

EQUINE THERAPY FOR MENTAL HEALTH

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EQUINE THERAPY FOR MENTAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

The problem addressed in this research is the increasing recognition of the complexity of mental disorders, and previous studies have indicated the positive potential of Equine Therapy in addressing various mental conditions. The aim of this research is to deepen the understanding of the mechanisms and benefits of Equine Therapy as an innovative and effective therapy in enhancing individual mental well-being, by detailing previous research results to contribute further to our understanding. The research methodology used in this study is a literature review, involving a critical examination and review of knowledge, ideas, or findings in academically-oriented literature. The results of the study on Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) have proven effective in addressing depression and anxiety in adolescents, as well as having the potential as a valuable addition to the treatment of PTSD in first responders and substance use disorders. Despite positive results in increasing self-confidence, social interaction, and well-being, limited public understanding poses a challenge to the recognition of this therapy. Further research is needed to strengthen empirical evidence and understand the positive impact of human-horse interaction in the context of animal-assisted therapy.

Keyword : Equine, Psychotherapy, Therapy

INTRODUCTION

Equine therapy, or horse therapy, is a therapeutic approach that utilizes horses as a medium to enhance mental health (Lee & Makela, 2015). This therapy has been used for centuries in various cultures around the world and has proven effective in addressing various mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and autism. Previous research has shown that equine therapy can provide mental health benefits. For example, a study conducted by Grimm (2015) shown that equine therapy can help reduce anxiety and depression symptoms in children and adolescents. Another study by Cheak-Zamora et al. (2019) at the University of Missouri found that equine therapy can improve social and communication skills in children with autism.

On the other hand, as awareness of the complexity of mental disorders and the challenges in their treatment increases, attention to therapy involving interactions with animals, especially horses, is growing (Scopa et al., 2019; Ekholm, 2021). Some studies by Johnson et al. (2018); Marchand et al. (2021); Wheeler et al. (2020) indicate that being in the presence of and engaging in activities with horses can have positive effects on various mental conditions, including stress, anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). These studies highlight specific aspects

of the human-horse relationship that can provide psychological benefits, such as increased self-confidence, emotional attachment, and improved interpersonal skills. Furthermore, some studies have also noted neurobiological and hormonal changes associated with participation in equine therapy, providing a scientific basis for the clinically observed positive effects.

Therefore, this research aims to delve deeper into exploring the potential utilization of equine therapy as an innovative and effective form of therapy to enhance individual mental well-being. By detailing the findings of previous research, this study seeks to contribute additional insights to our understanding of the mechanisms and benefits of equine therapy in the context of treating mental disorders.

⁹ **Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP)**

Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is a form of therapy that involves the interaction between humans and horses as an integral part of the psychological healing process (Notgrass & Pettinelli, 2015; John et al., 2016). This approach ¹⁶ is based on the understanding that the relationship between humans and animals, particularly horses, can contribute positively to the development of mental and emotional well-being (Luhmann & Kalitzki, 2018). In the context of EAP, horses are not just tools or therapy objects but are considered therapeutic partners that can facilitate the individual's transformation process (Bennet & Woodman, 2019). Interacting with horses can help clients overcome various emotional challenges such as anxiety, depression, and trauma. Through the presence of horses as creatures sensitive to nonverbal expression and responsive to emotional changes, clients can establish a deep connection with these animals (Vincent & Farkas, 2017). Activities such as feeding, grooming, or direct interaction with horses can create a supportive environment for exploring and understanding the feelings and thought patterns underlying psychological issues (Nelson et al., 2023). Furthermore, physical engagement with horses can also help improve social skills, self-confidence, and stress management abilities. Horses, as non-judgmental beings without bias, create a safe space for clients to speak and explore their experiences without fear of judgment. Thus, Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy ⁵ is not merely an alternative therapy method but an approach that respects the complexity of the relationship between humans and animals, acknowledging the unique potential of horses in supporting the psychological healing process.

Equine Facilitated Psychiatry and Psychology

Psychotherapy with a Horse-Based Approach, or Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP), is a therapeutic method that involves the engagement of humans and horses as an essential part of the psychological healing process (Fennig, 2022; Li & Sánchez-García, 2023). This approach refers to the understanding that the interaction between humans and animals, especially horses, can significantly contribute to the development of mental and emotional well-being for individuals. In the context of EAP, the role of the horse is not merely as a tool or therapy object but is seen as a therapeutic partner with the ability to facilitate the individual's transformation process (Kovács et al., 2020). The interaction between humans and horses has the potential to help clients overcome various emotional challenges, including anxiety, depression, and trauma.

Through the presence of horses as creatures sensitive to nonverbal expressions and responsive to emotional changes, clients can build a deep connection with these animals (Scopa, 2019). Various activities such as feeding, grooming, or direct interaction with the horse can create a supportive environment for exploring and understanding the feelings and thought patterns underlying psychological issues (Kelly et al., 2021). Furthermore, physical engagement with the horse also has the potential to improve social skills, self-confidence, and stress management abilities. Horses, as beings free from prejudice and non-judgmental, create a safe space for clients to speak and explore their experiences without fear of judgment. Thus, Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy is not just an alternative therapy but an approach that respects the complexity of the relationship between humans and animals, acknowledging the unique potential of horses in supporting the psychological healing process.

METHOD

The research methodology adopted in this study is known as literature review, which involves a critical examination and review of knowledge, ideas, or findings in academically-oriented literature. This approach aims to formulate theoretical and methodological contributions to a specific topic, commonly referred to as literature research or literature review. The literature selected for this study is accessible in full-text PDF format and is of scholarly nature, typically found in peer-reviewed journals. The criteria for choosing journals to investigate include articles in both Indonesian and English related to the topics "Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy," "Equine Facilitated Psychiatry and Psychology," and "Mental Health." The narrative method is employed

to synthesize this literature review by categorizing extracted data with similar outcomes based on the research objectives. This process is undertaken to address the research questions effectively. The procedure involves carefully reading and analyzing journals to gain a profound understanding of abstract analyses and full-text content. Following the completion of the journal review, an examination of the information presented in the research will be carried out.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The following table contains information about previous studies.

Researcher	Research Objective	Research Method	Research Findings
Wilson et al. (2017)	Investigate the perspectives of EAP facilitators regarding the biopsychosocial benefits and therapeutic outcomes of EAP for adolescents with depression and/or anxiety.	Qualitative study in Australia involving collaboration between licensed therapists and horse professionals.	Improvement in confidence, self-esteem, and assertiveness in adolescent clients. Reduction in undesirable behaviors. The therapy's effectiveness is attributed to the experiential nature of involving horses.
Nelson et al. (2022)	Evaluate the additional benefits of equine-assisted therapy for first responders experiencing operational-related trauma.	Pilot study with 7 first responders in an 8-week, 90-minute equine-assisted therapy program. Pre- and post-intervention administration of primary outcome measures (anxiety, depression, trauma,	Initial support for symptom reduction, especially for depressive and trauma-related symptoms. Benefits include increased sense of peace, reduced anxiety, mindfulness, and increased trust in self and others. This is the first study to directly examine clinical outcomes of first responders

		inflexibility, and avoidance).	with PTSD participating in equine-assisted therapy, presenting a promising adjunct to care for first responders moving forward.
Manchova et al. (2023)	Evaluate changes in health and quality of life for patients with substance use disorders in the EFPP program.	The study used the Assessment of Quality of Life (AQoL) and the Health of the Nation Outcome Scales (HoNOS).	Significant improvement in three of the four domains of the HoNOS scale and seven of the eight dimensions of the AQoL scale in the experimental group. The HAIS scale significantly increased over time, as well as the patient's mood after each session and in the long-term perspective. EFPP may be one of the successful programs that improve mood and social interactions in substance use disorders.

Note : EAP (Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy), EFPP (Equine Facilitated Psychiatry and Psychology)

All of these studies suggest that therapies involving interaction with horses have the potential to provide psychological and social benefits to individuals, especially in the context of psychiatric and mental health disorders.

Discussion

Research conducted by Wilson et al. (2017) in Victoria and New South Wales, Australia, involved eight therapists with backgrounds in psychology and Equine expertise. They administered Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) to adolescents diagnosed with depression and/or anxiety. The interview results revealed three main themes: the characteristics of EAP, its clinical implications, and its practices and limitations. The involvement of Equines and the experimental aspects were

acknowledged as pivotal factors influencing the therapy's effectiveness. Therapists emphasized the non-judgmental nature of Equines during therapy sessions. Positive outcomes observed in adolescent clients included enhanced self-confidence, self-esteem, assertiveness, and resilience, along with improvements in emotional regulation, self-control, and a reduction in undesirable behaviors. Nevertheless, a lack of public understanding of EAP was identified as a hindrance to the recognition and acceptance of this therapy. With more empirical evidence, EAP could be recognized as a suitable therapeutic intervention for preventing and addressing emotional disorders in adolescents. Conversely, Nelson et al. (2022) offered initial support for symptom reduction, particularly in depression and trauma symptoms. Qualitative responses from participants indicated significant benefits, such as increased feelings of peace, reduced anxiety, self-awareness, and improved self-confidence in oneself and others. This study was the first to directly examine clinical outcomes of Equine-assisted therapy in first responders with PTSD, showing promise as a valuable addition to future treatments. Pilot project results demonstrated a significant decrease in depression and trauma levels in participants after completing the program. Qualitative findings also indicated positive experiences, with participants reporting reduced anxiety and an increased ability to be present in the moment. Self-engagement and connection with others who had similar experiences appeared highly beneficial for first responders.

Manchova et al.'s (2023) research showed positive outcomes in improving mood and social interactions in a group of patients with substance use disorders. Comparisons between initial and final scores in the experimental group indicated significant positive changes in several domains of the HoNOS and AQoL scales. The therapy program effectively increased HAIS scores over time, along with patient mood. Significant improvements were seen in behavioral issues, particularly alcohol and substance abuse, which were the focus of EFPP. These findings support the effectiveness of EFPP in addressing behavioral issues in patients with substance use disorders. Results also showed improvements in symptomatic areas, particularly related to depressive mood and other mental health issues. This study provided in-depth insights into the positive changes experienced by patients, including increased happiness and involvement in independent life, sensory experiences, mental health, self-esteem, and relationships. Patients' positive experiences in the EFPP program included feelings of relaxation, moments of forgetting, and success in achieving goals. Additionally, the study highlighted that the presence of Equines and the EFPP program had a positive impact on human-animal interactions, with increasing HAIS scores over

time. These findings support the need for further research to better understand the therapeutic impact of the human-Equine relationship in the context of animal-assisted therapy.

This studies Equine-assisted therapy for mental health provides a comprehensive overview of its advantages. EAP has proven effective in addressing depression and anxiety in adolescents, while Equine-assisted therapy also shows potential as a beneficial addition in treating PTSD in first responders and addressing behavioral and mood issues in patients with substance use disorders. These findings suggest that human-Equine interactions can create deep, positive experiences, improving mood, enhancing social interactions, and providing the confidence necessary for mental recovery. To understand the effectiveness of this therapy, it is crucial to continue further research with stricter study designs and larger samples to strengthen the empirical evidence.

CONCLUSION

In summary, research on equine therapy for mental health, encompassing Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) and Equine-Facilitated Psychosocial Programs (EFPP), indicates promising outcomes across diverse populations. Studies demonstrate the effectiveness of EAP in addressing depression and anxiety in adolescents, highlighting the non-judgmental aspect of equine interactions and improvements in self-confidence, self-esteem, emotional regulation, and undesired behaviors. Similarly, equine therapy shows potential as an adjunctive treatment for PTSD in first responders, with notable reductions in depression and trauma symptoms post-program. Additionally, EFPP positively impacts mood, social interaction, and substance abuse issues among patients, suggesting enhancements in behavior, mood, and overall well-being. These findings underscore the meaningful and therapeutic benefits of human-equine interactions.

The implications of these studies suggest that equine therapy holds promise as a valuable intervention for mental health challenges in various populations. The observed enhancements in mood, social engagement, and self-confidence signify the potential of equine therapy to complement traditional therapeutic approaches. Furthermore, the positive experiences shared by participants emphasize the significance of integrating human-animal interactions into mental health interventions. However, to fully comprehend and utilize the therapeutic potential of equine therapy, future research should prioritize robust study designs and larger sample sizes to strengthen empirical evidence. Additionally, efforts to raise public awareness and understanding of equine therapy are crucial to bolster its recognition and acceptance within clinical settings. Through

advancing research and fostering greater integration of equine therapy into mental health practices, clinicians and therapists can effectively leverage its benefits to promote overall well-being and recovery in individuals facing mental health challenges.

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