

HARNESSING THE POWER OF EQUINE ASSISTED COUNSELING

Adding Animal Assisted Therapy to Your Practice



CHAPTER

KAY SUDEKUM TROTTER



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1

CHAPTER

Equine Assisted Interventions in Mental Health

Kay Sudekum Trotter

☐ Defining Equine Assisted Interventions

“The field of animal-assisted interventions currently lacks a unified, widely accepted, or empirically supported theoretical framework for explaining how and why relationships between humans and animals are potentially therapeutic” (Kruger & Serpell, 2006, pp. 25–26). In the field of equine assisted interventions, there is movement toward establishing a national certification or credentialing process similar to that of the National Board of Certified Counselors (CBNN) and that proves to the public and employers that the counselor has met the national standards set by the counseling profession. Two primary models or theoretical frameworks currently dominate this growing field and may be referenced in this book by various authors. This book does not endorse any specific model of *equine therapy*. References to any treatment or therapy model or to any program, service, or treatment are solely the views and opinions of authors. In this book, we use the term *equine assisted counseling* (EAC) to indicate therapies

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requiring a licensed mental health provider working with the clients and equines. We will also share techniques incorporating both ground and mounted therapies. However, we felt it important to offer a quick overview of the prominent models of equine assisted interventions dominating the equine therapy field today: Certification Board for Equine Interaction Professionals (CBEIP); Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), and Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl).

Certification Board for Equine Interaction Professionals

CBEIP is a not-for-profit, tax-exempt organization started by professionals in the field who feel a credential for equine facilitated professionals is needed to identify the body of knowledge and those who practice in the field. The vision of the group is to promote professional credibility and to achieve public confidence in the transformative value of equine-human interaction. Their mission is to offer a credentialing process for equine interaction professionals grounded in a foundation of knowledge and experience that supports safe, humane, and ethical practice. Integrity, compassion, excellence, respect, and collaboration are the stated values of the organization.

CBEIP promotes the concept of voluntary certification by examination for those who incorporate equines into their mental health or education practice. Certification is just one part of a process called *credentialing* and focuses specifically on the individual. The designation from CBEIP is one indication of current competence in the specialized field. Certification of equine interaction mental health and education professionals provides formal recognition of basic knowledge in this field. Certification by the CBEIP indicates licensed mental health professionals that have complied with the following criteria:

1. Provided documented evidence that they have been examined by an independent professional certifying organization and found to possess a certain level of basic knowledge about the specialized field of equine interaction mental health or education
2. Established a level of knowledge required for certification of equine interaction mental health or education professionals
3. Provided encouragement for continued personal and professional growth in the field

4. Provided a standard of knowledge requisite for certification, thereby assisting clients, students, the public, and members of the profession in assessment of equine interaction mental health or education professionals
5. Provided a direction and focus for new professionals in the field seeking to increase their knowledge and skill levels
6. Protected the public
7. Increased the credibility of the field of equine interaction, education, and learning

☐ **PATH International**

Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl), formerly North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) is a professional organization that promotes equine-assisted activities and therapies for individuals with special needs. PATH Intl calls its model “equine facilitated psychotherapy (EFP).” This experiential psychotherapy includes equines and may incorporate a number of mutually respectful equine activities, such as handling, grooming, lunging, riding, driving, and vaulting. A licensed mental health professional must work with a PATH Intl certified equine specialist in mental health during all EFP sessions (PATH Intl, 2011b).

According to PATH Intl, the mental health professional must meet the criteria to legally and independently provide mental health counseling in the state (or country) in which the services are being delivered, and must maintain current professional liability insurance. The mental health professional must also have additional training, education, and supervision in EFP. If the mental health professional is an intern or graduate student, he or she must be supervised by a licensed mental health professional (PATH Intl, 2011b). The equine specialist must be certified by PATH Intl as an Equine Specialist in Mental Health, thereby insuring that the equine specialist possesses the professionalism, experience and skills necessary to act as the horse handler in a PATH Intl un-mounted mental health session. Additional PATH Intl certification in riding, vaulting and/or driving is needed by the equine specialist to include mounted activities in EFP sessions. The mental health professional may also be dually credentialed as a PATH Intl equine specialist (PATH Intl, 2011a).

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PATH Intl also allows for equine facilitated psychotherapy assistants (EFP-assistants) or volunteers to be present during mental health sessions. PATH Intl requires that the EFP-assistants receive very specific training in client behaviors, treatment plans and confidentiality policies, treatment goals, behavioral modification programs, early signs of behavioral escalation, medication side effects, and appropriate personal boundaries, in order to provide stability of treatment to the clients (PATH Intl, 2011b).

☐ **Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association**

The EAGALA Model of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and Learning requires a cofacilitating team that must include an EAGALA-certified mental health professional and an EAGALA-certified equine specialist in all sessions. EAGALA also specifies all session activity must be performed with the client remaining on the ground and never mounting the horse. The mental health professional needs to have college-level educational training and a degree in the mental health field. The mental health professional also needs to be under a governing board for ethical or scope of practice violations relating to mental health practice. The equine specialist must have 6,000 hours (approximately 3 years of full-time work) of hands-on experience with horses and must have completed at least 100 hours of continuing education in the equine field. EAGALA offers two levels of certification: EAGALA certification and EAGALA advanced certification. The certification is valid for 2 years and thereafter must be renewed. The certification process is experiential and hands-on during a 4-day weekend (EAGALA, 2010).

☐ **Equine Assisted Interventions in Mental Health Theoretical Foundations**

Animal–Human Bond

The interaction between animals and humans has endured since the beginning of time (Hirschman, 1994; Levinson, 1972; Serpell, 2000).

The two schools of thought on the development of the animal–human bond reflect either the evolution theory or the social cultural perspective. The innate essence of our relationship with animals, and our predisposition to interact with certain species that provide valuable services (such as being alerted to danger by dogs barking), became part of the *collective consciousness* that was passed down from generation to generation and reflects the evolutionary theory perspective on the animal–human bond. The other school of thought comes from the social cultural perspective, which believes the animal–human bond has to be viewed throughout the cultural environment where individuals learn at an early age to negatively or positively regard certain animals (Graham, 2000).

The role of animal–human interactions has been postulated to promote wellness and prevent illness (Beck & Katcher, 2003; Garrity & Stallones, 1998; Graham, 2000) similar to maintaining a healthy diet and exercising to promote overall general well-being. A large component of the animal–human bond stems from the social support that individuals receive from animals that translates into positive health effects (Beck & Katcher, 2003). The social support that animals provide humans, such as love and acceptance, which is not dependent on appearance, social, or economic status (Chandler, 2005), often fills a void that otherwise would remain empty. In contrast to human relationships, which may be complex, confusing, and at times painful, bonds with animals are inherently relaxed and intimate. The need for animals to be cared for on a daily basis fulfills the human need to be needed, to nurture, and to love (Hirschman, 1994).

Animals play a symbolic role in society, influencing the psychological and physiological domain (Beck & Katcher, 2003). Animals can serve as a client's substitute to which tenderness and protection can be given. The raising and caring for animals provides individuals the opportunity to learn about themselves and can serve to prepare couples for parenthood (Levinson, 1972). As friends, animals provide unconditional love and loyalty—they are often seen as a faithful intimate companion. Hirschman (1994) found that the intimate relationship that exists between humans and animals was a "mutual evolving relationship that defines their lives together. They find they can communicate in subtle, nonverbal ways grounded on mutual understanding and experiences. Much like long-term human friends, they 'grow into' one another's lives through daily rituals and habits of behavior" (p. 620).

Development and the Animal–Human Bond

Animals play an important role in shaping child development (Carey, 1985; Levinson, 1972; Melson, 2003; Myers, 1998) because learning

can be stimulated by the presence of animals. Learning occurs because the interaction with animals teaches in a concrete experiential manner the needs of the animal, thus providing individuals with the opportunity to apply this newly developed knowledge with others (Carey, 1985). Furthermore, interacting with animals for some can be a powerful motivator for learning, according to Vygotsky (1978), for two well-established reasons: (1) learning is retained more when individuals are emotionally invested; and (2) learning is maximized when it occurs within significant relationships.

The individual's sense of self and ability to trust are directly influenced by the animal-human bond (Levinson, 1972; Melson, 1998; Myers, 1998). The ever-faithful responsiveness of an animal in an individual's life and the individual's attachment to the animal serves to reinforce and reassure the individual by providing the basic elements of developing trust and building healthy attachments (Melson, 1998). Another developmental task that animals contribute to is the individual's sense of self. This is accomplished through many modalities, such as the individual assuming responsibility for the animal or through the unconditional acceptance offered by the animal or by the emotional support provided by the animal. Furthermore, because animals do not disappoint or make excuses or demands on individuals, the animal-human interaction provides the individual the ability to disregard other hurts and disappointments in his or her life (Levinson, 1972; Melson, 1998). In addition, the opportunity to interact and learn with an animal provides an opportunity to develop a sense of identity. According to Levinson (1972), "When a child has a pet with which he works and toward which he expresses a wide range of feelings, he can get a better understanding of what he is like and what his strengths and limitations are" (p. 49).

☐ Animal Assisted Therapy

The recognition of the value of the animal-human bond has encompassed the period from the 1960s to present day. The first to publish about the therapeutic power of the animal-human bond was Boris Levinson (1962). Animal assisted therapy (AAT) built on this animal-human bond to create a therapeutic goal—directed counseling intervention. Chandler (2005) describes animal assisted therapy as an adjunct to therapy, where a therapist can incorporate the animal into whatever professional style of therapy the therapist already uses. Animal assisted therapy can be directive or non-directive in its approach. Animal assisted therapy sessions can be integrated into individual or group therapy and used with a very wide range of age

groups and persons with varying abilities. Animal assisted therapy is a practice modality and not an independent profession. Mental health professionals that provide AAT must have the proper training and credentials for their professional practice (Chandler, 2005). Since animal assisted therapy was first viewed as a justifiable adjunct to traditional counseling techniques in the late 1970s and 1980s, national therapeutic programs have been established, training courses have been developed, international professional organizations have been formed, conferences have been established, and a dramatic increase in AAT literature has surfaced (Burch, 2000).

Counseling interventions that use animals tend to create opportunities for healing, learning, stimulation, curiosity, and attachment. The presence of an animal in therapy gives the client the opportunity to develop personal and social identity, to strengthen self-concept and self-esteem (Chandler, 2005), and to elicit a wide range of emotions from joy to sorrow. The physical touching of an animal promotes comfort and safety (Fine, 2000) and helps the clients understand their behavior as well as the behavior of others more accurately (Katcher & Wilkins, 1998). Fine (2000) reported that many therapists observed that the presence of an animal reduced client stress, and the therapist is perceived as less threatening and therefore is seen as more approachable by the client. Plus, the presence of an animal seemed to help clients overcome anxiety related to therapy. The therapeutic relationship between the client and the animal added an element of safety and freedom to the counseling session.

The Delta Society

In the mid 1970s, seven veterinarians and a psychiatrist created the Delta Foundation to scientifically research the positive effects animals have on people's lives. The name of the organization was changed to the Delta Society in 1981 to reflect the growing interest on the part of researchers and medical practitioners in both human and animal fields.

The Delta Society's ongoing clinical research reflects the fact that having an animal in one's life helps reduce blood pressure, lower stress and anxiety levels, and stimulate the release of endorphins (Delta Society, 2006).

The Delta Society (1996, pp. 2–3) outlined 10 mental health applications of animal assisted therapy:

Emotional safety: When an animal is included in the therapy session, the environment of power has changed. The therapist is seen as more approachable and likable. The presence of an animal opens a pathway

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through the client's psychosis or resistance. Clients also tend to project their experiences and feelings onto the animal.

Relationships: An animal can be a source of love and companionship. For clients who do not relate well with other people, an animal can become the object to which they can direct their own love and compassion.

Limit setting and consequences: Clients learn that there are limits and parameters they must behave within around animals and, consequently, within the world. An animal's quick response to a client's behavior can be generalized to others and provides an opportunity to process the client's feelings toward the animal's response.

Attachment: An animal can offer the isolated client a healthy attachment, one that is less threatening than with people.

Grief and loss: The first experience of loss for many clients centers on the loss of their pet, and that grief primarily remains unresolved. Tearfulness and feelings of loss and abandonment are frequently experienced in therapy sessions when an animal is present, providing an opportunity to explore and work through unresolved losses.

Reality orientation: An animal can act as a link between a client's internal fantasies and external reality. The client can live in the here-and-now and enjoy it.

Pleasure, affection, and appropriate touch: It is socially acceptable for men as well as women to touch, caress, and hug an animal. Touching an animal is safe and nonthreatening. Clients also learn new ways of touching, with gentleness, nurturance, and concern for the animals' well-being.

Socialization: The safety of an animal provides the catalyst toward social interactions and connections for interpersonal communication.

Play and laughter: People often laugh and are playful when interacting with animals. This playful expression can be associated with the well-being of joy and happiness.

Anxiety: An animal can divert clients' attention away from their internal anxiety, allowing the therapist to nurture alternative functional responses to anxiety. An animal can reduce a client's discomfort (physical or emotional), acting as a distraction, shutting out reactions to aversive stimuli.

Equine Assisted Counseling

The emergence of EAC has developed as an outgrowth of the healing bond that can develop between animals and humans. This type of animal assisted therapy is in its infancy in terms of research, theory, and practice, and, as with any newly developing counseling field, the literature on qualitative observations and case studies is greater than empirical-based quantitative research and theory exploration.

With EAC, both individuals and groups interact with horses to facilitate the prevention or resolution of emotional and behavioral difficulties with themselves and others. This type of counseling provides a safe and secure environment that nurtures inner healing and encourages optimal growth and development (Trotter, Chandler, Goodwin-Bond, & Casey, 2008). This is achieved with traditional counseling processing and equine activities designed to teach individuals about themselves, to allow recognition of dysfunctional patterns of behavior, and to help define healthy relationships.

EAC is based on experiential work that uses equines to increase clients' awareness of their thoughts, words, and actions. This type of counseling also provides tools for individuals to better manage their lives and foster positive relationships while also teaching problem-solving communication and social skills. The risk-taking activities associated with working with horses are a conscious decision by clients—a decision that is physical as well as emotional in nature. Through the process of risk-taking, clients can test and improve their abilities to control self and their surroundings. This risk-taking behavior tends to produce deeper therapy than working in a traditional counseling setting (Trotter et al., 2008).

EAC addresses a variety of mental health conditions and human development needs, including behavior issues, attention deficit disorder, substance abuse, eating disorders, abuse issues, depression, anxiety, relationship problems, and communication needs. Equine assisted counseling promotes both personal exploration and clinical interpretation of feelings and behaviors.

Horses are used in a counseling session because the animals are much more effective at confronting behaviors and attitudes than people are, partly because of their honesty but also because of their ability to observe and respond to nonverbal communication (Irwin & Weber, 2001). The horse provides the vehicle for the projection of the client's unconscious worries or fears. This provides the client the opportunity to look at what works, what does not work, and whose needs are being met while offering the client the opportunity to take responsibility for recognizing how personal actions affect others. Psychoanalysts and social

anthropologists have long recognized the symbolic meanings associated with horses that individuals use to represent strong emotions and feelings that are both difficult to describe and prone to repression (Kruger, Trachtenberg, & Serpell, 2004).

Because all horses are different, they each require different treatment from participants to successfully complete tasks. Through their experience with the horses, individuals learn to observe and respond to behaviors of the horse instead of staying stuck in their current patterns of behavior. Traditional counseling processing techniques used by the counselor during and after every session facilitate clients' ability to relate personal insight into their own lives (Chandler, 2005). Personal insight for an addictions client could result in learning about their attitudes toward their temptations or addictions, and, as a result, they can identify the behaviors that can lead to relapse. They can learn new ways to handle frustration, challenges, and fears while also learning healthy communication, problem-solving skills, and solution-oriented behaviors. According to Chandler, "The skill of the group process leaders is the key to the success of the program for the participants" (p. 112).

Theoretical Foundations of Equine Assisted Counseling

EAC, like any AAT, is considered an adjunct to existing therapy, where therapists can incorporate the use of a horse into their own professional theoretical orientation (Chandler, 2005). However, EAC tends to draw more heavily from some philosophy and principles of four major counseling theories: (1) brief therapy; (2) Gestalt therapy; (3) reality therapy; and (4) Adlerian therapy.

Brief Therapy

EAC uses a brief therapy problem-solving model of change, which follows two basic philosophies of change: (1) the focus on visible behavioral interactions; and (2) the use of purposeful interventions to change the visible pattern of undesirable behavior (as cited in Williams, 1999). Brief therapy, like EAC, focuses on action versus insight—new actions produce change. Expectancy is another principle of both brief therapy and

EAC, which focuses on disrupting client's negative expectancies and creating the positive expectation that change is possible (Williams, 1999). Although the client's problem developed in the past, both brief therapy and EAC focus on how the problem or negative behavior is maintained and experienced in the present. In the brief therapy approach to counseling, the therapist is an active participant and shares responsibility with the client for initiating therapeutic movement and creating context in which change can take place (Williams, 1999). This philosophy is also a tenet of EAC. That is, in both approaches to counseling, the therapist may invite or confront clients to grow and change by creating a context in which change can occur. Underlining principles of both brief therapy and EAC are action-oriented viewpoints that respect the client and emphasize the client's strengths.

Gestalt Therapy

EAC also has strong underpinnings to Gestalt therapy, which is grounded in the assumption that meaning is best derived and understood by considering the individual's interpretation of immediate experience. Like Gestalt therapy, EAC emphasizes the immediate experience—what is happening in the here-and-now—and explores all aspects of the individual's present perception. Perls emphasized *immediate* experience because this is the experience that is present and can be attuned to and impacted, where the client and counselor explore the individual's current perceptions (Fall, Holden, & Marquis, 2004). The client's role in Gestalt therapy and EAC is active and focused on the present. The client plays a very important role in the therapeutic process that leads to greater awareness of the reality of oneself and how one interacts with one's surroundings, including people, animals, and contact with one's natural environment. This awareness facilitates natural and spontaneous change.

Reality Therapy

EAC also uses principles from reality therapy, both of which use directive techniques. The therapist is an active participant in the counseling process, and both have an education-oriented focus. Glasser's focus on the central importance of love and belonging needs (Fall et al., 2004) is facilitated through the relationship clients establish with the horse during therapy. Reality theory also emphasizes the importance of doing

and thinking behavior (Fall et al., 2004), which mirrors EAC focus on what clients are doing in the present and correlating the here-and-now experience into opportunities for them to understand and discover themselves.

Adlerian Therapy

The Adlerian therapy of counseling also is applicable to EAC, specifically his tenet that all individuals move from feelings of inferiority toward a feeling of significance. According to Adler, striving for significance can be broken down into four categories: physical, intellectual, psychological, and social (Fall et al., 2004). EAC, unlike other counseling modalities, requires that participants be in a physical relationship with the horse and the other group members. Because EAC usually takes place out-of-doors, the outdoor environment demands greater physical responsiveness from the participants. As with the Adlerian psychological aspect of striving for significance, not enough can be said about the power individuals feel when they are successful in getting a 1,200-pound horse that could easily overpower them to respond to them. Adler's striving for significance in the social content is also applicable with EAC activities that are designed to build teamwork and group cohesion to be successful. EAC activities are designed to recreate potentially troubling life situations the participant may be experiencing. Thus, the group provides an arena for the client to discover and work through social difficulties or issues the client might be avoiding, repressing, or deflecting.

☐ **The Nature Connection**

Implications for Conducting Counseling Outdoors

There is something unique about the natural setting that requires examination; perhaps it is the interplay between experiencing life in communion with nature and the essence of human existence. Time spent in the natural environment reading a book, participating in activities, riding a bike, or perhaps just enjoying the gentle breeze blowing against your face with the scent of freshness and sunshine—just being in nature—nurtures the soul. Nature provides a special place for the human adventure of body, mind, and spirit—it provides an opportunity for mindful ways

of being, for reflection, for peace. Time spent in the natural environment contributes to an individual's sense of well-being and creates connections and a sense of belonging between the self and the world.

The natural environment provides a potentially powerful adjunct to the mental health of both the client and the treatment providers. Nature stimuli have been shown to elicit positive emotional states, behavioral relaxation, and reduction in stress levels (Kahn, 1997; White & Heerwagen, 1998). As a counseling modality that takes place in the out-of-doors, EAC can only benefit from the powerful psychological and physical connection clients experience from being in the natural outdoor environment.

Once the counseling session steps outside the traditional four walls of the counseling room to the wide expanse of the great outdoors, the very act of counseling undergoes a delicate shift that is hard to define but is quite real. This phenomenon holds true if the counseling session takes place in a horse arena, on the side of a mountain, or sitting on a bench in a beautiful garden. Being outdoors demands greater client responsiveness, which influences the holistic development of the client because the outdoor environment offers the stimulation of hands-on learning and experiencing and sometimes an atmosphere of greater risk. The outdoors is a natural place that creates unique opportunities that change the nature of clients' reactions to relationships with themselves, with others, with animals, and with their world. Counseling in the outdoors also creates situations in which the counselor and client are more attuned to the relational elements of the counseling process. This is partly due to the spontaneous reactions to unpredictable moments that can occur while counseling outdoors.

Being in a place that is a little unfamiliar or uncomfortable and that requires natural reactions to unpredictable moments produces pure engagement—a heightened emotional state the counselor can gently guide the client through while creating an intense connection between the client and the counselor without the four walls and the staleness of the traditional counseling room. Outdoor counseling also requires counselors to allow direct experience to take over; this is possible when the counselor creates an environment of trust and support. There is no denying that outdoor counseling is challenging. At times it is counseling in the realm of the unpredictable. Confronting challenging situations, predicaments, and difficulties are powerful adjuncts to the counseling process. How a counselor guides a client through those moments and supports them during that time is what defines the power of EAC in the natural environment (Foran, 2005).

As more research emerges scientifically proving the healing properties of connecting with nature, at the time this book is going to press I am in the process of creating Green Therapies and Research Institute in the

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Dallas area. This non-profit organization will change the way therapists interact with their clients and the natural world. Repairing the relationship between people and nature will center them in their lives, allowing them to heal and fully express their potential.

Green Therapies and Research Institute will be a counseling and research oasis that utilizes the integrative wellness model of treating the body, mind, and spirit through a therapeutic framework involving the direct and creative dialogue humans have with nature and animals. Green Therapies and Research Institute expands the classical concept of “mental health” while developing concepts and methods that place nature and animals as partners in the healing therapeutic process.

Both research and application are crucial to the development of effective therapeutic modalities that can be taught to mental health professionals and used in every type of community. I will chronicle the development of this integrated wellness center through blogs and my website, www.kaytrotter.com.

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