



"Can horses distinguish between neurotypical and mentally traumatized humans?"



Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapies Research News from Horses and Humans Research Found



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News & Updates

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"Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose." - Zora Neale Hurston

New Executive Director for HHRF

By Paul T. Hefner, Ph.D., Immediate Past President of HHRF Board of Directors



I am delighted to introduce HHRF's new executive director, [Kenneth Boyden, J.D., Ed.D.](#)

**Kenneth Boyden, HHRF's
new Executive Director**

Dr. Boyden comes to us with extensive experience in supporting the growth and development of philanthropic and charitable institutions. He has effectively served numerous organizations in leadership, development, fundraising and management roles.

His diverse background and professional experience makes him uniquely suited to lead HHRF forward as we continue our efforts to advance our knowledge of horses and all the ways they contribute to our health and wellbeing.

Please join me in heartily welcoming Dr. Boyden and supporting him as he takes over the reins at HHRF. With your continued support, we look forward with excitement to the next chapter and increasing our investment in this important work.

HHRF and the entire field of equine-assisted activities and therapies owe a debt of gratitude to our past executive director of twelve years, KC Henry. She has shepherded this foundation since its infancy and is largely responsible for our success in funding eleven research projects in as many years. On behalf of the Board of Directors and all who have supported HHRF, I offer KC our heartfelt gratitude.

New Research Findings from University Of Guelph Team

Principal Investigator Katrina Merkies, University of Guelph, shared the following findings from her team's HHRF-supported project which asked: "Can horses distinguish between neurotypical and mentally traumatized humans?"

Equine-assisted activities rely on appropriate pairing of a horse with a human participant to extract applicable learning opportunities that enable the participant to benefit fully from the interaction with the horse. Facilitators need not only to know the temperament of the horses at their disposal, but also to understand how certain human traits or actions affect the behavior of the horses. Some criticisms of research studies in this area target the (unproven) assumption that horses will respond differently to humans with psychological/emotional issues (eg. PTSD) than to humans not experiencing any psychological trauma - the implicit belief that the horse "intuits" the needs of the emotionally-challenged human and responds benevolently.

As a foundational pilot study to expand research of behavioral responses of horses in equine-assisted settings, this project paired four humans with clinically-diagnosed PTSD to four neurotypical control humans similar in age, height, weight and familiarity with horses. The PTSD subjects interacted in a round pen for two minutes with each of 17 different therapy horses.

Following an instructional session with a professional acting coach, the control humans then interacted with each of the therapy horses, moving their bodies in the same manner as their paired PTSD subject. Both horses and humans wore a heart rate monitor, and all sessions were video-taped for retrospective analysis of horse behaviors. Results showed that horses carried their head higher with PTSD subjects (a behavior related with stress), but otherwise did

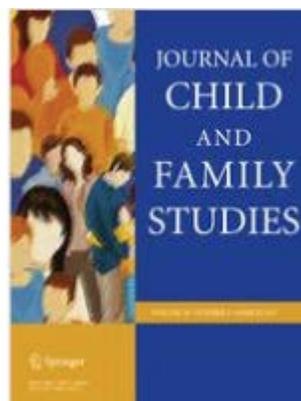


not respond differently to PTSD subjects compared to control. However, the presence of any human caused horses to move slower, vocalize less, chew less and decrease heart rate - all signs of a more relaxed state. The length of time a horse had been used in a therapy setting only affected vocalizations, with less experienced horses vocalizing more. Interestingly, horses approached quicker, oriented their ears toward and stood closer to humans who were more experienced with horses, although horse heart rate was lower when with inexperienced humans. This could indicate that horses are more attentive toward experienced humans, perhaps in the expectation of work, whereas horses can be more relaxed when with inexperienced humans. These results are useful to inform practitioners of behavioral responses of horses used in equine-assisted activities, as well as to justify experimental protocols for future research in this area.

[Read the full report](#)

HHRF Funded Research Published in Journal of Child and Family Studies

Principal Investigator Dr. Megan Kiely Mueller shared the news that the findings of the HHRF funded project "Effects of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy on Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms in Youth" were recently published in the peer-review Journal of Child and Family Studies.



The Journal Abstract:

Equine-assisted therapy has become an increasingly popular complementary mental health treatment approach, but there is limited empirical research assessing the effectiveness of this practice. In particular, equine-facilitated psychotherapy has many potential benefits for the treatment of trauma in youth. The purpose of the proposed study was to investigate changes in levels of post-traumatic stress symptomatology and levels of the human-animal bond in children and adolescents ages 10-18 over the course of a 10-week equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) intervention. Youth in the treatment group participated in 10 weekly two hour EFP sessions, and were compared on changes in post-traumatic stress symptoms with a control group of participants who continued to receive the already existing traditional therapeutic services provided by their treatment facility or outpatient therapist. Findings suggested a significant decrease in post-traumatic stress symptoms across the intervention for both the treatment and control group, but the treatment group did not decrease significantly more than the control group. These findings suggest that EFP may be an effective additional treatment modality for post-traumatic stress symptoms, but there was no evidence from this initial study that EFP was significantly more effective than traditional office-based therapy. Further research and discussion of the relative benefits of EFP compared to traditional treatment modalities is warranted.

Dr. Mueller further shared the following with HHRF regarding the publication:

"The results from this study indicated that participants in the equine-facilitated psychotherapy intervention experienced a significant reduction in post-traumatic stress symptoms over the course of the treatment. However, we also saw the control group (with traditional cognitive behavioral therapy) experience similar symptom decreases. While these findings suggest that equine-facilitated psychotherapy may be an effective treatment modality for post-traumatic stress symptoms, further discussion and research of the relative costs and benefits of equine-facilitated psychotherapy compared to traditional treatment modalities should be addressed in future research. When working with high-risk youth populations who may experience burnout or treatment fatigue from traditional methods, it is useful to identify innovative therapeutic strategies (such as equine-facilitated psychotherapy) that can be used in addition to or conjunction with traditional methods. The more treatment options that are available, the better. This research provided an important step forward in understanding how equine-facilitated psychotherapy can be used for the treatment of post-traumatic stress. Future research should explore for which particular youth, an equine-based approach would be the most motivational and appealing. "

[Visit the Journal Article at Springer.com](#)

Year-End Challenge Pledge Met and Surpassed - Thank you!!

HHRF was blessed with a generous \$20,000 challenge gift from Jenny Booth at the end of last year. We were even more excited when our generous donors exceeded our goal to increase our number of total donors by an unprecedented 20% in 2016!

This support is essential to us as we continue to build on our research successes and take our work to a higher level. Thank YOU! Your investments truly made a difference that will be felt far into the future.

Check out other recent HHRF research news and publications:

[Call for Research Proposals](#)

[Baylor University Completed Their Recent Research Project](#)

[\\$88,000 Awarded to Slippery Rock University](#)

[Interview with PI Beth Lanning](#)

[HHRF's First Focused Research Initiative](#)

We are building momentum, and this research is powered by YOU! We cannot all participate in the high standard research projects that HHRF supports - but we can ALL move it forward. We can ALL do our part:

Support Ongoing Research:

DONATE today

Horses and Humans Research Foundation
P.O. Box 23367
Chagrin Falls, OH 44022

HHRF Board of Directors Transitions

We were sorry to see **Alison Zack Darrell** leave our board after 6 years of service. Alison chaired the development committee through years of growth and championed all the work done by the 10 year anniversary campaign where \$120,000 was raised for the largest grant award ever offered by HHRF. Alison's lovely warmth and exceptional skills will be greatly missed, but we hope she is not going too far away - there is so much more to do!



C. Mike Tomlinson is HHRF's new President

Larry Pence is leaving the board after completing a 3 year term. Larry has been a huge motivator as chairman of the Focused Research Initiative (see above article). Larry has also worked tirelessly on a number of committees and projects including strategic planning and has been a strong advocate for research to support military veteran's equine services. We are grateful that Larry will continue his work on the Focused Research Initiative.

The new lineup of officers of the Board includes **Paul T. Hefner** as immediate past president, **C. Mike Tomlinson** as president, **Molly Sweeney** and **Pam Cusack** as vice presidents, **Maureen McNamara** as treasurer and **Patricia Ochman** remaining on as secretary.

[HHRF Board of Directors listing](#)

Call for LOI's: \$10,000 Innovation Grant

HHRF is now accepting Letters of Intent (LOI's) for a \$10,000 Innovation Grant. Proposals may focus on basic or clinical research while approaching the study from a unique angle or by applying theoretical concepts differently. The overarching goal of this grant is to stimulate exploration, encourage testing of unique hypotheses, and generate preliminary data that will open new pathways for future research. LOI's must be submitted by April, 15, 2017, and proposals will be due by July 15, 2017.

[Learn more](#)

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As a public foundation, Horses and Humans Research Foundation is in a unique position. Our current programming is entirely focused on our competitive research grant award programming. However, we are not an endowed fund, so we must also constantly fundraise in order to award research grants. We are dependent on contributions from those who understand the importance of this research.

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