

Horses and Humans Research Foundation

Final grant reporting



Effects of Equine Assisted Activities on PTSD Symptoms, Coping Self-Efficacy, Emotion Regulation, and Social Engagement in Military Veterans

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1. Full summary of qualitative research findings.

Project Description

The study investigated to what extent participation in a structured, six-week therapeutic horseback riding (THR) program was associated with decreased Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, as well as improved self-efficacy, emotion regulation, and social engagement among veterans. Veterans were randomly assigned to participate in the six-week THR program either without a wait control period or assigned to a six-week wait control period prior to the six weeks of riding. We expected that no changes would occur during the six-week wait control period. We hypothesized that compared with their baseline levels; participants in the six-week THR program would have decreased PTSD symptoms, as well as improved self-efficacy, emotion regulation, and social engagement after the six-weeks.

Veterans, age 18 years or over, who were out of active military service (not serving in reserve units), diagnosed with PTSD/TBI or both according to ICD-9 diagnostic codes, weighed less than 250 pounds, were able to walk at least 25 feet without the assistance of a person (but potentially with assistive devices), and who were willing to interact with and ride a horse, were invited to participate in the study. A total of 40 veterans enrolled in the study. Two individuals were later excluded due to issues with their eligibility criteria, thus they did not participate in THR. Participants who were assigned to the wait control period group took part in data collection six weeks before riding, three weeks before riding, immediately before the first riding class, at week three of their riding classes, and following their final class. The treatment group without a wait

control period completed data collection immediately before the first riding class, at week three of their riding classes, and following their final class.

Qualitative Results

With the qualitative data we sought to delineate the benefits and drawbacks of participating in a six-week THR program, from the veterans point of view. In addition to this we also examined the veterans' perceptions and experiences in the THR program, including their recommendations for changes in the program and whether or not they would recommend the THR program to someone else.

Methodology. Twenty U.S. military veterans with a diagnosis of PTSD and/or TBI were recruited through a Veterans Administration Medical Center. The veterans participated in a six-week, one-hour curriculum in a THR program, following primary care provider assent. Participants completed a Demographic Questionnaire, and at the last session an eight-item investigator developed Riding Questionnaire. Items one and two addressed the first research question. Items three through eight addressed the second research question, including participant recommendations for program changes and whether they would recommend the program to others.

A phenomenological analysis was conducted utilizing Colaizzi's (1978) method. Three team members began by individually reading and rereading the transcript to develop a general sense regarding the participants' experience. They next identified participant statements for each of the eight-item questions and then extracted significant statements related to the research questions. Meeting together, team members formulated meanings through focusing of the meaning behind each statement, as it pertained to the item being asked and to the research question. Team members again worked individually on the formulation of meanings, verifying the accuracy of themes by referring to the raw data. The team then came together to discuss the creation of themes, based on the research questions. A third time, team members approached the data individually to develop an understanding the relationship of the themes to the research questions. Team members then met together to create clusters of themes, based on themes created for each research question. Consensus of the phenomenon experienced by participants was researched through this emersion into the data and collaboration with the team. Colaizzi's (1978) final step of fact checking with participants was not possible in this study.

Results. There were 20 participants having a mean age of 52.90 (range 29-68) with 18 males. Eight veterans served in the Army, eight in the Marines, three in the Navy and one served in the National Guard. The average number of deployments was 2.05 (Range 1-10). Sixteen identified as Caucasian and four as African American. Thirteen participants were married, three divorced, two in a committed partner relationship, one never married, and one separated.

The themes for benefits were "Connection to the Horse," "Relaxing," "180 Degree Change," and "Meeting New People." Themes for drawbacks were, "None," "Struggle to Get There," "Pain," "Too Short," and "It is Structured." Themes for overall perceptions of the program were, "I Absolutely Loved It," "Feel Again," "The Horse," "The People," and "No Worries." The name of each theme was derived directly from the participants' responses. The themes are presented in order of frequency of occurrence.

Four themes emerged from the responses to the benefits items on the questionnaire. "Connection to the Horse" consisted of the enjoyment and interpersonal connection, which came from interacting with the

horse. Relaxing included language, which described the THR as relaxing, calming, a stress reducer and/or a diversion from stressors or daily hassles. The theme of “180 Degree Change” emerged from statements about positive changes participants saw in themselves due to their participation in the THR. The theme of Meeting New People described the participants’ beneficial interactions with people (e.g., fellow veteran participants, staff, and/or volunteers).

Five themes developed from the responses to questions about drawbacks of the program. The theme of “None” came from the often concise response that there was no drawback of participating in the THR program. “Struggle to Get There” emerged from responses which described logistical issues, such as transportation or scheduling conflicts as being a drawback. The theme of “Pain” came from language describing physical pain and/or soreness that was experienced. “Too Short” emerged from responses which cited the length of the program or limited number of sessions as negative aspects of participating. “It is Structured” described the organized and controlled characteristics which were necessary in a systematic study.

Five themes emerged from the data regarding the perceptions of the program: “I Absolutely Loved It,” “Feel Again,” “The Horse,” “The People,” and “No Worries.” The name for each these was taken directly from the data. The subthemes were named in order to more accurately label the experiences described.

Conclusion. Our findings demonstrate that the THR program was a beneficial experience for the participants, which facilitated positive personal change in the veterans, interpersonal connections between veterans, a bond between veterans and the horses, positive interpersonal interactions between veterans and staff/volunteers, and that this intervention had minimal negative side effects. We conclude with the participant 629’s response to the final item (the emphasis was his own), “This program has been one of the best experiences that I’ve had in getting rid of some of the connection issues from my PTSD. It was nice to FEEL again.”