Allowing Horses to Heal: The Healing Power of Equines in Therapeutic Settings

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ALLOWING HORSES TO HEAL: THE HEALING POWER OF EQUINES IN THERAPEUTIC SETTINGS

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A Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science Degree in Counselor Education at Winona State University

Spring 2014
Allowing Horses to Heal: The Healing Power of Equines in Therapeutic Settings

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Science Degree in

Counselor Education

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Approval Date: April 30, 2014
Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to gain further understanding of the history of animal-assisted therapy, specifically looking at incorporating equines as part of the therapeutic process. The use of equines in therapeutic settings, or equine-assisted psychotherapy, is an emerging field in the mental health profession. Current research indicates that the presence of animals in therapeutic settings provides physical, physiological, and psychological health benefits for clients as well as professionals in the field. This paper will further discuss how horses can be used as a tool and instrument of change among various populations. Additionally, theory in relation to equine-assisted psychotherapy is discussed as well as a review of ethical considerations.
Introduction

The simple presence of animals is known to make people feel calmer and at ease. Introducing animals in the therapeutic setting can help individuals feel more comfortable and open to the process of therapy; thus the animal may act as a link in the conversation between client and therapist (Berget, Ekeberg, & Braastad, 2008). It can be difficult for some clients to connect to and express their feelings in more traditional therapy settings but some clients may have an easier time doing so through interventions with animals; as many clients note feeling empowered, more connected to their feelings, safer to open up and take risks, and able to learn to trust others in their therapeutic experiences with animals (Masini, 2010).

Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy, or EAP, provides individuals who decline traditional therapy an opportunity to participate in a more experiential, hands-on approach, as it promotes growth and change in people through interactions with horses. EAP utilizes horses as a tool for clients to learn about themselves through the use of metaphors. Additionally, EAP may spark the interest of clients in that it takes place in an outdoor setting versus an enclosed office (Masini, 2010).

The purpose of this project is to further explore the use of animals in therapeutic settings, specifically horses, and gain a better understanding of the effects horses can have on clients in therapeutic settings. The history of including animals in therapeutic settings will be discussed, with further dialogue focused specifically on horses; including the reasoning behind using a horse as opposed to other animals, where mental health professionals fit in the EAP process, how the horse is used as a metaphor in EAP, the various populations and theories used in EAP, and the general benefits of EAP as a whole.
Review of Literature

History of Animal-Assisted Therapy

There has been significant recognition throughout history and across cultures in the role that animals play in creating optimal healing environments in various health care settings (Halm, 2008; Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013; Walsh, 2009). Animals have been used for the therapeutic benefit of humans for many years ranging from hospitals, nursing homes, schools, college counseling centers, private practices, community agencies, and prisons (Lentini & Knox, 2009; Walsh, 2009). Many domestic animals, including dogs, cats, pigs, rabbits, fish, and dolphins assist professionals in therapeutic settings.

It was first recognized in 1860 that animals were a beneficial companion to ill individuals (Halm, 2008; Lentini & Knox, 2009; Walsh, 2009). William Turke is recognized as being one of the first to include animals in human healing interventions (Favali & Milton, 2010). The ancient Greeks, including Turke, are the first known individuals to recognize the therapeutic effects horses had on individuals suffering from an illness (Bizub, Joy, & Davidson, 2003; Favali & Milton, 2010). Turke took his finding a step further and founded an inpatient retreat in the eighteenth century where horses were used to encourage the terminally ill to live (Favali & Milton, 2010). It wasn’t until the 1960’s that equines were formally introduced to the therapeutic setting in the United States (Lentini & Knox, 2009; Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013). There are currently over 700 health care settings in the United States that provide some form of AAT (Bachi, 2012; Thompson, Iacobucci, & Varney, 2012; Walsh, 2009). The immediate and long-term benefits of animals on human health, specifically the mind, body, and spirit, continue to be documented today (Beck & Katcher, 2003; Halm, 2008).
**Foundation of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy**

The therapeutic interactions between humans and animals are often described in several different ways. The most common description is Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT), which is defined as “an intentional healing modality used to achieve therapeutic goals through a facilitated interaction between patients and trained animals (as therapist) accompanied by human owners or handlers” (Halm, 2008, p. 373). Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is defined as a type of AAT where a horse is used as a primary part of treatment in the therapy process. More recently, horses have started to be incorporated into therapeutic programs through several organizations, such as the Equine-Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA) and the Equine-Assisted Growth And Learning Association (EAGALA) (Burgon, 2011). These associations strive to set standards in EAP and bring research and therapeutic models to practice (Burgon, 2011). EAGALA was officially founded in July 1999 due to the rapid recognition and response to the powerful and effective ways that horses are able to help humans (Masini, 2010). Within the EAGALA standards and approach, there is an emphasis on ground versus mounted activities with the horses as well as a stressed need for both the licensed mental health professional and the equine specialist to be present during sessions versus just one or the other (Masini, 2010).

Research indicates an increasing number of organizations and facilities incorporating horses as a part of the therapeutic process and treatment of clients (Favali & Milton, 2010). Horses are more commonly known to assist individuals with disabilities, also referred to as therapeutic riding or hippotherapy, which is a form of physical rehabilitation riding. Equine-assisted psychotherapy differs from therapeutic riding as it refers to the use of horses to assist with a variety of mental health concerns, such as, ADHD, addictive behaviors, anger
ALLOWING HORSES TO HEAL


For the purpose of this project, EAP is not to be confused with other forms of AAT, such as therapeutic riding and hippotherapy. This project will focus on mental health concerns and how horses provide healing for individuals struggling with developmental and behavioral issues in life. In EAP, clients begin to process their feelings and behaviors through the various tasks and interactions with the horses. Clients then learn how to apply the strategies they learn in working with the horses to cope and work through their struggles in life (Christian, 2005; Favali & Milton, 2010; Klontz, Bivens, Leinart, & Klontz, 2007). The primary goal of EAP is to help individuals transfer their human-horse relationship to their human-human relationships (Favali & Milton, 2010).

Horses in Comparison to Other Animals

The specific qualities found in horses make them the ideal animal when it comes to therapeutic intervention; for they are “a figure of grace, vulnerability, power, and compassionate patience” (Karol, 2007, p. 82). Their presence and characteristics allow clients to connect and relate to them in ways that are limited through human connection. Horses each have their own personalities, much like humans (Favali & Milton, 2010). Some horses are more skittish and spook easily, others are very laid back and lazy. The same horse may respond very differently to each new client, thus highlighting the importance of allowing the client to select the horse, feel
out the initial bond, and work toward developing the meaning of the new relationship (Christian, 2005). The size and power of horses often provide opportunities for clients to explore issues related to vulnerability, power, and control (Ewing, MacDonald, Taylor, & Bowers, 2007; Schultz, Remick-Barlow, & Robbins, 2007). The fact that horses can be ridden sets them apart from most other animals used in therapeutic settings. While most EAP activities are done on the ground, the option for mounting the horse exists in some cases, as being carried by a strong and powerful creature enhances the level of trust and communication between horse and client (Lentini & Knox, 2009). Riding them can also provide individuals with a chance to see things from a new perspective (Favali & Milton, 2010). For example, being atop the horse can provide individuals the chance to look down at other people rather than always having other people look down at them. Horses can interact with clients in appropriate, therapeutic physical ways that are impossible for the therapist (Lentini & Knox, 2009). They offer things that are more difficult, and in some cases inappropriate to reenact in traditional therapeutic settings such as touch, affection, contact, comfort, and rhythm (Karol, 2007). Moreover, when clients have the ability to work with and develop a bond with such powerful animals, they often feel comfortable going to a deeper place in therapy then they would otherwise in more traditional therapeutic settings (Trotter, Chandler, Goodwin-Bond, & Casey, 2008).

Horses tend to be very transparent and real with clients, which fosters connection and security, allowing the client to feel safe with the horse to go deep in session. Horses are prey animals and their flight or fight instincts govern their behavior. They naturally travel in herds, which makes them accustomed to social experiences and they have the ability to read and respond to social behaviors (Lentini & Knox, 2009; Trotter et al., 2008; Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002). Due to the fact that horses are not predator animals, they bring unique
attributes to the therapeutic setting such as cooperation, patience, willingness, receptiveness, and an orientation toward clients (Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013). Horses pay great attention to detail and often respond to things unnoticed by humans; as they live in the moment and continuously respond to the energy that surrounds them (Dawley & Lidke, 2013; Lentini & Knox, 2009). They are sensitive to the energy clients bring to session and are aware of how clients move around them. This sensitivity and awareness enables horses to teach clients about energy, boundaries, body language, and the intensity and purpose they bring to others (Lentini & Knox, 2009; Schultz et al., 2007). If clients move too quickly or are abrupt in their movements, the “horse will often move away from the intensity of the energy the client conveys, as they are generally careful about maintaining personal space. However, horses are also very curious and will usually approach a human who remains calm and unaggressive” (Lentini & Knox, 2009, p. 52). In this way, horses are very keen and observant; for they are careful about their communications with humans and often feel them out before trust is fully developed.

Although horses do not speak a verbal language, they have the ability to understand and communicate with clients in numerous ways (Walsh, 2009). Communicating with the horses using non-verbal communication provides individuals the opportunity to develop an unspoken bond (Favali & Milton, 2010). EAP teaches clients to be congruent in the messages they send verbally and through body language, as horses communicate almost entirely through body language (Lentini & Knox, 2009). Horses naturally mirror what the body language of clients is saying, and as a result, clients are able to gain insight into their nonverbal communication and behavioral patterns (Lentini & Knox, 2009). Due to the size and power of horses, many clients are surprised and feel encouraged by their horse’s response to them and how willing their horse is to connect, comply, and interact with them (Favali & Milton, 2010). This realization helps
clients carry their new found confidence in working with the horses to their lives outside of the arena as well.

Clients respond to the communication of horses so quickly due to the fact that horses are able to give clear, immediate, and honest feedback to clients (Karol, 2007). They have an incredible ability to sense things about clients that humans cannot sense. For instance, while a therapist in an office may not be aware of dissonance within a client, horses may be unsettled in their behavior until the client becomes internally consistent; for “horses respond to the internal state of a person, no matter how much the person tries to disguise it” (Lentini & Knox, 2009, p. 52). Additionally, horses provide unconditional positive regard and are not judgmental (Vidrine et al., 2002.) Many clients discuss that natural calming effect their horses have on them and the absence of pressure to be a certain way (Burgon, 2011). Client’s often expressed feeling like they have to live up to the expectations of others, be strong, and not show their feelings; however, when they are with their horses, they feel no pressure to be anything except for who they are that day (Geyer, 2013; Walsh, 2009). Horses do not know or care if clients are small for their age, have messy hair, crooked teeth, failed a test, or have no friends; they allow clients to simply be who they are, no questions asked (Vidrine et al., 2002). Furthermore, Trotter and colleagues (2008) suggest that,

It is the horse’s differences to the socialized man that brings about the success that the traditional therapist cannot achieve. Horses allow us to unite unconditionally with another living being. We can take our masks off without fear of rejection. The horse has no expectations, prejudices, or motives. All of these traits allow the [client] to open up, reveal their selves, and receive feedback from the horse’s responses. This is the key to healing: expressing true feelings and interactions with another being to develop a true self-concept (p. 255).
The Therapy Team

The therapy team consists of a mental health professional, an equine specialist, and the horses themselves. A significant component in understanding EAP is to understand the partnership between the mental health professional, the equine specialist, and the horse and how they work together (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). The mental health professional “is concerned for the emotional safety of clients, and assesses clients’ emotional state and readiness for various aspects of the session” (Christian, 2005, p. 65). The mental health professional is also in charge of encouraging, confronting, and affirming the client when necessary, as well as changing any aspect of the session when the need arises (Christian, 2005; Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Clients often ask for advice in achieving the goal of the session, and while they are provided with encouragement, they are left to problem solve on their own (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). The mental health professional is also responsible for maintaining appropriate notes for each session, or SPUD notes (see Appendix A). Additionally, the mental health professional should be knowledgeable and comfortable with horses, as well as the various experiential approaches often used in therapy (Dawley & Lidke, 2013; Vidrine et al., 2002). It is required that the mental health professional hold a license that is recognized in the mental health field and practice EAP according to the EAGALA standards (Dawley & Lidke, 2013).

The primary responsibility of the equine specialist is to ensure the safety of the clients and the horses (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). The equine specialist must understand the EAP process, horse behavior, and the inherent risks of working with horses (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). They serve as an active member of the treatment team in that they provide clients and the mental health professional with an interpretation of horse behavior when needed, and are there to make any necessary adjustments to the therapeutic setting in terms of safety (Dawley & Lidke, 2013).
The equine specialist frequently communicates with the mental health professional and helps structure sessions by developing activities that relate to the goals clients have set. As sessions take place, the equine specialist remains focused on the horses, specifically paying attention to their behaviors and responses to clients, while considering the safety of clients as well (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Although there are no licensure requirements for the equine specialist, they must have specific training and education to be qualified as a team member of EAP. EAGALA has developed objective standards that an equine specialist must follow before they will be qualified to practice (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). These standards include any of the following: working in a horse profession, competing professionally, having a degree or certification in a horse program, being a member of a horse association, or being a horse owner with extensive horse experience (Dawley & Lidke, 2013).

Much like the mental health professional and the equine specialist, the horse serves as another co-therapist of the EAP team. Burgon (2011) defines the role of the horse as providing useful metaphors to reflect certain people or components within the lives of clients. The horse is non-judgmental and seeks social connections by nature. Like humans, horses also exhibit fear, curiosity, playfulness, boredom, frustration, comprehension, and social connection with other horses (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Additionally, horses have similar ranges in personality characteristics as humans, making the opportunity for connection and real therapeutic work possible through metaphors and mirroring (Dawley & Lidke, 2013).

The relationship between horse and human is often described as an emotional partnership, as it can be very personal and intimate (Favali & Milton, 2010; Karol, 2007; Nilson, 2004). The bond between horse and human often takes time and patience, as trust is the fundamental component of the relationship (Favali & Milton, 2010). The relationship between
horse and human is often experienced as reciprocal and is based on giving and receiving. Horses have the ability to actively give within the relationship and provide individuals with elements often not received from other humans (Favali & Milton, 2010). Horses are responsive by nature and have the ability to recognize and respond to an individual who is upset without having the words or understanding of human language (Favali & Milton, 2010). Their ability to respond to human emotion is what makes the human-horse bond incredibly unique, for individuals may not have this kind of interaction with anyone in their lives. Clients are often amazed at their horse’s ability to sense their feelings and frequently report their horse to not only be their therapist, but a true friend as well (Geyer, 2013).

In EAP it is essential that the mental health professional and the equine specialist take a step back, trust in their counterpart (the horse), and allow the therapeutic process to work (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). It is important that the therapy team to meet their clients where they are and allow them to tell their stories at their own pace and in their own way. This can be specifically challenging for the mental health professional and the equine specialist, however, the horse has an incredible, natural ability to meet clients where they are in life (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Horses are naturally very aware of their environment; they live in the moment and are able to continually reflect the energy that surrounds them, making them especially in tune to clients in their presence (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). For these reasons, horses stand out as being absolutely therapeutic in nature and phenomenal animals to couple with the human professionals in the mental health field.

**The Horse as a Metaphor**

The concept of the horse as a metaphor in EAP serves as a powerful therapeutic change agent; for “the metaphor serves as a corridor which connects the [client’s] therapeutic world in
ALLOWING HORSES TO HEAL

EAP to his or her inner and outer world (i.e. with family, peers, or at work/school)” (Karol, 2007, p. 86). The horse often represents the client’s present concern and/or another person in the client’s life (Dawley & Lidke, 2013; Schultz et al., 2007; Vidrine et al., 2002). The horse can be the client’s family member, friend, co-worker, boss, teacher, or the horse can be a reflection of the client themselves, as clients often talk about the horse in terms of their own feelings (Christian, 2005; Trotter et al., 2008). The horses should not be introduced to the clients with a name, as this allows the horse to become whoever the client needs them to become, which is extremely powerful (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). It is within the process of clients choosing their own horse or horses for session and allowing them to name their chosen horse or horses that provides for more opportunity for the metaphors to take place, connections to happen, and change to occur.

Relating their struggles to a large and powerful animal often provides clients with a visible reminder of how difficult their struggles can be and the importance of gaining a perspective of the problem and realizing the need for support (Christian, 2005). Clients are able to make connections between what is happening in the arena and what is happening in their world outside of the arena. When clients are allowed to develop and tell their story in the arena, they are able to develop insights and skills that they can take home and apply to their life (Christian, 2005). Clients process each EAP activity and what happens in the arena with the opportunity to reflect on what strategies worked, what did not work, and they have the chance to try again (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). The way clients process and handle the experience is the most significant component of EAP. It is a well-known fact that humans learn the best by doing, which is why EAP can be a more effective approach versus sitting in a therapist’s office; for animals can get to a place where people and words cannot (Dawley & Lidke, 2013).
How Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy Works

Equine-assisted psychotherapy is an experimental approach, in that clients learn about themselves through their reactions to a horse (Masini, 2010). EAP is unique in that the activities done in session “are designed to symbolically re-create life situations clients may be struggling with. The activities are designed to help clients move out of their comfort zones and help them discover new solutions and healthier ways of doing things” (Trotter et al., 2008, p. 265). EAP can be done in group sessions, family sessions, or couples and individual sessions. It can be used as a solo therapeutic intervention for clients or in combination with services already being offered to clients as well (Dawley & Lidke, 2013; Trotter et al., 2008). Clients meet weekly at the barn for approximately one to three hours per session depending on the presenting concern(s) (Burgon, 2011). The number of sessions is often determined again by the presenting concern(s), the assessment of the therapist, and by funding. Group sessions tend to have a more consistent schedule with a start and end date, whereas individual, family, and couples sessions have more flexibility and are often ongoing (Burgon, 2011).

EAP sessions usually begin by reviewing the informed consent and liability agreement. An example of an EAP facility’s informed consent can be found in Appendix B. This required paper work is followed by introducing clients to the setting of the barn, along with instructions on how to be safe around the horses. Clients begin their first session by observing the horses in their natural environment. Clients are encouraged to notice the behavior of the horses and to pay attention to the horses’ interactions with one another as they are roaming free in their environment (Burgon, 2011; Dawley & Lidke, 2013; Karol, 2007). As the clients observe the horses, they are educated on horse behavior and communication, as well as their natural, instinctive responses to their environment, to other horses, and to people (Trotter et al., 2008). It
is important for clients to understand and respect the power of horses and the possibility of getting hurt in their presence (Trotter et al., 2008). As clients observe the horses, they will often select the horse or horses they would like to work with during session. Clients often select their horse(s) based on how they identify with certain ones from watching them interact in their natural environment; as many clients report feeling that certain horses mirror their own life or personality (Burgon, 2011; Corring, Lundberg, & Rudnick, 2013; Ewing et al., 2007; Trotter et al., 2008). Clients are typically drawn to horses that display a similar disposition or similar characteristics of their own (Trotter et al., 2008). Some clients experience an immediate connection to a horse, while it takes others a longer time to develop the initial connection (Burgon, 2011). As the human-horse relationship develops, clients begin to explore their issues through the horse and the horse will often mirror what clients need to recognize in themselves, which is where using the horse as a metaphor plays a role (Burgon, 2011; Trotter et al., 2008; Vidrine et al., 2002).

An important component in developing the human-horse bond for clients is teaching them how to care for the horse and allowing the EAP process to naturally evolve by encouraging clients to simply spend time with the horses and be in their presence. Many clients report that they enjoy being in the horse environment and showing their horse affection by hugging them, stroking them, and talking to them (Burgon, 2011). Clients first learn how to groom, halter, lead, and feed their horses before engaging in the more interactive activities of EAP (Burgon, 2011). It can be helpful for the client and therapist to do a simple activity with the horse, such as grooming, and encourage discussion of the activity as it is being performed. This technique is especially beneficial with less verbal clients (Masini, 2010). Therapists should be observant of times that clients project uncomfortable feelings onto their horses; for example, a client may say,
“He [the horse] is in a bad mood today. He probably had a bad day with the other horses picking on him” or “He looks tired, I bet that he didn’t get a good sleep last night” (Masini, 2010, p. 31). It is important to process these kinds of feelings and emotions as they arise while clients are interacting with the horse; for “clients are often unaware of their behavior until they can understand it through the way in which the horse reflects it back to them” (Schultz et al., 2007, p. 266). Clients are encouraged to make connections between their experience with the horse throughout an activity and their internal state during processing (Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013). It’s helping clients connect these dots and determining other places in their lives that they experience what they are experiencing and feeling with the horses (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). For example, if the horse walks away from the client or ignores the client, the therapist can help the client process what that may mean, identify similar experiences in the client’s daily life, and explore where changes can be made (Dawley & Lidke, 2013).

As clients are ready to begin more interactive activities, they are given specific safety rules to follow and are then left on their own at that point to work through the various activities with their horse. Providing clients with limited instruction allows for a natural flow between the horse and client and pushes clients to figure out the process as it makes sense to them (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Clients are encouraged to work through any struggles they have in completing the activities and are not allowed to ask the professionals for assistance; as pushing clients to figure things out on their own fosters growth and improvement in their therapy goals and overall life skills (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Once the client has completed an activity, the therapist and client will discuss what the experience was like for the client, specifically highlighting what the client noticed about themselves and the horse as they worked through the activity (Dawley & Lidke, 2013; Masini, 2010).
A majority of EAP activities take place on the ground, as many clients do not always ride their horse. Some popular ground-based activities include join-up and invisible riding. Join-up, or “horse whispering”, is a process in which clients use their body language to begin building trust with the horse. The client will begin with the horse loose in a round pen and the aim of the exercise is to get the horse to follow the client without the use of a halter or lead rope (Burgon, 2011). The join-up process is about the client’s ability to listen and their willingness or capability to see themselves through the eyes of their horse (Epston, 2011). Invisible riding is a technique used to teach clients how to connect with the horse using only intentional voice commands and body language (Burgon, 2011). The client is to guide the horse from one side of the arena to another, or through and over different obstacles the client has set up in the arena, without actually touching the horse or bribing the horse with food, and using only their tone of voice and body language (Burgon, 2011; Masini, 2010). The obstacles clients take their horses through often represent challenges they are facing in life, for example, making friends, relapse, relationship conflicts, and so forth (Trotter et al., 2008); as the things happening in the arena with the horse are also happening in the client’s world outside the arena as well (Dawley & Lidke, 2013).

Another common activity in EAP is having clients work toward picking up the horse’s hoof and cleaning out the dirt. Horses can be stubborn creatures and will not pick up their hooves for clients they don’t like or trust, or for clients who are too timid or aggressive in their attempts to get the horse to respond (Trotter et al., 2008). It is through this activity that clients begin to understand that their behaviors, thoughts, and feeling have an effect on how the horse responds to them and that in order to get what they are looking for from the horse, they may need to make some changes within themselves (Dawley & Lidke, 2013; Trotter et al., 2008).
Many clients find success with this activity at some point throughout their experience with EAP, which can be very “empowering because if [they] can gain the cooperation of a thousand-pound horse, then smaller life challenges do not seem quite so daunting after all; thus allowing clients to see other life problems as more manageable” (Trotter et al., 2008, p. 265).

Clients often need to apply leadership skills, judgment, and concentration in session in order to gain the trust and co-operation of the horse and to reach their goals in the various EAP activities (Burgon, 2011; Karol, 2007). It is through the various EAP activities that the bond between horse and client strengthens; as one client stated, “some kind of magic happens… you and the horse become one” (Corring et al., 2013, p.123). As clients begin to experience success and achievement through the challenging EAP activities, their sense of self-confidence increases, thus increasing their overall self-esteem and ability to apply their new skills outside of the EAP sessions and to others areas of their lives (Burgon, 2011).

The basic format of EAP consists of reviewing past sessions with clients and discussing ways in which they were successful or not successful in applying what they learned with their horse to their life outside of EAP. Subsequent to this initial discussion, clients are engaged in experiential activities with the horses, followed by time for the client to process the experience with the therapist (Epston, 2011; Masini, 2010). Although this basic format generally remains the same, “the approach allows the therapist and the equine specialist much flexibility in modifying the exercises or creating new ones depending on the treatment goals” (Masini, 2010, p.32). As the EAP process comes to a completion for clients, a final activity includes allowing clients to paint on their horses. This activity encourages clients to reflect on their entire EAP process and express to their horse the most meaningful things they will take away from their experience (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). For many clients, it serves as a final day of bonding. It’s a
way for clients to say farewell and thank-you to their horses and express their success and achievements by leaving an artistic mark on their horse; an experience that often remains in the mind and hearts of a client forever.

**Benefits of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy**

Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy provides numerous benefits to clients that are typically not available in more traditional therapeutic settings. Many individuals are resistant to more traditional forms of therapy for various reasons; however, EAP provides clients with an exciting opportunity to work through their struggles in a unique environment with a horse as their co-therapist. Many clients report their strong connection to horses to be the only reason behind their initial participation in EAP, which shows to be a good example of how horses have the ability to reach clients who are resistant or disengaged in more traditional therapy settings (Masini, 2010). Therapists utilizing EAP in treatment are able to reach a vast amount of clients, resistant or otherwise, as insurance companies are beginning to recognize this form of therapy, and will often cover the cost of the services provided by mental health professionals offering this type of therapy to their clients (Bachi, 2012).

EAP is beneficial in reaching clients as it allows them to respond to difficult and challenging situations in the here and now through hands on activities with the horses (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). The hands on activities are suggested to be the central agent for success in EAP; for “hands on activities with horses provide opportunities for change and growth in which individuals integrate learning through direct experience and change through action” (Dawley & Lidke, 2013, retrieved from handout, *Why Horses?*) Additionally, EAP teaches life skills and clients learn to verbalize their problems and fears through the use of hands on activities and metaphors (Ewing et al., 2007). Furthermore, the interactive aspect of EAP allows clients to
engage in forms of exercise, which is directly related to the reported physiological benefits experienced by clients (Giaquinto & Valentini, 2009; Walsh, 2009).

In addition to the noted physiological benefits of EAP, horses also bring an emotional and mental healing to individuals that traditional forms of therapy do not (Christian, 2005; Giaquinto & Valentini, 2009; Nilson, 2004). Horses have the ability to heal individuals, and whether an individual is a seasoned equestrian or has never been exposed to horses in their life is irrelevant; as the positive difference horses can make in the lives of individuals who interact with them is remarkable (Nilson, 2004). One of the greatest aspects of EAP is the overwhelming response from clients describing the joy and positive impact they gain from the intervention (Corring et al., 2013; Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Additionally, many clients report prolonged elevated moods after EAP sessions (Corring et al., 2013); for they report spending more time reflecting on their sessions with the horses and are able to recognize and note their improvements and points of change more readily compared to their progress in a more traditional therapeutic setting (Bizub et al., 2003).

The noted differences seen between the ways clients process EAP sessions compared to traditional office sessions is in part due to the relationship clients build with their horse. Many clients feel that the relationship they form with their horse is the one relationship they know they can always count on (Walsh, 2009). The bond that develops between horse and client is a central factor in the process of change; as this relationship can be life-altering (Bachi, 2012). Clients, especially children, can learn to form attachments, show love and affection, experience intimacy, and understand what it means to be nurturing toward another being (Bachi, 2012; Ewing et al., 2007). Nilson (2004) describes horses as one of the world’s best secrets, as many “come to them tired, discouraged, ill, and confused and they send individuals home refreshed, renewed, and full
of life and hope for tomorrow” (p.42). Clients often describe their horses as their confidants and the ones they tell their secrets to; for clients trust their horses sometimes more than anyone else in their lives (Burgon, 2011).

A high percentage of clients experiencing EAP describe the horses as being the most reliable source of social support in their lives. Additionally, clients also describe their horses as providing great psychological strength (Favali & Milton, 2010; Giaquinto & Valentini, 2009). One client specifically quoted, “I just feel complete… it’s being around the horses that makes everything complete” (Favali & Milton, 2010, p. 254). Another client stated, “Horses are empathetic and emotional; being around them makes me feel safe” (Geyer, 2013, p. 1). Clients who go through EAP often report feeling amazed by their accomplishments and surprised by what they are capable of doing (Vidrine et al., 2002); as one client declared, “Well if I can do this, then I can do other things as well, you know, and break out of my comfort zone” (Corring et al., 2013, p. 123). It is clear that EAP serves as a “steppingstone for individuals to learn more, to do more, and, eventually, to be more” (Bizub et al., 2003, p. 381).

Clients leave EAP sessions feeling as though they can break out of their comfort zone and make improvements to their lives due to the variety of opportunities that arise in EAP to address presenting issues in their work with the horses (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Some of the most common issues addressed in EAP include trust, respect, boundaries, impact of nonverbal communication, leadership, patience, assertiveness, cooperation versus competition, parenting skills, conflict resolution, co-parenting, and natural and logical consequences (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Through EAP, clients are able to work on and improve in a variety of areas, including communication skills, honesty, respect, awareness of power, and feeling more in control of their lives (Trotter et al., 2008). Research indicates clients experience fewer psychological symptoms
after experiencing EAP, specifically reporting that they are “more oriented in the present, better able to live more fully in the here-and-now, less burdened by regrets, guilt, and resentments, less focused on fears related to the future, more independent, and more self-supportive” (Klontz et al., 2007, p. 263). Additionally, clients report improvements in self-confidence, self-efficacy and empowerment, communication, trust, anxiety reduction and impulse modulation, addressing boundaries, assertiveness, and practicing social skills (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). EAP leaves a majority of its clients feeling as though they are able to apply their learned skills outside of the arena and truly take the reins of their own lives (Bizub et al., 2003).

**Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy and Special Populations**

EAP has been applied to clients across ages, genders, and cultures, and is commonly used with individuals, couples, parents and families, returning veterans, and groups (Dawley & Lidke, 2013; Lentini & Knox, 2009; Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013; Trotter et al., 2008). There are various psychological and social benefits of EAP found across all populations. Greater perceptions of happiness, a sense of control, and an established importance of giving unconditional love are some of the psychological effects reported among various populations participating in EAP (Bachi, 2012; Halm, 2008; Thompson et al., 2012). Many of the social benefits include the ability to snuggle or hug the horses and the impact that has on healing, as well as the overall experience of clients feeling a sense of normality in being with the horses (Bachi, 2012; Halm, 2008; Thompson et al., 2012). Psychiatric patients, children, adolescents and at-risk youth, couples, families, and other groups are the highlighted populations found within EAP literature.

**Psychiatric Patients.** EAP has been used with clients struggling with serious and long-lasting psychiatric disorders. Many therapists believe clients dealing with disorders such as
allowing horses to heal

schizophrenia, major depressive disorders, and personality disorders would benefit from participating in EAP (Berget et al., 2008; Walsh, 2009). It has been found that individuals with schizophrenia were able to further develop their coping skills, increase their self-esteem and self-efficacy, and better manage their symptoms of anxiety (Corring et al., 2013). Many individuals with schizophrenia are socially isolated and often struggle with adaptive social skills. Creating a bond with a horse can provide these individuals with the connection to another responsive being who is not socially threatening, thus providing them with a sense of connectedness through the non-verbal feedback and the company of the horse (Corring et al., 2013).

Although EAP appears to be beneficial for most psychiatric patients, therapists should use caution before suggesting EAP to any client (Berget et al., 2008). For example, clients with more severe disorders who present to be in a manic or psychotic phase and who also take extensive medications, may not be a good fit for EAP (Berget et al., 2008). Therapists need to thoroughly assess their clients to ensure not only their safety, but for the safety of everyone involved with EAP as well (Berget et al., 2008).

Children. The perceptions many children hold of horses as being magical, powerful, beautiful, brave, and strong, may greatly contribute to the therapeutic benefits of EAP for children (Lentini & Knox, 2009). Research suggests that children are often motivated to attend EAP session as they were “taught structure, responsibility, routine, care for another (the horse), empathy, safe mistake-making, the value of practice and mastery, discipline, problem-solving, body awareness, visual learning, patience, respect for others choices, creativity, self-esteem, relaxation, the value of completing necessary but unpleasant tasks, self-reflection, and nurturing” (Lentini & Knox, 2009, p. 53). One parent compared a variety of activities to EAP, including golf, swimming, basketball, and many others, and reported the therapy with the horses to be the
favored activity by her children and the most consistent and positive intervention in her child’s life as well (Lentini & Knox, 2009). Animals are very straight-forward in expressing their feelings and behaviors, which is why children learn to be more empathetic from animals versus humans (Walsh, 2009). Ponies and miniature horses are also used in EAP settings, as they may serve to be a more appropriate fit for children and youth at times.

**Adolescents and At-Risk Youth.** Clients are generally defined as at-risk due to various psychological factors that place them in a position to experience negative life outcomes (Burgon, 2011; Schultz et al., 2007). Some of the contributing factors include low socio-economic status, lower class and cultural expectations, and neurobiological and environmental risks (Burgon, 2011). Additionally, there is agreement within research that at-risk youth are likely to have been exposed to stressful and traumatic events at some point in their life, such as physical, sexual, or psychological abuse, dysfunctional parenting, or parental drug and/or alcohol abuse (Burgon, 2011; Schultz et al., 2007). Research indicates that many at-risk children and adolescents feel apprehensive and untrusting around teachers, therapists, or adults in general (Ewing et al., 2007). In working with the horse on the other hand, these children and adolescents open up and can often see their own self and their own issues reflected through the horses (Ewing et al., 2007; Vidrine et al., 2002).

The process of EAP allows young people to develop meaningful, educational, and therapeutic experiences with horses and further provides them with protective factors useful in promoting resilience and avoiding life’s negative outcomes (Burgon, 2011). EAP activities are geared toward engaging young people in activities that are helpful in building their self-esteem, self-confidence, and social skills (Burgon, 2011). A variety of positive behaviors are often seen in youth who experience EAP, such as nurturing, affection, play, lower aggression, peer
cooperation, responsibility, teaching others, and responding to adult authority (Walsh, 2009).

Additionally, research indicates a common response from youth that being around a horse helped them to feel safe, which is perhaps the most significant benefit of EAP for youth (Masini, 2010).

**Couples, Families, and Groups.** EAP with couples, families, or groups presents a very different dynamic compared to EAP with an individual client. When EAP involves more than one person, clients must not only interact with the horse, but also with each other (Masini, 2010). Clients often realize the need to think ‘outside the box’ and find new ways of relating to each other as they move through activities that require cooperation, creative thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills (Masini, 2010). The therapist will discuss the experience with clients following the activity, encouraging clients to speak about strategies that worked and strategies that didn’t work (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Clients will often be given the opportunity to regroup, develop new strategies and try the activity again if necessary. The therapist will also encourage clients to notice the behavior of the horse or horses during activities, as well as when everyone circles up for discussion and processing after activities (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). The horse will often mirror certain behaviors or attitudes within the couple, family, or group and may act a certain way with clients, for example, standing next to them, nudging them, ignoring them, etc. (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). It is important for clients to notice the behavior of the horse and have a discussion about their interpretation of the horse’s behavior and how it may serve as a metaphor in their own dynamic as a couple, family, or group (Dawley & Lidke, 2013; Masini, 2010).

**Applying Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy to Theory**

There are many different styles, philosophies, and practices that exist within the field of EAP, as therapists use a variety of models to integrate EAP into practice (Bachi, 2012). The most common theories highlighted throughout research include: Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy
ALLOWING HORSES TO HEAL

(REBT), Reality therapy, Psychoanalytic, Gestalt, Attachment theory, and nature/outdoor theories (Bachi, 2012; Dawley & Lidke, 2013; Walsh, 2009).

**Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT).** The use of REBT in EAP teaches clients that their beliefs cause certain feelings, emotions, and behaviors that lead to consequences, which in turn reinforce their beliefs (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Clients learn through EAP how to break this unhealthy cycle and become more mindful of their negative self-talk (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). An example of how to apply REBT to session would be helping clients to change their beliefs about a certain behavior their horse is doing. For example, if a horse keeps walking away from the client, the client may believe that the horse doesn’t like him. The mental health professional can apply REBT to session by helping the client identify this belief and work on how to change the belief into something more positive, for instance, helping the client reframe his belief that the horse doesn’t like him to trying a new way to communicate with the horse so the horse will better understand the client’s needs (Dawley & Lidke, 2013).

**Reality Therapy.** Utilizing a reality therapy approach in EAP helps clients focus on the present moment. Clients are encouraged to focus on a behavior, evaluate that behavior, and decide if they need to make an action plan to change that behavior (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Reality therapy helps clients learn to take responsibility for their actions or feelings and focus on how to change an unhealthy patterns (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). The mental health professional will often point out behaviors for the client to focus on; for example, if a client continues to try the same approach with the horse, but is not getting a response, the mental health professional can help the client process this and work on developing a new approach, or behavior with the horse (Dawley & Lidke, 2013).
Psychoanalytic Approach. Applying a psychoanalytic approach to EAP is beneficial in that it helps clients uncover their buried feelings associated with past events (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Sessions utilizing psychoanalytic theory are designed to make the unconscious conscious through various activities that help bring about insight (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). For example, the mental health professional may point out to a client his feelings towards his horse being congruent with his feelings towards someone close to him and help the client make that connection (Dawley & Lidke, 2013).

Gestalt Approach. The aim of applying a Gestalt approach to EAP is to help clients begin to focus on their current behaviors, feelings, and body language (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Clients often become aware of their bodily tensions and their fears as they work with the horses. This awareness helps clients release their feelings and begin to experiment with new behaviors (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Action oriented techniques are used in this approach to purposely intensify clients’ experiences in session to further foster their awareness of their feelings (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). The mental health professional will often point out clients’ reactions to the horses, such as facial expressions, muscle tensions, etc. Additionally, clients are encouraged to explore the reasoning behind their attraction to certain horses and not others in using this approach as well (Dawley & Lidke, 2013).

Attachment Theory. Applying attachment theory to EAP is a common theme found in the research, as this theory may provide further understanding of the human-horse bond (Bachi, 2012; Walsh, 2009). Specific research on attachment theory in EAP settings is limited and it remains unclear of how attachment could be part of the human-horse bond (Bachi, 2012). Some researchers suggest that there may be a difference in the internal working models of individuals in how they attach to other humans versus animals (Bachi, 2012). Understanding the patterns of
attachment with animals through the use of attachment theory needs further exploration and research (Bachi, 2012). A deeper exploration of these areas may help offer greater insight into the change process clients experience through EAP (Bachi, 2012).

**Nature/Outdoor Therapies.** There is much to be said about the benefits of conducting therapy in a more natural environment. EAP requires clients to attend the horses’ natural environment, thus exposing clients to nature in terms of fresh air, trees, wild life, flowers, green grass, sunshine, and so forth (Beck & Katcher, 2003). The combined role of the horse and nature produce a variety of physiological effects on clients including reduction in blood pressure cholesterol levels, and anxiety, as well as an overall increase in neurochemicals in the brain associated with relaxation and bonding (Beck & Katcher, 2003; Walsh, 2009).

Reviewing the therapeutic approaches commonly used with EAP is a crucial part of developing a deeper understanding of how the EAP process works. Masini (2010) views EAP as not so much a theoretical orientation, but rather as an “approach that can be used in conjunction with a variety of therapeutic modalities and with diverse client populations” (p.30). Therapists with backgrounds in solution-focused, family, Gestalt, dialectical-behavioral, and group therapy have found EAP to be a valuable addition to the therapeutic process in working with a wide variety of clients (Masini, 2010). Additionally, many therapists find ways to be creative in how they approach the therapeutic process of EAP and often apply certain theories or techniques to session as they appear appropriate for clients. For example, in working with clients with anxiety, therapists may begin teaching clients relaxation techniques through grooming the horses (Favali & Milton, 2010).
EAP remains a developing field in the mental health profession and there is a greater amount of literature on experimental practices compared to specific research on theory (Lentini & Knox, 2009). Therapists usually fall into one of two categories when it comes to EAP; they are either willing to try this experimental therapy, or they are settled in waiting for more theory based studies to develop (Lentini & Knox, 2009). Although there are differences and lingering questions in regards to theory and EAP, there is however, considerable agreement among mental health professions practicing EAP as to what the horses bring to the therapeutic setting; for they bring unique equine attributes, opportunities for metaphor, relational aspects, a calming effect, and they help bring clients to the here-and-now (Bachi, 2012; Dawley & Lidke, 2013).

**Ethical Considerations**

There are various ethical considerations that the therapy team and clients must be aware of in the practice of EAP. It is important to consider the goals of EAP, safety concerns for both the clients and the horses, specific training of the horses, being mindful of burnout among horses, and the overall business ethics of EAP.

As in most therapeutic settings, it is essential to spend time reviewing the client’s therapeutic goals and developing a treatment plan. Discussing and defining therapeutic goals using EAP becomes a heightened importance in order to help clients remain focused and avoid confusing the setting used for EAP with a social outing (Lentini & Knox, 2009). Therapists need to be very transparent in establishing boundaries with clients during EAP since the treatment is done in a setting outside the office, thus potentially allowing limits to be confused or blurred (Lentini & Knox, 2009). Furthermore, clients need to have a clear idea of the goals and the purpose of EAP and understand that sessions are not a time for recreational activity because an animal is involved (Lentini & Knox, 2009).
Animals used in any type of AAT are required to be properly cared for and properly trained. They must be healthy, clean, well-groomed, fully vaccinated, and free of parasites (Halm, 2008). Additionally, they must be provided with adequate food, water, shelter, social interaction, and regular veterinary care (Beck & Katcher, 2003). AAT animals must also have tamed mannerisms, or a kind disposition, and be familiar with human contact (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Horses must be halter broke, meaning they can be lead around by humans, ground broke, meaning they are familiar with objects in the arena, including tarps, cones, bridges, logs, buckets, etc, and they must be trained to ride (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). It is left to the professional opinion of the equine specialist to determine which horses are sound and safe to participate in EAP and which horses may require more time, maturity, and training.

In addition to the required physical care of the horses, it is important to consider how the horses may be affected mentally as part of the EAP team. Several studies have looked at the wellbeing of horses used in therapeutic settings and found that horses, like therapists, can experience burnout. Horses indicate signs of stress and burnout through their body language; for example, pinned ears, tossing their head, charging, bucking, rearing, and displaying other forms of disobedient behaviors (Lentini & Knox, 2009). It is important for the equine specialist to assess the behavior of the horses and determine if and when they are experiencing points of high stress or burnout (Beck & Katcher, 2003; Dawley & Lidke, 2013).

Safety is one of the most critical considerations and ethical components of EAP, considering the behavior of horses can be unpredictable at times, especially if they are reaching a point of burnout. It is the responsibility of both the mental health professional and the equine specialist to ensure both the physical and emotional safety of clients (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). They often need to be strategic in removing clients from a potentially dangerous situation; for
example, if clients are near horses that may spook or act aggressively, the professionals need to assess the situation and bring the clients to safety without yelling or making sudden movements which may further elevate the mood or responsiveness of the horses (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). In terms of the emotional safety of clients, the EAP team must avoid scaring clients if such potentially dangerous situations arise. It is important to allow clients to process what happened rather than lecture them about safety; as this approach helps clients build new perceptions and allows them to continue the session with a new awareness (Dawley & Lidke, 2013).

As another component of safety, the mental health professional and the equine specialist must also assess if clients are appropriately dressed for their EAP session (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Clients must wear strong, toe covered shoes to protect their feet if the horse were to step on them. Additionally, clients must wear pants and are discouraged from wearing their best clothes, as they are likely to get dirty. Along with dress, the weather is another significant consideration in EAP (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Extreme heat or cold can be a safety issue for both horses and clients. The professionals must be mindful of this and reschedule appointments when necessary. In addition to extreme temperatures, strong winds and thunderstorms may also interfere with sessions, as horses tend to be high strung and unpredictable in such weather conditions and may not be safe for clients (Dawley & Lidke, 2013).

It is important for professionals practicing EAP to be aware of the ethics involved with the practice of EAP and understand the importance of communication and developing a partnership in terms of the above mentioned ethical concerns. Such partnership signifies teamwork and a unique bond that is essential for not only the therapeutic process, but also for the business side of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy facilities. Trust, patience, honesty, forgiveness,
support, and commitment from each team member are essential traits needed in making an EAP business a success, and perhaps more importantly, a joy (Dawley & Lidke, 2013).

**Limitations of Research**

Gaining an understanding of the limitations of EAP is imperative for mental health professionals in the field, as having such an understanding allows them to further conceptualize EAP and begin to fill the holes in the literature through their own research. Perhaps the most common limitation of EAP is that horses do not suit everyone. Some people do not like horses, as some greatly fear them, and others may be limited due to health conditions such as allergies or other neurological disorders (Burgon, 2011; Corring et al., 2013; Somervill, Kruglikova, Robertson, Hanson, & MacLin, 2008). There is limited research in terms of the diseases and injuries that may be associated with interacting with animals (Beck & Katcher, 2003). The fear of injury is another common limitation among EAP practices, specifically concerning parents and caregiver of EAP clients.

In combination with client fears and/or allergies of horses, financial struggles are another limitation, as cost is another large obstacle when considering EAP. Burgon (2011) highlights the great expense of EAP when considering the upkeep of the horses and the barn, the liability insurance, and the staffing costs of at least two practitioners. However, the potential benefits gained from being in a natural environment with animals, the physical and mental health benefits of exercise, and the challenging and risk-taking elements of working with horses prove to outweigh the financial cost of EAP (Burgon, 2011; Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Furthermore, there is a long history of bringing about positive change in clients when involving them in outdoor activities (Burgon, 2011).
Aside from the high cost of EAP and the fact that horses may not be for everyone, many practicing therapists remain skeptical of integrating EAP into practice due to the lack of available theory based research (Bachi, 2012; Thompson et al., 2012). Additionally, parents and other caregivers of potential clients may fear or feel hesitant to accept the process of EAP due to the lack of evidence based research (Vidrine et al., 2002). To date, studies on EAP are greatly based off of individual researchers’ experiences with EAP, compared to an overall ‘EAP theory’; hence, resulting in therapists questioning EAP as a valid and reliable approach (Bachi, 2012). There are few studies that look at and appropriately measure the physiological responses that occur when clients are interacting with the horse (Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013). Lentini and Knox (2009) contend that “longitudinal studies using biofeedback to measure physiologic heart rate variability, skin conductance level, and even beta vs. alpha brain wave activity, and blood samples measuring neurotransmitter uptake could significantly enhance research efforts” (p. 56). Additionally, further research should evaluate the effectiveness of EAP, further determine the appropriate populations and diagnoses for EAP, and develop a firm theoretical knowledge to further guide this type of intervention (Bachi, 2012).

In addition to a lack of theory based research, studies on EAP and AAT in general provide minimal research on the gender differences of clients, thus making this area another important factor for future studies (Berget et al., 2008; Somervill et al., 2008; Vidrine et al., 2002). Future research should consider the effects of gender in terms of connection and affection to the horse, body language and communication with the horse, and overall success in reaching and maintaining therapeutic goals (Vidrine et al., 2002). There is however, research related to the gender differences of therapists. Berget and colleagues (2008) found that female therapists believed animals to be helpful in therapeutic settings to a large extent, whereas male therapists
on the other hand, remain more skeptical of integrating animals into the therapy process. Further studies are needed in regards of the attitudes therapists as a whole have toward AAT and EAP.

Although a majority of the skepticism mental health professionals hold against EAP revolves around the lack of evidenced based research, Beck and Katcher (2003) suggest the most common criticism of EAP and other form of AAT is that they are not goal oriented. Discussing and defining goals with clients throughout the EAP process is commonly noted throughout the literature; however, even when such goals are identified, evaluations and outcomes are often unclear, making the credibility of EAP questionable (Beck & Katcher, 2003).
Conclusion

Equine-assisted psychotherapy is an interactive form of therapy that simply allows horses to heal human beings (Dawley & Lidke, 2013; Nilson, 2004). It continues to be a growing trend in the mental health field as it allows horses to be an integral part of the treatment of youth, adults, and families that are struggling with mental health issues (Nilson, 2004). Furthermore, “this unique therapy provides opportunity to enhance self-awareness, develop feelings of self-love, and allow people to grow, progress, and heal” (Nilson, 2004, p. 42). EAP is a non-threatening approach that allows clients to build an intimate relationship with a horse, thus allowing the therapy process to deepen and go places that are limited in more traditional settings.

The human-horse relationship plays a primary role in the success of EAP; as clients become truly transformed through the metaphors they create with their horse. Accordingly, this relationship keeps clients motivated to come back to therapy and continue EAP sessions (Vidrine et al., 2002). Trotter and colleagues (2008) suggest that “interacting with horses has been shown to contribute to client motivation in attending, participating, and cooperating in therapy regularly” (p. 255). Clients become invested in their treatment with the horses and are often heard saying things like, “My horse is the best treatment; he helps me get rid of all the bad stuff” or “I just think of my horse and how he would help me get through this” (Vidrine et al., 2002, p.600). Clients learn to apply their human-horse relationship to their human-human relationships, along with their day to day experiences, and are often excited about their success in making those connections (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). Clients report genuine joy in being able to share a part of themselves with the horses and allowing themselves to be vulnerable with them (Ewing et al., 2007). Clients establish a unique connection and a supportive friendship with their horses, which is known to be very therapeutic in itself (Bizub et al., 2003).
Equine-assisted psychotherapy provides clients with an opportunity to take a risk and become involved in new and different activities that not only provide challenge, but reap rewards and self-fulfillment (Dawley & Lidke, 2013). As clients gain and build their confidence and learn new skills through EAP, doors may begin to open where they were previously closed (Burgon, 2011). The relationships and experiences clients have with the horses has been proven to contribute to a positive gain in psychological benefits, such as social competence, empathy, ability to reflect, sense of purpose and future, autonomy and self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-esteem (Burgon, 2011; Dawley & Lidke, 2013).

It is apparent that EAP has a long way to go in terms of research and proving its credibility to the mental health field. However, EAP is a relatively young field, providing it with ample opportunities to grow in terms of research and reduce the skepticism among clients, their caregivers and loved ones, and mental health professionals as a whole (Masini, 2010; Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013). EAP is a profound psychological experience and often leaves clients with a greater inner peace and sense of self; as animals have the power to make us feel accepted, understood, and needed (Giaquinto & Valentini, 2009). Helen Keller once said, “The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be see or even touched. They must be felt with the heart” and EAP allows clients to do just that.
Author’s Note

I have been truly inspired by my research on Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy and will undoubtedly apply the information I have learned to both my personal and professional life. I struggled for the longest time with what I wanted to do with my life, but I have never felt so certain that I have finally found where I belong in a career sense. I always knew that I had a passion for the helping profession, which is what lead me to the Counselor Education Program at Winona State University. Coupling that passion with my passion for horses is my dream come true, as I aspire to become a certified equine specialist and practice Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy in the future. There couldn’t be a better opportunity for me than this because it involves working with horses and helping others, which are two of my deepest passions. Horses have been a part of my life since my first independent steps; I have a profound love for them and being around them makes me a better person. Completing this capstone project was very therapeutic for me in many ways because it helped remind me of how passionate I am toward horses and how strongly I believe in their power to help people. There were many times in my personal life that I turned to my own horse for therapy sessions and I am hopeful that I will one day have the ability to introduce others to the powerful ways in which horses can help us learn, grow, and heal.
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Appendix B: Example Informed Consent and Liability Agreement in EAP

Horses Easing Life’s Pain (H.E.L.P.) is a program created to provide Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) and Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) activities for those desiring personal growth and learning. It is our pleasure to offer this Equine Assisted Program through CFCC and Associates, Inc., whose mission is to be a compassionate place for hope and healing for all people in North East Kansas. By offering opportunities to interact with horses, it is our goal to instill hope, to help people find their own solutions, and empower them to make healthy lifestyle choices.

Values:

The values that are important to the HELP Program include:
1. The safety of all participants, human and animal;
2. Respect for all;
3. The courage to try new things without judging the outcome;
4. Cooperation and negotiation with others;
5. Personal growth and learning;
6. Balancing consistency and flexibility; and
7. Responsibility.

We believe that through the process of building relationships with animals and the natural environment an individual can come to know one’s self better. This process also allows individuals to develop and improve communication with others and to manage the expressions of feelings with greater clarity.

Goals:

It is important to us that we provide a safe environment in which to:
1. Discover and nurture strengths, interests and talents;
2. Support effort toward change;
3. Establish consistent and stable relationships;
4. Improve interpersonal skills;
5. Enhance self-worth and empowerment;
6. Identify and develop individual learning styles;
7. Gain knowledge, communication and coping skills through program experiences;
8. Conduct Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) and Equine Assisted Learning (EAL).
Additional Considerations:

You will be introduced to safety aspects of being around animals during your initial sessions. Attention to safety issues by all involved will be a regular part of each session. If you are the parent/guardian of a program participant, your interest in the process and activities is important. Please notify the therapist of any significant behavioral/emotional or physical changes which may impact activities.

We wish to keep participation in the program a productive experience for all. The same confidentiality laws that apply to your treatment at CFCC & Associates, Inc. apply at the arena. If you are participating in a group, you are responsible to keep the other member’s information confidential also. Since the program is being held at a place that conducts other business, please be aware that you and/or your group may be seen by other staff or clients of the arena. No information about you or your treatment will be shared with these individuals. The only exception to this rule applies to the Horse Professional that is a part of your treatment team. Since they participate in the therapy session, it is necessary for them to have a basic understanding of why you are there. The Horse Professional has signed a contract stating all information will be kept confidential.

In addition to matters of confidentiality, please be aware that program participants need to wear clothing suitable to being in a barn and animal oriented environment. This means closed toed shoes and clothes you are willing to get dirty.

Agreement:

I have read and understand the above program considerations. I agree to be responsible in keeping confidential any information I see or hear while participating. I also agree to be responsible for my physical, spiritual, mental and emotional safety, and in that way, add to the safety of all involved.

Participant ___________________________ Date ___________________________

Parent/Guardian, if applicable ___________________________ Date ___________________________
**Horses Easing Life’s Pain Program**

**Adult Participant Release of Liability Agreement**

I, (participant) ________________________ for and in consideration of the agreement with CFCC & Associates, Inc. to provide Equine Assisted Services to myself, do hereby forever release, acquit, discharge and hold harmless, CFCC & Associates, Inc., and its officers, trustees, agents, employees, representatives, successors and assigns, for all manner of claims, demands, and damages of every kind and nature whatsoever, which the undersigned may now, or in the future, have against CFCC & Associates, Inc., its officers trustees, agents, employees, representatives, successors or assigns on account of any personal injuries, physical or mental condition, known or unknown, to the undersigned and the treatment therefore as a result of, or in any way growing out of, the acts of CFCC & Associates, Inc., its officers, trustees, agents, employees, representatives, successors or assigns, including but not limited to, their negligence or gross negligence, in rendering the services above described or in any way incidental thereto.

*Under Kansas law, there is no liability for an injury to or the death of a participant in domestic animal activities resulting from the inherent risks of domestic animal activities, pursuant to K.S.A. 60-4001 through 60-4004. You are assuming the risk of participating in this domestic animal activity. Inherent risks of domestic animal activities means those dangers or conditions which are an integral part of domestic animal activities, including, but not limited to: (1) The propensity of a domestic animal to run, buck, bite, shy, stumble, rear, fall, step on or behave in ways that may result in injury, harm or death to persons on or around them; (2) the unpredictability of a domestic animal’s reaction to such things as sounds, sudden movement and unfamiliar objects, persons or other animals; (3) certain hazards such as surface and subsurface conditions; (4) collisions with other domestic animals or objects; and (5) the potential of a participant to act in a negligent manner that may contribute to injury to the participant or others, such as failing to maintain control over the animal or not acting within such participant’s ability.*

_________________________  _______________________
Signature of Participant      Date

_________________________  _______________________
Signature of Program Personnel Date

Page 3 of 4
Horses Easing Life’s Pain Program

Child Participant Release of Liability Agreement

I, (parent/guardian) ____________________________________________ for and in consideration of the agreement with CFCC & Associates, Inc. to provide Equine Assisted Services to (child participant) ____________________________________________, do hereby forever release, acquit, discharge and hold harmless CFCC & Associates, Inc., its officers, trustees, agents, employees, representatives, successors and assigns, for all manner of claims, demands, and damages of every kind and nature whatsoever, which the undersigned may now, or in the future, have against CFCC & Associates, Inc., its officers trustees, agents, employees, representatives, successors or assigns on account of any personal injuries, physical or mental condition, known or unknown, to the undersigned and the treatment therefore as a result of, or in any way growing out of, the acts of CFCC & Associates, Inc., its officers, trustees, agents, employees, representatives, successors or assigns, including but not limited to, their negligence or gross negligence, in rendering the services above described or in any way incidental thereto.

Under Kansas law, there is no liability for an injury to or the death of a participant in domestic animal activities resulting from the inherent risks of domestic animal activities pursuant to K.S.A. 60-4001 through 60-4004. You are assuming the risk of participating in this domestic animal activity. Inherent risks of domestic animal activities” means those dangers or conditions which are an integral part of domestic animal activities, including, but not limited to: (1) The propensity of a domestic animal to run, buck, bite, shy, stumble, rear, fall, step on or behave in ways that may result in injury, harm or death to persons on or around them; (2) the unpredictability of a domestic animal’s reaction to such things as sounds, sudden movement and unfamiliar objects, persons or other animals; (3) certain hazards such as surface and subsurface conditions; (4) collisions with other domestic animals or objects; and (5) the potential of a participant to act in a negligent manner that may contribute to injury to the participant or others, such as failing to maintain control over the animal or not acting within such participant’s ability.

Signature of Participant ___________________________ Date __________

Signature of Parent/Guardian ___________________________ Date __________

Signature of Program Personnel ___________________________ Date __________