

What about the welfare of the horse in EAP work? Does it harm horses?

EAGALA has as *the* top priority in its Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) model the emotional and physical well being and safety of all involved in EAP sessions - clients, horses and the human therapeutic team. It is central in the training programme, the code of ethics, the team approach and the on-going good practice of the many professionals in the field over many years. The welfare of the horses in EAP work is paramount.

In all of the different arenas of the human / horse working relationship - recreation, competition, sport, breeding, therapy - there is the potential for humans to cause harm to horses, knowingly or otherwise. It is the responsibility of all who have horses and work with them to place their welfare as the top priority in the knowledge that all activity with horses and horse management of any form by humans is contra to their natural way of living. It is our privilege to be with them - not theirs to be with us. Respect for this is central to the EAGALA approach.

Any innovative approach involving horses and people working together will attract some negative criticism, mostly born of a lack of experience of the approach and the challenges it might present to existing understanding of the horse human relationship. In response, EAGALA encourages open debate on such issues as the welfare of the horse in EAP sessions as a part of its ethical and professional mission.

Anecdotal evidence from the EAGALA membership and through the newsletter strongly supports the view that when horses are involved in EAP sessions using the EAGALA ethical approach they actually show signs of better health and psychological well being over time - even enjoying sessions!. Why? Because at the heart of EAP and the EAGALA approach is the belief that working with horses on the ground, working with horses at liberty and working with horses in social groups allows the horse to get closer to 'being a horse' and meeting people on more equal terms. This gives horses choices in ways that they are denied in other horse activity with humans. There is also evidence that EAP work adds variety to a horse's experience with people and this has resulted in unexpected improvement in other arenas of their life in terms of mental health and performance.

While anecdotal evidence points to horses involved in EAP sessions actually benefiting from the experience and being less stressed than in ridden activities, there is a need for more rigorous evidence and research to support such claims. The press release below highlights the research work of Dr. Marie Suthers-McCabe. In summary she found from her work that "most therapy horses did benefit and were actually less stressed after their sessions." While the focus of the study was on ridden therapy horses, it is even more likely, in her view, horses used in EAP sessions where riding is not involved will be even less stressed (discussion at conference in Glasgow, October 2004). She intends to investigate this at a future point.

David Tidmarsh
EAGALA Europe

Press release by the American Veterinary Medical Association

Horses Helping Humanity Help Themselves

Schaumburg, Ill

— Sitting atop a therapy horse, a Florida woman in her 30s smiles brightly at getting a second chance at life. After a car accident propelled her into a two-year coma, she is now relearning how to walk-the horse's pelvic movements mimicking her own. While the benefits of equine-assisted therapy are well documented on the human side, anxiety over the horses' welfare has been galloping off in another direction.

"The field of equine-assisted therapy is growing, along with the concern for the horses involved," said Dr. Marie Suthers-McCabe, associate professor of Human-Companion Animal Interaction at the Virginia-Mary-

land Regional College of Veterinary Medicine. "Little scientific research has been performed to substantiate the benefits to therapy animals, or to establish any potential detriments."

And so Dr. Suthers-McCabe and one of her senior veterinary students set their sights on the other end of the reins-and discovered that most therapy horses did benefit and were actually less stressed after their sessions. Their research was presented publicly for the first time at the 141st Annual Convention of the American Veterinary Medical Association, held in Philadelphia, July 24-28, 2004.

To evaluate stress induced by therapy sessions, the pair traveled to Florida this past February to perform an exploratory study. Creator and director of the college's Center for Animal-Human Relationships-which works in tandem with the Medical College of Virginia and is the only facility of its kind doing joint research in human medicine-Dr. Suthers-McCabe had anticipated negative study findings.

Unlike other therapy animals that make a difference simply by their presence, interactions with therapy horses are much more physical in nature. "A lot is asked of these horses," Dr. Suthers-McCabe said. "Their riders are challenged physically by disabilities such as cerebral palsy or brain injuries that cause them to be off balance. A therapy horse has to work hard to keep its rider in the saddle, which has led to an anecdotal fear of burn out or stress."

Thirty-three horses were studied in four different equine-assisted therapy programs, a small but accurate representation. More than 725 accredited equine therapy centers exist, with 5,000 specially selected horses serving 36,000 participants in a variety of therapeutic activities, according to the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association. Each program in the study focused on a different therapy discipline: equine-assisted mental health therapy, therapeutic horseback riding for children and for adults and equine-facilitated psychotherapy.

Blood samples were taken in the morning prior to therapy sessions to determine baseline levels of cortisol, a stress hormone. Post-session blood samples were redrawn for comparisons. In addition, horses were videotaped prior to, during and after their activities. In the study, cortisol levels decreased in 82% of the horses after therapy participation. Only two of the 33 horses had increased levels, one of which was new to the herd and had been involved in adverse horse-to-horse contact. The second horse was seen exhibiting signs of stress on videotape, "cribbing" or biting its stall doors, both before and after therapy.

In the future, Dr. Suthers-McCabe, who is president of the American Association of Human-Animal Bond Veterinarians, will expand the scope of the study. She wants to compare neurohormones such as oxytocin and prolactin in horses at rest and in those carrying able-bodied riders with blood sample levels in horses performing therapeutic activities.

"There are so many benefits that therapy horses provide," said Dr. Suthers-McCabe, "everything from physical and social well being, to improved balance and posture. It's our duty as veterinarians to determine whether therapy work is stressful and, if so, what can be done about it."

The AVMA, founded in 1863, is one of the oldest and largest veterinary medical organizations in the world. More than 70,000 member veterinarians are engaged in a wide variety of professional activities. AVMA members are dedicated to advancing the science and art of veterinary medicine including its relationship to public health and agriculture. Visit the AVMA Web site at www.avma.org to learn more about veterinary medicine, animal care and access up-to-date information on the association's issues, policies and activities.