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Karl H. Hoopes

Utah State University Extension

Makenna Osborne

Utah State University Extension

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Ride Utah! Resiliency-Building Horse Rides for Military Personnel and Families

Abstract

To introduce and provide equine-related activities to military personnel and their families, Utah State University Equine Extension created and implemented an effective program called Ride Utah! Equine-related activities have been shown to improve mental health and build strong family relationships in participating individuals. Ride Utah! incorporates campus faculty, county agents, and community volunteers to promote, facilitate, and conduct safe, enjoyable equine trail rides and associated resiliency-building programming. Program evaluation has indicated significant increase in participants' resiliency, and the program can be replicated or adapted for use elsewhere.

Keywords: [veterans](#), [equine activities](#), [resiliency](#), [military families](#)

Karl H. Hoopes
Extension Assistant
Professor
Animal, Dairy, and
Veterinary Sciences

Makenna Osborne
Extension Intern

Utah State University
Extension
Logan, Utah

Introduction

The Army Study to Assess Risk and Resilience in Servicemembers (Ursano et al., 2014) showed that almost one in four U.S. military personnel experience mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Attempts have been made to address these issues; however, research has shown that few service members access available mental health services (Vogt, 2011). Influencing factors for their not using these programs include stigma, social perceptions, the potential for devaluation and discrimination, and assumptions about treatment ineffectiveness (Vogt, 2011). However, recent research also has shown clinically significant benefits from horse-related activities with military personnel and family members (Hatcher et al., 2019; LaFleur, 2015) used to address a variety of psychological issues (Masini, 2010) and relational adjustment issues between couples (Russell-Martin, 2006). Lawmakers recently added equine activities to the list of eligible grant-funded services for veterans in the Veteran Suicide Prevention Bill (Office of U.S. Congressman Andy Barr, 2019). Additionally, involving families in such activities increases positive behavior in youths (Ashurst et al., 2020; Pendry et al., 2013). With the intent of counteracting barriers to treatment, Utah State University Extension professionals developed a program called Ride Utah! to provide participants with an equine-based experience that engages active duty military and veterans and their families in supportive and resiliency-building activities. We are among the campus personnel involved with creating and implementing the program. The components of Ride Utah! are described in this article.

Program Description

The purpose of Ride Utah! is to introduce and promote healing opportunities for members of the military and their families through the human–equine connection, community support, and safe recreational equine activities. Military personnel are encouraged to attend the ride with a guest, who can be a family member. Program objectives of Ride Utah! include providing participants the opportunity to

- engage in physical activity in an outdoor setting,
- explore life lessons via an experiential activity, and
- socialize with members of the military community.

Since its inception in 2016, Ride Utah! has reached over 940 participants, including both military personnel and invited guests. With 20–25 rides occurring each year, this multiple-month program has included over 68 Ride Utah! activities throughout Utah. These activities allow military personnel and their guests to participate in a group trail ride, a meal, and voluntary professional-moderated discussion focused on relationship and resiliency issues. Individuals are invited to participate in as many Ride Utah! events as they can.

Program Development and Implementation

Faculty Planning

Prior to launching the Ride Utah! program, much planning occurred. Campus faculty preparation included

- completing a pilot program,
- determining safety protocols,
- designing horse selection criteria (Osborne et al., 2019),
- producing a detailed program guide (Hoopes et al., 2018), and
- collaborating with county faculty interested in program participation.

Taking the steps of conducting a program pilot, developing safety protocols, and designing horse and tack selection criteria helps ensure the efficiency and safety of such a program. These steps are described in Table 1.

Table 1.
Campus and County Faculty Program Planning Tasks

Planning task	Responsible party	Description of task
Conduct a program pilot.	Campus and county faculty	Many things can happen with equine activities. A pilot test helps participating faculty understand the problems that can occur.
Develop a safety plan.	Campus faculty	The safety plan should include an outline of personnel duties, first aid training, horse and tack selection criteria, personal protective equipment required, ride safety protocols, liability waiver, and photo releases. It is important to involve risk management personnel in this step.
Design horse and tack selection criteria.	Campus faculty	Identifying these criteria upfront ensures that horse selection will be based on factors such as experience, temperament, and physical ability. Qualified individuals must evaluate horses that can perform appropriately in the desired setting and match them with appropriately fitting tack in proper working condition. It is important to document this evaluation.

Prior to an event, county faculty working with campus faculty take event-specific actions such as selecting event coordinators, ride supervisors, and ride locations and arranging for local meals. Together, campus and county faculty also identify local licensed mental health professionals familiar with military issues who are willing to participate in the event and facilitate the group discussion. When facilitators join in the trail ride, they foster an opportunity to build rapport with participants. Table 2 describes the tasks required to organize an event.

Table 2.
Campus and County Faculty Event Planning Tasks

Planning task	Responsible party	Description of task
Select an event coordinator.	Campus and county faculty	The event coordinator manages the whole event. This individual can be county faculty, campus faculty, office staff, or a volunteer. This individual is responsible for communication among those helping and, with input from others, makes final decisions about the event.
Select a ride supervisor.	County faculty	The ride supervisor must be someone familiar with horses and leading trail rides. This individual should be involved in horse and trail selection. On the day of the event, the ride supervisor must inspect the tack on all horses before the ride begins. During the ride, the supervisor has final say on equine safety matters. The event coordinator can also be the ride supervisor.
Select a trail ride location.	County faculty	The ride location must be a beginner-level trail for rides under 2 hr. It is important to complete a preevent ride before taking participants out to make sure the trail is in good condition. Partnerships with local riding groups can be useful for accomplishing this step.
Arrange for a meal.	County faculty	Meals can be purchased or donated. Many local businesses gladly donate to military personnel activities. Meals should be simple and appropriate for outdoor eating.
Involve a mental health professional.	Campus and county faculty	A mental health professional participates in the event to assist with any issues that arise and to lead the group discussion following the ride. We encourage using a mental health professional who is familiar with military life and situations.

Social media, word of mouth, and partnerships with military support groups such as Veterans Affairs, National Guard, and local veteran support groups serve as a platform for advertisement and encouragement to attend Ride Utah! events. Military personnel sign up for the rides free of charge using a computer-based system. Details gathered on the sign-up forms include addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers. This communication with participants prior to the ride familiarizes individuals with horse safety, ride location and time, and recommended personal protective equipment. This communication also allows us to match horses appropriate for a rider's size and experience level. Publication of a detailed schedule at the beginning of the season allows individuals to plan their summer activities around Ride Utah! events. Participants have used Ride Utah! for family outings, dates, team-building exercises, and social networking activities.

Utah State University faculty provide training for ride supervisors, interns, Extension faculty, and volunteers

on equine safety; military etiquette; and proper procedures for PTSD situations, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and first aid. They also identify and select trails around Utah for beginning riders.

Funding

Grants, monetary donations, and in-kind donations provide support for the events. Trailer manufacturers donate trailers, local horse owners donate horses to use, local eating establishments offer meals at discounted rates or no cost, and volunteers contribute time and resources. Table 3 displays volunteer tasks.

Table 3.
Volunteer Duties and Responsibilities

Task	Task explanation
Assist with trail selection.	Volunteers have knowledge of local trails. They can help identify appropriate ride locations, make sure trails are clear and safe, and offer valuable insight about weather conditions.
Assist with horse selection.	Volunteers can assist in horse selection by helping identify local horses appropriate for beginning riders. Although horses must be evaluated by campus and county faculty before the ride, volunteers can assist in identifying and facilitating those evaluation processes.
Assist with horse transportation.	Trailering horses to the ride location is a substantial task. Local volunteers familiar with equine transportation can be a significant help.
Assist with saddling horses.	Volunteers can help with saddling the horses on the day of the event. However, the ride supervisor must inspect all tack on horses before mounting the participants.
Assist with safety on the ride.	Volunteers familiar with horse rides and safety can be asked to help on the rides. Although many volunteers may want to help, it is important not to involve too many. The focus of the ride is the military personnel, not the volunteers. Also, volunteers not familiar with horse trail rides can be a distraction for participants and faculty.
Assist with the meal.	Volunteers can donate meals and/or assist by providing meal transportation and setting up the meal site.

Riding Day

Riding day generates excitement. Punctuality when working with military personnel proves vital. Same-day preparation for the rides includes

- evaluating horses and tack,
- transporting horses to the ride site,
- arranging meals,
- communicating with participants,
- completing registration forms and liability and photo releases, and

- offering helmets to riders and encouraging riders to use them.

Prior to participants' mounting the horses, an intern provides a brief presentation on horse riding basics. Riders then mount, and the trail ride commences. The rides last 1–2 hr depending on participants' abilities and determinations made by the ride supervisor. Following the ride, participants enjoy an authentic Western meal. The group discussion usually happens during or after the meal, with the intent being to expand the benefit of the ride (experiential component) to a participant's everyday life. The discussion facilitates the group's recognition of principles and constructs that occurred during the ride (i.e., trusting the horse) and applying them to one's life situation.

Evaluation and Results

Program evaluation has consisted of administering paired surveys before and after a ride. We developed the survey from the Conner-Davidson Resilience Scale (Davidson & Conner, 2018) used to evaluate military personnel resiliency, or the ability to cope with stressors in life. Results have indicated a statistically significant increase in resiliency scores because of the trail rides. Table 4 displays the survey results for 2016–2019. Personal communications from participants and volunteers also have indicated program success. Table 5 contains direct quotes from participants. Many participants have returned as repeat riders.

Table 4.
Program Evaluation Conner-Davidson Resilience Scale Scores

Evaluation variable	Value
Preride mean score (0–40)	30.4
Postride mean score (0–40)	34.1
Average difference between preride and postride scores	3.7
Two-tailed <i>t</i> -test <i>p</i> value	.000004
<i>Note.</i> <i>n</i> = 90.	

Table 5.
Quotes from Participants

Participant	Quote
Tim Fagan, U.S. military veteran	"I would like to thank Utah State University and its equine program for recognizing military members especially those affected by combat by affording them this opportunity. Please continue to do what you do in serving my fellow veterans as it is these types of events that are lifesaving for the many combat veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress. The opportunity to have camaraderie with fellow veterans to destress and rehabilitate can be interventional in preventing the high rate of suicide among combat veterans. As you may know the statistics of suicide are alarming! I venture to say that experiences like this very well may save a life."

Daniel Neville, U.S. National Guard and military family therapist "Looking in the future I cannot tell you how vital a program like this will be. Your trail rides allow for direct relationships and hands on experience. Far from the comfort of cruise control and cooled leather seats, we rely on ourselves and the trust we have developed with the horse. In that moment we are free from past doubts and future anxieties. We are fully in the present. Horseback riding is one of those memories that have staying power. Staying power means long lasting happiness. You and Ride Utah! are scratching the surface of something that will pay huge dividends in the lives of Veterans and their families."

Conclusion

Equine-related activities such as Ride Utah! can provide much needed help to military personnel and families. When planned and executed correctly, these activities are safe, enjoyable, and effective. Military personnel participation in these activities is exciting and rewarding to everyone involved. For a more detailed description of the program, a detailed program guide for Ride Utah! can be found at https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/extension_curall/1861.

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Karl Hoopes. Email: karl.hoopes@usu.edu

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