

Horses as healers?

SCAS member and PhD student Hannah Burgon shares insights from her recent research study of 'at-risk' young people participating in therapeutic horsemanship.

Hannah Burgon MADipSW, MSc; Cardiff University School of Social Sciences: PhD student.
Supervisors: Dr Jonathan Scourfield and Dr Raya Jones.



The area of this research project

Equine-assisted therapy (EAT) is an umbrella term for a number of emerging interventions where horses are employed for therapeutic and learning benefits. They include equine-assisted psychotherapy, equine-assisted learning and therapeutic horsemanship (TH).

EAT is aligned to the field of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) which has a longer history of providing animals for therapeutic benefit. Research in AAT claims that stroking a dog lowers blood pressure and that animals can provide non-judgemental emotional support, healthy tactile experience, act as a 'social lubricant' and a host of other benefits (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Fine, 2000; Friedmann *et al.*, 1983; Levinson, 1969; Podsberecek, Paul, & Serpell, 2000).

Practitioners and researchers claim that EAT can provide psychosocial benefits such as an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem, mental and physical health benefits, gains in self-awareness and behavioural modification, and psychotherapeutic benefits including links to attachment theory and the therapeutic relationship (Bizub, Joy, & Davidson, 2003; Klontz *et al.*, 2007; Shultz, Remick-Barlow & Robbins, 2007; Virdine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002; Yorke, Adams, & Coady, 2008).

Horses and humans: a long history

Horses have been part of human culture since they were first domesticated for their food and hides by nomadic herders around 4000 BC. Their crucial roles in transport and war followed. Horses have been embedded in culture through art, stories, film, myth and legend (Scanlan, 2009, Walker, 2008).

Riding as therapy can be traced back to the fifth century when wounded Greek soldiers were encouraged to undertake 'hippotherapy' – riding for rehabilitation and in order to improve their morale. In the UK, riding as therapy was introduced in the 1970s by Riding for the Disabled – inspired by Liz Hartel, who won a medal at the Olympics after having taken up riding as rehabilitation following polio.

The USA wilderness programmes for 'at-risk' youth started to use horses therapeutically in the 1990s and this developed into equine-assisted therapy, where horses are employed for psychosocial benefits. There are now a handful of centres in the UK including the project involved in the current study (see: sironacic.com).

Methods and methodology

The research was a qualitative, reflexive, practitioner-researcher ethnography. I was aligned to a participative approach where the young people were active participants in the research project. It was found that this was not without its challenges due to the disjointed and fractured lives of many of the young people involved.

The study followed a psychosocial mixed-method model which fitted with the epistemological and theoretical framework of the therapeutic horsemanship project values of a person-centred, experiential learning approach. It was interested in looking at how the young people experienced their interactions with the horses.

Insights from the research study

The PhD research study found similar themes to much of the preliminary EAT literature. In addition, links to the literature on risk and resilience, mindfulness and nature therapy were found to be relevant. Prominent themes that were explored included:

- **Self-confidence and self-esteem:** the young people and adults involved displayed and reported increases in communication and social skills, self-confidence and self-esteem, through challenging and empowering activities with the horses.

- **Trust and relationship:** some of the young people experiencing difficulties in relationships with people appeared to be able to build up relationships with the horses. In some cases this enabled a 'therapeutic alliance' to begin with the therapist.
- **Empathy and emotion regulation:** being with the horses appeared to enable many of the young people to identify and empathise with the horses. In turn, they were able to modify their behaviour in order to have successful and meaningful relationships with them.
- **Mindfulness, 'being calm' and the natural environment:** Links to the mindfulness literature was a new theme to emerge. Being with horses demands being in the 'present moment' and 'relaxed concentration'. The young people spoke of how they needed to remain calm around the horses and the adults reported that they believed the natural environment helped facilitate this alongside the horses.

Testimonials from the study

"... it is very beneficial to the children – it can help them through difficult times" Foster carer

"I love R (horse) because she's quiet and understands me" Young person

"The horses change your mood and they help to calm me down" Young person

"L is always calm and relaxed after a session" Foster carer

"You can just talk to the horses and they won't answer back. They won't tell your secrets and when you see their ears twitch you know they are listening!" Young person

"His confidence has grown, he has developed an empathy with horses, developing a bond that is positive to him" Social Worker

A preliminary report of Hannah's study is forthcoming in the *Journal of Social Work Practice*.

About the author

Hannah Burgon is a qualified social worker who has completed training in Riding Therapy at the Fortune Centre of Riding Therapy and further training in Equine Facilitated Learning. She also holds a BHS Stage 1 certificate and a Cert. in Counselling. She has over 30 years of experience with horses and learnt to ride with Lucy Rees, a horse behaviourist and author of *The Horse's Mind*.

Hannah is currently undertaking a PhD at Cardiff University, School of Social Sciences, researching the benefits of therapeutic horsemanship and equine-assisted learning/equine-assisted therapy. She is the director and founder of Sirona Therapeutic Horsemanship CIC. Hannah can be contacted by email at: hannahburgon@hotmail.com.

Children in photographs are models

Equine-assisted therapy

If you are interested in finding out more about the field of equine-assisted therapy, you may like to browse the following publications and websites:

PUBLICATIONS

Hannah Burgon has published the following paper in *Anthrozoos*: Burgon, H. 'Clinical Notes. Case studies of adults receiving horse-riding therapy' (2003), *Anthrozoos*, Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 263-276

Sirona Therapeutic Horsemanship director and play therapist Di Gammage published an article in *Counselling Children and Young People Journal* (CCIP), March 2008 entitled: 'Case study 2: Equine Assisted Therapy. Work with Georgie, by Di Gammage'. This can be accessed online at: www.cyp.co.uk/journal_pdf/ccyp_spring08a.pdf

Kohanov, L (2001) *The Tao of Equus: a woman's journey of healing and transformation through the way of the horse*. CA: New World Library

McCormick, A, McCormick, D, McCormick, T (2004) *Horses and the Mystical Path: The Celtic Way of Expanding the Human Soul*. CA: New World Library

Rees, L (1984) *The Horse's Mind*. London: Stanley Paul

Bekoff, M (2007) *The Emotional Lives of Animals: a leading scientist explores animal joy, sorrow and empathy – and why they matter*. CA: New World Library

Rashid, M (2004) *Life Lessons from a Ranch Horse*. Newton Abbot, UK: David and Charles

Roszak, T, Gomes, M and Kanner, A (1995) (eds) *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*. Sierra Club Books: San Francisco

WEBSITES

Equine Guided Education Association:
www.EGEA.org

Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association:
www.narha.org

Equine Facilitated Learning:
www.equinefacilitatedlearning.org

Equine Assisted Therapy:
www.equineassistedtherapy.org.uk

Epona – Linda Kohanov's website:
www.taoofequus.com

EHWAZ - The Spirit of the Horse:
www.ehwaz.co.uk

Fortune Centre of Riding Therapy:
www.fortunecentre.org/

Horses Helping People:
www.horseshelpingpeople.co.uk

LEAP Equine Therapeutic Centre:
www.leap-etc.co.uk