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Exploring Occupational Therapy's Role in Equine-Assisted Therapy with Veterans

Collin Cooper; Becki Cohill, OTD, OTR/L; Susan MacDermott, OTD, OTR/L; Karen Park, OTD, OTR/L

BACKGROUND

Equine-assisted therapy (EAT) is treatment that incorporates activities with a horse and the equine environment to reach rehabilitative goals specific to the client's needs and the medical professional's standards of practice (Meregillano, 2004; Path Int, 2021). There are many methods of using a horse in treatment. Therapeutic riding is component of EAT along with horsemanship, groundwork, horse care, and stable management.. Hippotherapy is a healthcare professional (OT, PT, SLP) treatment tool using the horse's movement to facilitate change (Meregillano, 2004). EAGALA is psychotherapy based with no activities occurring on horseback. Some research has demonstrated veterans who work with horses show improvement in quality of life and lower PTSD symptoms which can lead to positive changes in self-care, productivity, and leisure (Johnson et al., 2018; Lanning & Krenek, 2013; Olenick et al., 2018).

PROBLEM

There is a gap in the research related to OTs role in EAT with the veteran population. Using EAT, OTs can individualize treatment sessions to provide benefits in physical, mental, and emotional aspects of veteran lives.

PURPOSE

Using the Model of Human Occupation and Person-Environment-Occupation Model to determine OT's role in EAT with veterans to increase occupational engagement in a safe and supportive equine environment which will allow the veteran to heal.

Outcome Objectives

Gain further knowledge to advocate for the role of OT in EAT with veterans.

METHODS

Phase 1: Scoping Literature Review

- 12 articles were reviewed.
- OTPF used as a guide to determine an impact on occupational performance in veterans who participate in EAT.
- Search Terms were 'equine assisted therapy' and 'veterans.' Related terms were acceptable.
- Inclusion Criteria
 - English, peer-reviewed, focused on veterans, utilized EAT, mention of an impact on occupation using the OTPF as a guide.

Phase 2: Mixed Methods Study

- IRB Approved mixed methods study.
- Participant recruitment from 13 Facebook groups and 33 therapeutic riding facilities via approved recruitment script.
- 11 survey responses: 9 OTs, 1 veteran, and 1 therapeutic riding staff member.
- Coding and thematic analysis performed.

Phase 3: Informal Interviews

- Needs assessment completed through informal interviews with four stakeholders working with horses which lasted between 45 -90 minutes.
- Interview Participants
 - 1 OT who utilizes hippotherapy.
 - 2 therapeutic riding facility owners.
 - 1 veteran and founder of a retreat center.

RESULTS AND THEMES

Results found that veteran EAT participants experience a positive changes in occupational performance. The results also found that there are many roles for an OT within EAT and barriers to OT practice.

THEMES	DESCRIPTION OF THEMES		
Impact on Occupational Performance	Main areas found to be positively impacted in the 3 phases of data collection:		
	<i>Social Participation</i>	<i>Environmental Factors</i>	<i>Activities of Daily Living</i>
	<i>Well-Being</i>	<i>Personal Factors</i>	<i>Work</i>
	<i>Health Management</i>	<i>Leisure Participation</i>	<i>Sleep</i>
Role of Occupational Therapists	OT Veteran specific treatment Motor, sensory, cognitive development	Advocate Grant writing, fundraising, to legislation for inclusivity	
	Consultant Program assessment, staff education Activity modification	Horse Trainer Train horses for treatment Ensure horses are safe	
Barriers to Practice	Funding Veteran programs operate as non-profit organizations Limited funds and resources to pay for OT services.	Reimbursement Veteran programs are often free and not considered medical treatment at this time.	Organization Conflicts The American Hippotherapy Association and PATH Int's mission and vision do not align causing a divide.

DISSEMINATION

Fieldwork Level 1 Proposal

Proposal for Cornerstone Therapeutic Riding Center in Escondido to increase exposure to equine environment while allowing future practitioners the opportunity to work with veterans and horses while enrolled in Clinical Applications in OT for Adulthood or Psychosocial and Community Settings.

Infographic and Adobe Spark Website

Infographic flyer with link to website highlighting the occupational impact of participation in EAT, the role of OT, barriers to practice, and recommendations for future research.

DISCUSSION

- Evidence of an impact on occupational engagement and performance in veterans which was supported by data found in the 3 phases of this project.
- OT has a role in EAT, however it is complicated due to funding and reimbursement challenges.

Limitations to this Project:

- Relevant studies may have been missed.
- Small sample size is not generalizable to the veteran population or field of OT.
- Impact of COVID-19 pandemic.

Implications for Practice:

- Further research on the impact of occupations in an equine environment.
- Advocating to the AHA to establish AHA veteran programming.
- Advocating to insurance companies so services utilizing equines can become reimbursable.
- Exposing future practitioners to using horses while in an academic setting.

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References