participated in a psychosocial equine program that I facilitated. Some of these retreats have been a one-day model (approximately six hours) and others were a four-day model (once a week for four weeks; 3.5 hours each session). Reflecting on these two models, it was revealed that each has a different purpose. Although the six-hour day mirrors a typical group session, there is no follow-up or continuation of treatment. Therefore, the one-day encounters are psychoeducational retreats, not psychotherapy, *per se*. These one-day retreats should not be dismissed, as the results show they do provide temporary diminishing symptomology of psychological issues, teach important social skills, and can play a role in conjunction with treatments given as part of the VA programming or other mental health treatments.

An overview of past participants' exit evaluations reveals their desire to work more with the horses and to decrease the amount of talking in a group setting. Conducting education on safety before working with horses directly takes up a significant part of the program time. It is therefore highly recommended that the equine program move to a two-day model that will provide the necessary safety and psychosocial educational components and an adequate amount of time for working directly with the horses.

Another option is a multiday format. As mentioned, I have facilitated several such programs in a four-week format. Each session was 3.5 hours long. In this construction, the program is indicative of a typical group therapy progression. One advantage of a multiday group therapy format, as outlined by Shulman (2012), is that it offers participants the opportunity to process the information, implement it into their lives, and come back with questions and observations. It also offers the opportunity for homework to be given. Another advantage is that this format offers the opportunity for facilitators to collaborate about participants and aspects of implementation of treatment to better facilitate positive outcomes. One disadvantage is attrition. Shulman explained the importance of evaluating participants' commitment to a group process to ensure participant attendance and a successful group outcome.

As mentioned, many therapeutic frameworks will work within the construct of equine facilitation (Ferruolo & Sollars, 2013; Knapp, 2013). Practitioners are encouraged to explore and evaluate the methods that best fit their style and their clientele. It is important that practitioners who delve into equine psychotherapy use with veterans write about their experiences and outcomes so that the modality continues to improve as a treatment for veterans and grows traction as an effective evidence-based practice.

RESEARCH

Further inquiry must be done with larger, more diverse samples that better represent the overall combat veteran population. Future research should include female as well as minority combat veterans, and also include combat veterans of all generations, not just from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Research may also target certain populations, for example minorities or women. It is particularly important to consider that this analysis was conducted on a program designed to be a therapeutic retreat and not a regime of mental health treatment. Therefore, it would be beneficial for research to be conducted to ascertain the efficacy of EFMH as a therapeutic modality for veterans presenting with specific mental health issues, like depression, anxiety, adjustment disorders, and PTSD. Moreover, comparative studies can be conducted on EFMH against (a) no treatment and (b) other evidence-based treatments for combat-related psychological issues such as CBT, exposure therapy, and eye movement desensitization

and reprocessing. It is also suggested that research be conducted about the efficacy of EFMH as an adjunct to the aforementioned evidence-based therapies.

CONCLUSION

According to Moore and Penk (2011), most returning military service personnel have successfully dealt with the psychological traumas of war. Nonetheless, a million veterans still suffer from the effects of combat exposure. These veterans are in desperate need of effective treatments. Typical couch therapies, such as CBT, may not be as effective as research suggests (J. Holmes, 2002; Phillips & Wang, 2014). Veterans themselves continue to explore alternative therapies that might better assist their road to recovery from psychological illness, increasingly putting pressure on the VA to expand available treatments (Phillips & Wang, 2014). EFMH has preliminarily shown efficacy in treating the psychological issues of depression, anxiety, and PTSD as well as elevating self-confidence, self-esteem, self-concept, and overall well-being in various populations. Psychosocial equine programs that address veterans' psychological issues show promise (Ferruolo & Sollars, 2013).

With the majority of trained and certified equine therapists being social workers (Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010), it is only logical that the field of social work delve more deeply into EFMH practice and research by further developing, implementing, and evaluating equine programming. With positive results, more veterans may be helped through EFMH, and the VA and perhaps even the insurance companies will begin to look at EFMH as a viable option for treatment of combat-related mental health issues. **SW**

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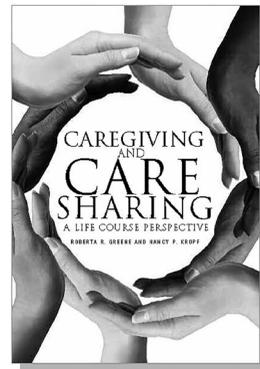
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CAREGIVING AND CARE SHARING

A LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

ROBERTA R. GREENE AND NANCY P. KROPP

Caregiving and care sharing take place across the life course and involve various configurations. Although there are similarities, families have different needs and experiences of care depending on the caregiving situation, life course issues, and unique personal history.



In *Caregiving and Care Sharing: A Life Course Perspective*, the authors highlight the experience of providing care in several different family situations. This book not only serves as a guide to assist those caring for older adults, but also examines the experiences of older caregivers caring for younger adults, as older parents care for adult children with intellectual and psychiatric conditions, or when grandparents are raising their grandchildren. The caregiving needs of veterans are also addressed.

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