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Benefits of Equine Therapy Within Occupational Therapy

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Benefits of Equine Therapy Within Occupational Therapy

EN100 Writing and Language

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The main goal of occupational therapy is to help the patient gain confidence in their ability to function and perform life skills outside of their therapist (Abu Tariah et al, 2020, p.1). By incorporating horses during therapy sessions, it can assist in strengthening the therapist/patient relationship and provide more productive therapy sessions, which would ultimately improve the patient's ability to learn, grow, and to continue functioning once therapy is completed. The use of equine therapy in occupational therapy is beneficial to patients diagnosed with different types of neurological and psychological disorders.

Equine therapy is a specific branch of occupational therapy and has multiple purposes when implemented into occupational therapy programs. Equine therapy is the implementation of horses into occupational therapy sessions. It was specifically designed to help improve people's social skills, improve their motor skills, and work on their ability to regulate their emotions (DiMarco et al., 2015). Kids and adults with disabilities such as attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have difficulty regulating their emotions, coping, and understanding their feelings, comprehending, and participating in social activities with other people, and tend to have a more difficult time developing motor skills and body safety (Roux, 2020, p.11). Horses assist in teaching patients how to remain safe by bringing awareness for the need to control their own body movements as well as teaching them how to remain safe while with the horse. Having animals involved in therapy can also improve patients' ability to function outside of the therapist's care. This includes their education, character, crucial life skills and "...problem-solving and critical thinking skills" (Wood et al., 2021, p.92). Occupational therapy is not a lifelong treatment which is why it is crucial to optimize the patient's ability to function outside of their therapist and therapy sessions.

Horses used in occupational therapy have been shown to improve mental and physical health in people with disabilities and in the patient's communication and understanding with their therapist. This helps to decrease anxiety and increase positive reflection on their life (Pruskowski et al., 2020, p. 296). Animals tend to be a very calming and loving presence, allowing patients to feel more comfortable during their time with their therapist; keeping them motivated to improve their skills and utilize time during therapy sessions (Gilboa & Helmer, 2020, p. 244). Neurological and psychological diagnosis can cause separation from peers, parents, therapists and in the field of work. There can be loss of communication and understanding causing the patient to become easily frustrated and irritable during simple tasks in their regular life. Therefore, it's important for the patient to continue applying learned lessons into their life.

Implementing horses into therapy sessions can improve patients' life skills. For patients that have been diagnosed with ADD and ADHD, working with horses enables them to be mainly in charge of the horse while riding (Gilboa & Helmer, 2020, p. 243). This gives the patient a sense of responsibility for the horse and the tasks given by the therapist. The responsibility and need to multitask while on the horse teach skills crucial to everyday life such as communicating, emotional regulation, focus, and patience. These therapy sessions are in a livelier environment (Gilboa & Helmer, 2020, p. 244), outside in the fresh air with a horse that is seen by the patient as a friend instead of one on one indoors with a therapist. This improves patients' ability and motivation to utilize the skills they have learned outside of the therapist; this increases their sociability and ability to reach their goals. It also decreases "irritability and hyperactivity" (Peters

et al., 2022, p. 4116). Patients better appreciate and enjoy their therapy sessions when they have fun which translates to the ability to better implement these skills.

People with ADD and ADHD struggle mainly with focusing (Gilboa & Helmer, 2020, p. 239); equine therapy is a good resource to work on this life skill. The application of lessons they have learned in therapy such as focusing is essential to patients' success. When the patient is working with the horse during their session their focus is streamlined due to the horse trotting. Patients not only enjoy it, but it also strengthens their focus due to stimulation to "the rider's vestibular and proprioceptive systems" (Roux, 2020, p.11), which improves the child's goal attainment, decreases irritability and hyperactivity, and increases their ability to communicate feelings and social abilities (Peters et al., 2020, p. 4116). The patient's senses are stimulated while riding the horse, enabling their focus on the horse, and maintaining control, while also aiding them to better communicate and focus on their therapists' instructions.

During equine therapy, patients diagnosed with ADD and ADHD's focus is also improved by working both on and off the horse, which aids in the child's ability to focus and remain attentive during the length of the session (Gilboa & Helmer, 2020, p. 244). This forces the patient to pay attention to the therapist's direction to comprehend the tasks they are expected to complete. While mounted on the horse, the patient receives positive feedback immediately due to the horse's reactions, (Gilboa & Helmer, 2020, p. 244). This improves their confidence, producing a higher level of engagement which in turn results in better interaction between the patient and the therapist. They are also able to receive instant negative feedback (Gilboa & Helmer, 2020, p. 244), this allows them to correct their mistakes faster and more efficiently.

When negative feedback comes from a horse, which the patient perceives as more of a friend rather than an authoritative figure such as a therapist, it allows for constructive criticism to be taken with a better attitude and more calmly.

Equine therapy also aids in the decrease of patient diagnosed with ADD and ADHD's anxiety during therapy (McKissock et al., 2022, p. 46); this helps strengthen the patient/therapist relationship. Activities during the session will be completed with more precision because decreased anxiety can help with focus on therapist instructions as well as increased patience. The ability to complete activities with more precision results in a steadier increase of reaching a patient's personal goals. This reinforces the therapist's ability to help the patient achieve those goals providing more quality care. It also increases the productivity of the therapy sessions as well as the number of goals reached, and skills improved (Peters et al., 2022, p. 4122). Patients' main motivation during therapy is reaching goals and seeing progress. As a therapist, the ability to observe patients' achievements at an accelerated pace increases their motivation to help the patient and provide quality care. When both parties see improvement in patients' ability and skills, there is more excitement for upcoming sessions, further strengthening the relationship between the patient and the therapist.

Equine therapy also assists patients with ADD and ADHD in both physical and personal behavioral regulation (Gilboa & Helmer, 2020, p. 244). Behavioral regulation takes place in a part of the brain called the limbic system that includes the hippocampus, which oversees the working memory, and amygdala, in charge of emotional processing (McDonald & White, 2013, p. 836). The hippocampus causes kids with ADHD and ADD to struggle focusing and have difficulty remembering. One emotion will become a focal point in the hippocampus's working

memory due to the brain not being able to shift its focus to anything else (White et al., 2013, p. 817). This causes the emotion to intensify, and the child will lash out in either a negative or positive way. When a patient's emotional state is supported by a horse, it regulates behavior, emotion, and focus by allowing them to understand what they are feeling and control themselves before lashing out or creating a scene. The ability to understand and keep emotions under control is needed outside of therapy as a crucial life skill.

Equine therapy has also been proven to assist people diagnosed with ASD, specifically in improving sensory issues. ASD's symptoms tend to show in early childhood, and it is known to cause diagnosed patients' difficulty in social settings such as conversation. It also causes "restricted and repetitive interest" (Wergeland, 2022, p. 2). Many patients with ASD struggle adjusting to new environments because of new sensory stimuli. Foreign stimuli cause sensory overload which leads to anxiety. In an experiment, patients that worked with horses showed an improvement in their visual, auditory, touch, taste, tolerance, and movement (Roux, 2020, p. 11).

Equine therapy allows patients with ASD a different setting and tasks in which their symptoms and condition can start to improve. Grooming the horses is a very popular tactic used with patients that have diagnosed ASD to improve sensory problems while making the patient feel safe (Roux, 2020, p. 12). As the patient grooms the horse, they take in multiple sensory stimuli, like the texture of the brush and the horse's hair, the feel of the horse's breathing, and the surrounding smells, sounds, and sights. The horse provides a point of focus for the patient, forcing them to pay attention to cues like pleasure or discomfort from the horse. Riding also helps to improve the intake of sensory stimuli for the patient, which will also help to decrease anxiety (McKissock et al., 2022, p. 46).

Horses have also been shown to improve mobility and body control in patients with ASD, which increases patient safety. The proprioceptive senses are activated while riding the horse, where the senses can then communicate to muscles and joints allowing for the right amount of feedback and muscle resistance while riding the horse (Roux, 2020, p. 13). Awareness of one's own body allows the patient to maintain control and composure. It also helps to improve patients' posture, balance, and ability to walk (Lavín-Pérez et al., 2022, p. 11). Improving these can help decrease the probability of injury due to falling as well as pain that can be caused by improper posture in the back and neck such as scoliosis, a hunched back, and chronic neck pain.

Furthermore, horses also helped kids with ASD progress faster in learning skills such as the ability to communicate clearly. The patient's having to tell the horse to "go" helps to reinforce the importance of communicating with others (Peters et al., 2022, p. 4115). In addition, the horses' movements while patients are mounted allows the patients to practice giving and taking orders from their therapist while following the horse's cues. While on the horse, they must develop the ability to practice taking turns and remaining calm (Peters et al., 2022, p. 4117). The calmer a patient remains during the therapy session, the more productive the session can be and the safer it is for both the patient and the therapist. In a case study done by Peters et al. (2022), a mother attended her son's therapy session where she stated that her son not only loved being on the horse but also left the session calmer than before (p. 4124). The patient's ability to remain calmer in everyday life helps them to adjust to new situations. In addition, animals are seen as "catalysts for social interactions" (Futera et al., 2022, p. 487). For example, most people walking their dog have people asking to pet it. This helps to jump start communication and social interaction. Using the horse to start social interactions with patients diagnosed with ASD makes

it easier for the patient to continue starting conversation in their life outside of therapy. It is important for a patient to communicate and interact with those around to live a normal functioning life. Working with horses increases patients with ASD's ability to maintain the skills they learned after therapy is completed.

In addition, the use of equine therapy has been shown to improve therapist/patient relations and improve mood, motivation, and confidence of children diagnosed with ASD (Peters et al., 2022, p. 4116). When a patient lacks interest in therapy sessions, they go through the motions or don't attempt to complete activities properly which can cause setbacks in their therapy and doesn't improve the ability for the patient to function outside of their therapist. As stated above, since the horse is viewed as a friend, the patient has more motivation to complete the tasks properly. The more the patient does the task, the more they improve, which will increase their confidence in their own abilities and willingness to complete the tasks on their own (Peters et al., 2022, p. 4125). The more they do the tasks and see improvement, the more confident they will grow in their interpersonal skills and the calmer they will be around others. Patients can take in new information when they have a calmer attitude, whereas they would have been too distracted and uninterested before the time with the horse (Peters et al., 2022, p. 4125). With a better mood comes easier flowing therapy sessions and more impactful conversations between the therapist and patient, which will further improve patients' willingness to participate and continue their therapy sessions.

The patient's ability to empathize with others will also improve when horses are used in occupational therapy. People with ASD struggle understanding social cues and people's emotions and feelings (Malcolm et al., 2018, p. 222). However, people with ASD can connect

easily with animals as they show no judgment. It is likely that during the therapy session, the patient will interact more with the horse than they will the therapist or other people and that the patients showed more empathy while riding the horse (Malcolm et al., 2018, p. 226). When patients can form a relationship with the horse, they are able to empathize with the horse and its feelings. The patient cares for the horse, which is an emotion that can promote empathy. People empathize with the ones they care about, so having a relationship with the horse helps to teach the patient with ASD what empathy is and its importance.

In addition to equine therapy having positive impacts on patients diagnosed with ADD, ADHD, and ASD, it also helps to improve symptoms that come with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD develops when a traumatic event occurs in one's life and becomes a stressor which includes symptoms of "intrusive event-related thoughts, event-related avoidance, negative changes in cognitions and mood, and trauma-related arousal & reactivity" (Marshall et al., 2022, p.1). A person with PTSD will have subconscious thoughts about their trauma making it hard for them to form relationships, participate in social activities, cause low self-image and lack of focus and memory along with changes in mood. However, when they interact with horses in their therapy sessions, their ability to cope with the events in their life, relationships, self-esteem, and feeling like they belonged improved (Shelef et al., 2019, p. 398). The patient can build a relationship with the horse, which then reteaches them how to build relationships with people.

Equine therapy can also help patients with PTSD build trust and feelings of safety in their life. Being with the horse every day, training with it and trusting it to keep them safe while they ride builds this sense of trust. One patient expressed that he was able to close his eyes next to the

horse and that he hadn't felt that type of trust in others for a long time (Shelef et al., 2019, p. 398). Without trust life becomes secluded and lonely with constant suspicion of those around. Trust is essential in proper communication in the workplace and relationships. Another part of PTSD are feelings of loss of control in one's own life. When a patient can work with a horse, they are in control of the horse's movements and directions, which gives them a sense of control back in their life (Shelef et al., 2019, p. 399). This is important because for a patient to function normally outside of therapy they need to feel some semblance of control of their own life.

Finally, equine therapy is used to assist patients with moderate to severe dementia. Dementia is caused by a degenerative condition in the brain that causes memory loss and can even lead to paranoia and aggression (Morimoto, 2022, p. 749). People with dementia tend to forget things easily, either long or short term, and struggle to understand where they are and who the people surrounding them are. Working with horses while in therapy was shown to improve patients' ability to communicate and socialize and increased their laughter, ability to remember, and willingness to participate in therapist given activities (Lim and Sheth, 2021, p.1). By working with horses to help increase patients' recall, it will help improve their daily living and social communication. Increasing laughter helps elevate daily mood, making working with the patient easier, and the more easily patients can communicate with those around them, the more likely it is to increase their life satisfaction. Equine assisted occupational therapy was shown to have improved both patients and their therapist's mood and wellbeing in their overall life (Lim and Sheth, 2021, p.1). Improving mood makes it easier to collaborate, leading to more quality care given to reach the goal of patients functioning outside of therapist care.

Equine therapy has numerous positive outcomes for people who need therapy, especially those diagnosed with ADD, ADHD, ASD, PTSD, and dementia. The positives of working with a horse include the increased ability to focus which results in easier completion of tasks, control behavior, regulate emotion, working together, build life skills such as communication, but most importantly leaves the best chance of patients carrying lessons they have learned in therapy to their real life outside of their sessions and therapist. With that being the ultimate goal, there is no question equine therapy needs to be more available to those who need it. However, many people cannot get equine therapy due to lack of insurance and lack of horses in their location, meaning if a patient wants or needs this type of therapy, they either can't get it or can't afford it. There needs to be a change so that equine therapy in occupational therapy can be more available to those around the world. This would help to improve the lives of people diagnosed with neurological and psychological disorders.

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