

PRIVATE PRACTICE INSIGHTS



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Partnering with horses in therapy: A unique private practice role

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Growing up, I had small pets—a rabbit, a few birds, and a hamster. I only rode a horse once as a child, but that one experience was enough to create in me a long-lasting impression that horses are huge, powerful, unpredictable, and definitely intriguing. Thirty years later, three times per week I work alongside seven beautiful horses at an equestrian centre as part of my private practice. I never would have imagined that my occupational therapy career would lead me here. The purpose of this article is to increase awareness of equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP); I will share my perspectives on what may make EAP a compelling therapy choice for some clients, as well as discuss my thoughts regarding ways that EAP is related to occupational therapy. I hope that increased awareness about EAP may lead more clients to have access to it and that more occupational therapists may consider joining me in this fascinating area of practice.

In my 10-year career, I have worked in hospital-based inpatient and outpatient mental health programs, as well as a private clinic, and three years ago I began my transition into private practice in community-based mental health. My private practice has focused on working with adolescents and adults with mental illness and other issues, including persistent pain, insomnia, and attention deficits. The majority of my work involves providing in-home assessments and interventions to Canadian Armed Forces Veterans. I first heard about EAP from a Veteran client who had a profound experience when he tried this therapy modality. He explained to me that the horses helped him to come to understand things about himself that he hadn't previously, even in other therapy sessions. The way the horses interacted with him revealed to him the impact that low self-esteem and unhealthy boundaries were having on his relationships. Being very curious to learn more about how horses could possibly be so transformative, I arranged to tour the equestrian facility where my client had his sessions. It was somewhat serendipitous, because the house into which my family and I were moving that summer was a five-minute drive away from it! Soon after the tour, I found myself registering to take the professional training course to become a certified mental health facilitator of EAP in the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) model.

EAP is a type of equine-assisted therapy, which is under the umbrella of animal-assisted therapies. It is well established

for occupational therapists to work within the equine-assisted therapy models of hippotherapy ("hippo" means horse in Greek), therapeutic riding, and equine-assisted occupational therapy. These models involve mounted activities and may work on goals such as postural control, balance, sensorimotor function, and communication skills (Canadian Therapeutic Riding Association [CanTRA], 1997). I am learning that it is much less common for occupational therapists to facilitate EAP, which is a mental health therapy modality focusing on psychosocial and emotional goals, such as emotion regulation, stress management, coping and problem-solving skills, self-awareness and healthy self-concept, and assertive communication (Thomas & Lytle, 2016). Unlike other equine-assisted therapy modalities, all of the work is done on the ground (i.e., not mounted), with horses who are not specifically trained or bridled and who move around freely in an indoor or outdoor space, allowing clients to interact with them as they wish (EAGALA, 2015). EAGALA, currently the most widely known and established EAP organization worldwide, developed its EAP model to have a clear theoretical base, standards for implementation, and a requirement of ongoing training for practitioners (EAGALA, 2019). EAP can be used to treat a range of clients, from school-aged children to older adults, with issues related to anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, trauma, eating disorders, substance abuse, autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and other challenges related to mental health (Hayes, 2015; Thomas & Lytle, 2016). EAP may be especially helpful to populations for whom traditional talk therapy has not been effective, such as those struggling with the impact of trauma (Levine, 2010). It is important to note that EAP is not for every client and, in particular, may not be a suitable therapy modality for individuals with severe psychosis, confusion, dementia, or dissociation, or for individuals who are actively suicidal (EAGALA, 2015). At the equestrian facility where I work, we see individual clients, couples, and groups with a wide range of challenges—for example, groups of students with low social functioning, military and first responders with post-traumatic stress disorder, and Indigenous people with anxiety and depression.

EAP (EAGALA model) is a unique model of psychotherapy not just because it involves partnering with horses, but because it is solution-focused and experiential, meaning that it is founded

on the ideas that clients hold the best solutions for themselves and that they learn best and can drive change through doing (EAGALA, 2015). Because horses are roaming freely in the sessions, clients are able to experiment with different ways in which to connect with the horses and try out various possible solutions to challenges. Part of what makes this experiential learning so powerful is that it relies on metaphorical learning. This means that the arena environment and the horses can represent people, relationships, issues, and situations in real life, and the session is a space in which clients can tell their stories and define a new story going forward (Thomas & Lytle, 2016).

When I began learning about EAP, I immediately drew comparisons between the core concepts of EAP and those of occupational therapy. At the heart of occupational therapy is enabling participation in occupations through active participation in experiences that involve the whole person and the senses, that relate to real life, and that are meaningful. Interacting with horses in therapy involves participating in a rich sensory learning environment that naturally requires a present-focused awareness similar to mindfulness (Burgon, 2014). In the arena, EAP is an occupation and a therapeutic means for learning mindfulness, relaxation, and problem-solving skills, which can enable and improve an individual's occupational participation outside the arena. Due to the necessity of active engagement, what is experienced and learned in the arena is not easily forgotten.

Horses can be meaningful to clients because they calm, ground, and offer a non-judgmental relationship. In addition, experiences with horses can be meaningful because what or who they represent has clear relevance and usefulness in the real world (Hayes, 2015; Thomas & Lytle, 2016). For example, a client may draw parallels between horse behaviours and themselves. A client may view one horse as anxiety and another as depression because of the way they sometimes nuzzle up together and other times bite and kick each other, creating an opportunity for consideration of how anxiety and depression influence each other. The indoor arena space may represent the safety of home, while the large barn door to the outdoor space may represent the barriers in someone's life that need to be removed.

What sets therapy with horses apart from other animal-assisted therapies is the creatures' size, power, intelligence, and sensitivity to their environment. Approaching an animal as large and powerful as a horse can help clients to reflect on how they approach intimidating people or overwhelming problems in life. Horses can help people to work on building trust and healthy boundaries as well (EAGALA, 2015). For survival, horses instinctively analyze and react to people's nonverbal cues, providing valuable, honest, in-the-moment feedback. Horses can pick up on what may be happening emotionally with someone before the person even realizes what is going on

(Hayes, 2015). For example, a past client who struggled with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder entered a session stating that all was well and that she didn't have anything in particular to work on. Throughout the session, the horses stood completely still (in sharp contrast to previous sessions when they had moved around a lot) and then proceeded to lie down on the ground, one by one. This unique shift in horse behaviour and powerful image of vulnerability helped the client to identify and discuss that she was in fact slipping deeper into her depression and had been ignoring the signs.

In sessions like these, I have been grateful that I facilitate EAP sessions as part of a team. My facilitation partner is an equine specialist, an expert in observing and interpreting horse body language and behaviour. His role is also to ensure the physical safety of the horses and the clients in the sessions at all times. My role as a mental health professional is to plan activities that relate to treatment goals, monitor progress, and ensure that standards related to consent and confidentiality are followed. In sessions, I am continuously observing and assessing clients' verbal and nonverbal communication and build off of the horse observations being given to me by the equine specialist. Together, we create a space that is physically and emotionally safe, and we hold that space to allow clients to have an experience that is meaningful to them.

Even though my role as an EAP facilitator is outside of my regular occupational therapy practice, I still view clients and their goals through my occupational therapy lens. This lens helps me to set up learning opportunities for clients in the arena that are focused on practical skills that can be applied to functioning in everyday life. Further, if sessions involve specific activities with the horses (e.g., taking them through an obstacle course), I collaborate with the equine specialist on how to grade, adapt, and communicate the activity to the client so that it promotes learning and growth and can be easily understood.



Elizabeth and one of her equine partners at Tranquil Acres Equestrian Centre in Ottawa, Ontario.

About the author

Elizabeth Eacrett, OT Reg. (Ont.), is self-employed in private practice through her business, *Elizabeth Eacrett Occupational Therapy*, in Ottawa, Ontario. Elizabeth also works as a certified EAP (EAGALA model) facilitator at Tranquil Acres Equestrian Centre and for the Heroes Equine Learning Program (H.E.L.P.), a charitable organization providing EAP retreats for military and first responders with post-traumatic stress disorder. You may visit Elizabeth's website at www.elizabetheacrettot.ca or contact her at: elizabetheacrettot@gmail.com

Adding EAP to my career has given me so much more than a unique new skill set. The fact that I get to spend time at a horse farm each week, learning from horse experts and from these highly intelligent and intuitive creatures themselves, adds balance and meaning to my life. I have always known that I need variety in my work schedule and tasks—I never would have dreamt that the variety I would add could be so fulfilling both personally and professionally.

For more information about EAP (EAGALA model), visit: www.eagala.org

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