

Effects of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy on Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms in Youth

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Abstract

Equine-assisted therapy has become an increasingly popular complementary mental health treatment approach, but there is limited empirical research assessing the effectiveness of this practice. In particular, equine-facilitated psychotherapy has many potential benefits for the treatment of trauma in youth. The purpose of the proposed study was to investigate changes in levels of post-traumatic stress symptomatology and levels of the human-animal bond in children and adolescents ages 10–18 over the course of a 10-week equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) intervention. Youth in the treatment group ($n = 36$) participated in 10 weekly two hour EFP sessions, and were compared on changes in post-traumatic stress symptoms with a control group of participants ($n = 32$) who continued to receive the already existing traditional therapeutic services provided by their treatment facility or outpatient therapist. Findings suggested a significant decrease in post-traumatic stress symptoms across the intervention for both the treatment and control group, but the treatment group did not decrease significantly more than the control group. These findings suggest that EFP may be an effective additional treatment modality for post-traumatic stress symptoms, but there was no evidence from this initial study that EFP was significantly more effective than traditional office-based therapy. Further research and discussion of the relative benefits of EFP compared to traditional treatment modalities is warranted.