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HONORS PROJECT

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Abstract

Equine-Assisted Therapy is a type of psychotherapy that uses horses to connect to people (Klontz, Bivens, Leinart, & Klontz, 2007). Clients of all ages with a variety of different reasons for seeking out this type of treatment have benefitted in many ways, including learning to trust and to be confident. A second therapeutic modality, mindfulness, is often a type of meditation based on focusing fully on the present moment (Niemiec, 2012). Researchers consider the term “mindfulness” to be synonymous with “awareness (Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995).” It can also be a “state of being” and it has been found be psychologically beneficial as the practice of mindfulness has shown to assist in the regulation of an individual’s feelings and can help to control his or her desires and wants. While these therapies have been studied separately, future research should consider if there is a positive correlation between the two.
Equine-Assisted Therapy and Mindfulness: A Potential Correlation

Today, many researchers are finding unique ways to help people and they are looking into various fields. In Psychology, there is a wide variety of therapeutic modalities that aim to assist clients with their differing psychological needs, such as art therapy, where the clients actually create art to express their emotions and get in touch with past experiences that they may not know how to express with words (Spiegel, Malchiodi, Backos, & Collie, 2006). Similarly, there are two other, unique types of therapeutic intervention that are becoming more well-known every day: Equine-Assisted Therapy and mindfulness. Equine-Assisted Therapy is a type of psychotherapy that uses horses to connect to people (Klontz, Bivens, Leinart, & Klontz, 2007). Clients of all ages with a variety of different reasons for seeking out this type of treatment have benefitted in many ways, including learning to trust and to be confident. The other modality, mindfulness, is often a type of meditation based on focusing fully on the present moment (Niemiec, 2012). Researchers consider the term “mindfulness” to be synonymous with “awareness (Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995).” It can also be a “state of being” and it has been found be psychologically beneficial as the practice of mindfulness has shown to assist in the regulation of an individual’s feelings and can help to control his or her desires and wants. Mindfulness has been commonly used in Buddhism as a way to reach enlightenment, but has been increasingly utilized in psychological practices to aid clients. Therapists have made use of this treatment with clients who have been diagnosed with anxiety disorders (Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995). While the two practices of Equine-Assisted Therapy and mindfulness are seemingly very different, it should be considered that there may be a positive correlation between the two. Future researchers should study Equine-Assisted Therapy with mindfulness to determine the extent, if any, of a possible relationship.
Equine-Assisted Therapy can provide a range of benefits. People of all different ages with completely different reasons for participating have learned confidence, as well as task-oriented goal setting, and have even received physical health benefits through the movement of the horse (Froeschle, 2009; Glazer, Clark, & Stein, 2004; Klontz, Bivens, Leinhart, & Klontz, 2007). Many times, this type of therapy is used to teach the clients trust. They must learn to rely on the horse, as well as themselves. They have to trust that the therapist is there to help them and the tasks are being set for a reason. They also have to trust that the horse is there to help them and the horse must feel safe and comfortable with the client in order to perform well during each session. Equine-Assisted Therapy shows the clients the value of their ideas and, through the tasks set by the therapist, can help them problem solve.

Equine-Assisted Therapy is a very flexible form of treatment. It helps a broad range of people with varied mental and physical needs. Froeschle observed the Equine-Assisted Therapy treatment can be used to aid women that have experienced domestic violence and abuse in the past (2009). The researcher wanted to see if equine therapy helped women build the confidence that is essential to complete career-related goals. Each client participated in two sessions which involved a therapist, a horse, and the horse trainer. During the first session, the therapist and client stood on one side of a fence and the horse and horse trainer stood on the other. Each party was introduced and this allowed the client to adapt to the idea of interacting with the horse. It also provided time for everyone to become acquainted and to allow the client an opportunity to become more comfortable with the prospect of her upcoming treatment. Additionally, the session helped the client to express her fears and what she was looking forward to achieving in the therapy.
The second session was different because the client got to have a more hands-on experience (Froeschle, 2009). She groomed the horse and then was taken to a round pen and given directions to maneuver the horse from one side of the pen to the other using creative thinking. There were obstacles that were placed in the work area, such as large feed buckets, and even baby strollers that the client had to avoid. The only rule was that the client could not touch the horse. Other than that, the client was able to determine her own strategy to accomplish her task. This activity helped the client realize the value of her opinion and ideas. Many of the Equine-Assisted Therapies available are similar to this one. They set specific goals for the participants and use them to achieve a certain outcome. Equine-Assisted Therapy is a creative way of helping clients to learn and grow, while also teaching them about horses and getting them to try new things. It is also a very flexible form of treatment that can be adapted to benefit the client.

In a second example of this therapy’s flexibility, Glazer, Clark, and Stein created a qualitative study that set out to determine if Equine-Assisted Therapy could assist children who were grieving (2004). Five children (ages 4-14) who were enrolled in a support group program were selected to participate in a six week summer riding program. One parent accompanied their child at each session and was sometimes asked to participate. There was also a volunteer assigned to each child for the duration of the program. Researchers wanted to know if Equine-Assisted Therapy encouraged grieving and personal development.

At the end of the summer riding program, the children, parents, volunteers, and therapist reported that this program was successful at helping with the grieving process. Overall, the experience was deemed to be very positive and that the children had improved their confidence, trust, and communication skills. They also saw signs of better communication about the deceased
and noticed improvements in the attitudes of the children during the program. One other benefit is that the children became very proud of the knowledge that they had gained with the horses and saw their participation in the program to be an achievement.

Equine-Assisted Therapy has proven to be a very positive, effective form of treatment. Klontz, Bivens, Leinart, & Klontz created a quantitative study to measure the effectiveness of Equine-Assisted Therapy (2007). Horses were used to create a unique experience for 31 (nine men and twenty two women) people who participated in all parts of the study. The program provided each client with 28 hours of group riding therapy (eight participants per group). Participants were asked to take a pretest, posttest, and a six-month follow-up survey. Ages ranged from 23-70 with a mean age of around 45.

The researchers used the Brief Symptom Inventory and Personal Orientation Inventory scales to determine an overall estimate of distress and self-actualization scores. After the therapy was completed, participants experienced an increase in psychological well-being and a decrease in overall levels of distress. Six months after the treatment, participants still had stable levels of distress and psychological well-being. Participants reported that they were able to live more fully in the present and were not bothered by the past. The fact that participants did not have any specific ailments or disorders really sets this research apart. There is not a lot of quantitative data on Equine-Assisted Therapy, and this study found that in groups of diverse people with differing distress and self-actualization score, the treatment significantly reduced stress and improved psychological well-being. Also, the findings connected Equine-Assisted Therapy with various aspects mindfulness, or the ability to live in the here-and-now.
Mindfulness has been linked to psychological well-being (Niemiec, 2012). Niemiec refers to mindfulness as being able to self-regulate one’s feelings and actions and states that this can be practiced through meditation. One benefit that is described is that people who practice this are able to see their own psychological states as fluid and changing. Mindfulness meditation has also been found to help many physical and psychological disorders such as chronic pain, anxiety, eating disorders, depression, and substance abuse. This meditation focuses on removing oneself from the experiences of the past or thoughts of the future and placing oneself in the present. Niemiec argues that character strengths, such as friendliness, can be influenced by the practice of mindfulness.

Brown also studied mindfulness and found that this practice can be beneficial in many ways (2003). It can stop automatic thoughts, bad behaviors, and habits. If an individual is aware of the present situations, he or she can learn to regulate themselves and their behaviors by thinking through their actions and wants and choosing what is best to do in that moment. People who are mindful do not think toward the past or the future. They are aware of what is around them, how they are feeling, and what they are doing in the present. Mindfulness can also play a role in happiness because it leads to clarity of the present moment and an individual could experience reality more clearly.

Brown suggests that the ability to pay attention and be aware of their circumstances can vary from person to person. Additionally, there are different variations of mindfulness that can be seen in each person. Brown looked at five different studies conducted by other researchers to see if their results proved that mindfulness and a person’s well-being are related. Evidence was provided to show that mindfulness is associated with a heightened sense of self-knowledge,
which can help with self-regulation. Additionally, the state of mindfulness was thought to help with mental health overall.

In a study done by Miller, Fletcher, and Kabat-Zinn, 22 people who were diagnosed with anxiety disorders participated in an eight-week, outpatient intervention with a focus on mindfulness (1995). Trained therapists taught the clients mindfulness-meditation techniques in order to relieve their stress. The focused on their lives at that moment and were able to become more aware of their surroundings and the events that were taking place currently. At the end of the eight weeks, the participants showed improvements in the objective symptoms of stress and anxiety. These researchers then followed up with 18 of the original 22 clients three years later. They determined that even after being away from the mindfulness-meditation therapy for three years, the clients still showed improvements in their anxiety and stress levels and that the mindfulness-meditation techniques were still being utilized. This research demonstrates the benefits of the mindfulness techniques that can help people attain awareness of the present moment and can decrease stress and anxiety.

While researchers have studied both Equine Assisted Therapy and Mindfulness in the past, there have been few, if any, studies that have directly examined how the two are associated. Future research could examine Equine-Assisted Therapy in depth and determine if this type of therapy helps to facilitate mindfulness in an individual. Results of these studies could be limited by a few different factors relating to Equine-Assisted Therapy and Mindfulness. One of these factors that could affect this research is that each session of Equine-Assisted Therapy could be different based on the needs and desires of the client. Additionally, Equine-Assisted Therapy is not a uniform practice. The top-rated practices, trainers, and horses must be certified by organizations like the Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association (eagalla.org), but can
vary because each trainer, therapist, horse, and barn facility is different. This means that clients may not receive the same type of treatment and that could affect their level of mindfulness. Also, people experience mindfulness differently, and some even find it difficult to reach a state of mindfulness at all. Researchers may also define the concept of mindfulness differently. This all could play a role in the possible correlation of Equine-Assisted Therapy and mindfulness.

While there are limitations to the suggested future research, benefits must be considered as well. If there is a correlation between Equine-Assisted Therapy and mindfulness, then researchers and practitioners in both fields will be able to extend their knowledge base. Equine-Assisted Therapists would be able to put more mindfulness-achieving techniques into their sessions in order to help clients to fully experience the moment and their therapy. These techniques could also transfer to everyday life when horses may not be involved if research does prove that there is a correlation. Finally, these subfields have not been directly associated, which could open the doors to future research, and could even inspire research on similar topics.
Works Cited


