



Insights into the processes underpinning Equine-based therapy: A qualitative study with Mental Health practitioners in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how equine-based therapy was implemented and facilitated within therapeutic contexts across South Africa. Drawing on qualitative data from fifteen mental health practitioners across South Africa, the study highlighted the collaborative roles of mental health professionals, equine specialists, and horses in facilitating healing amongst those presenting with mental health distress. Thematic analysis revealed five core themes: therapeutic process, setting, practitioner-client-horse engagement, pre-session check-ins, client orientation, and session facilitation. Practitioners emphasized the importance of using nature-based settings, experiential learning, and metaphorical reflection to foster emotional regulation, self-awareness, and relational insight for their clients. The study underscored the horse's intuitive responsiveness to human emotion, offering clients immediate, embodied feedback that enhanced therapeutic outcomes. Despite the growing recognition of the efficacy of equine-based therapy in treating trauma and mental health distress, its integration has remained fragmented due to a lack of understanding of its processes and varying terminology and gaps in training. This study positions equine-based therapy as a complementary intervention that can support mental health and well-being. Grounded in collaborative, strengths-based, and client-centred approaches, equine-based therapy offers transformative potential for vulnerable populations and mental health practitioners alike.

Keywords: equine-based therapy, implementation, mental health, therapeutic process.

INTRODUCTION

Humankind has coexisted with animals since evolution, bringing with it synergistic benefits within the human-animal relationship.¹ People have an inherent social nature which naturally lends itself to caring for or interacting with animals, thereby instinctively providing a sense of deep gratification for those involved with these interactions.² Arguments have therefore been advanced for the inclusion of animals

¹ Erika Friedmann et al., "Evaluation of a Pet-Assisted Living Intervention for Improving Functional Status in Assisted Living Residents With Mild to Moderate Cognitive Impairment," *American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease & Other Dementias*® 30, no. 3 (May 11, 2015): 276–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1533317514545477>.

² Katherine Compitus, "Animal-Assisted Therapy," 2021, 27–43, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-87783-5_4.

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in clinical treatment approaches that can tap into the therapeutic healing potential, which can emerge from the symbiotic relationship humans have with animals.

According to Hartwig and Smelser, an overwhelming majority of clinicians (91.7%) are familiar with Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT), which involves incorporating animals into clinical treatment plans with clients as a valuable therapeutic approach.³ Whilst there is a growing body of research that highlights the benefits of animal-assisted therapy in clinical practice, many clinicians remain uncertain about how to implement animal-assisted therapy with their own clients. Social work is premised on human relationships.⁴ Animals can contribute to the establishment, enhancement, and nurturing of interpersonal connections amongst humans, making it an important therapeutic approach in social work practice.⁵

Equine-based therapy has been described as a short, cooperative intervention which involves the client, horse, therapist, and equine expert. It uses experiential therapy and therapeutic exercises, which are integrated during interaction with horses.⁶ The central emphasis of equine-based therapy lies in nurturing relationships, fostering trust, enhancing communication, and cultivating more wholesome and constructive connections with clients.⁷ Gomez argued that equine-facilitated therapy involves the horse (equine), playing a key role in facilitating the relationship between the client and the clinician, which is aimed at achieving therapeutic objectives.⁸ In equine-based therapy, the horse collaborates in the therapeutic process by building rapport between the clinician and client for therapeutic purposes.⁹ Furthermore, the bond that forms between the client and the horse contributes to the therapeutic process and relationship building.¹⁰

Equine-based therapy has demonstrated efficacy within a wide range of contexts, that includes at-risk youth,¹¹ individuals who are grappling with mental health issues,¹² adults in residential substance abuse treatment,¹³ those affected by secondary trauma,¹⁴ and war veterans,¹⁵ lending support for its consideration in social work practice. Grimm argued that equine-based therapy offers children and youth, particularly, a distinctive avenue for developing skills that may not be readily accessible within conventional academic or therapeutic settings.¹⁶ Other recent research has documented the role of horse-human relationships in addressing diverse social, educational, and emotional issues.¹⁷ Equine-based

³ Elizabeth Kjellstrand Hartwig and Quinn Koelfgen Smelser, "Practitioner Perspectives on Animal-Assisted Counseling," *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* 40, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 43–57, <https://doi.org/10.17744/mehc.40.1.04>.

⁴ David Howe et al., *Relationship-Based Social Work: Getting to the Heart of Practice* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018).

⁵ Compitus, "Animal-Assisted Therapy."

⁶ Pamela N. Schultz, G. Ann Remick-Barlow, and Leslie Robbins, "Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy: A Mental Health Promotion/Intervention Modality for Children Who Have Experienced Intra-Family Violence," *Health & Social Care in the Community* 15, no. 3 (December 6, 2006): 265–71, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2524.2006.00684.x>.

⁷ Meg Kirby, *An Introduction to Equine Assisted Psychotherapy: Principles, Theory, and Practice of the Equine Psychotherapy Institute Model* (Balboa Press, 2016).

⁸ India B Gomez, *Evaluating a Program of Equine Therapy for Veterans with PTSD Symptoms* (Alliant International University, 2016).

⁹ Shereva Lewis, "Counselors Who Use Horses as Co-Facilitators in Treating Individuals with Anxiety Disorders" (University of Holy Cross, 2025); Laura Harbeson and Raeunn Marie, "Psychotherapists Perceptions and Use of Projection in Equine-Assisted Interventions: A Phenomenological Study" (Northcentral University, 2019).

¹⁰ Aviva Vincent and Kathleen J Farkas, "Application of Attachment Theory to Equine-Facilitated Therapy," *Society Register* 1, no. 1 (2017): 7–22.

¹¹ Keren Bachi, Joseph Terkel, and Meir Teichman, "Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy for at-Risk Adolescents: The Influence on Self-Image, Self-Control and Trust," *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 17, no. 2 (April 14, 2012): 298–312, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104511404177>; Kay Sudekum Trotter et al., "A Comparative Study of the Efficacy of Group Equine Assisted Counseling With At-Risk Children and Adolescents," *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 3, no. 3 (October 10, 2008): 254–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401380802356880>.

¹² Leslie McCullough, "Integrating Body-Mind-Attachment Practices into Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy: A Case Example of Oppositional Defiant Disorder," in *Equine-Assisted Mental Health Interventions* (Routledge, 2018), 133–46.

¹³ Elisabeth Suarez, "The Effects of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy on the Psychosocial Functioning of At-Risk Adolescents Ages 12–18 Copyright© by Bettina N. Shultz Bound Copy at Denver Seminary All Rights Reserved.," 2005.

¹⁴ Robert W. Motta, "The Impact of Animals on Secondary Trauma," in *Secondary Trauma* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023), 123–34, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-44308-4_12.

¹⁵ Gomez, *Evaluating a Program of Equine Therapy for Veterans with PTSD Symptoms*.

¹⁶ Erin J. Grimm, *Non-Traditional Therapeutic Interventions for at-Risk Youth & Students with Complex Support Needs: Equine Therapy* (Duquesne University, 2015).

¹⁷ Aviva Vincent et al., "Volunteer Engagement within Equine Assisted Services," *Animals* 14, no. 2 (January 12, 2024): 249, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani14020249>; André Vasconcelos et al., "Applying Gestalt Approach as a Method for Teaching Computer

therapy has been found to be beneficial with children and adolescents, more specifically with those who have experienced trauma,¹⁸ those deemed at-risk,¹⁹ those grappling with psychological distress and mental health issues and those manifesting with behavioural challenges.²⁰

A survey by Schultz, Remick-Barlow, and Robbins in Canada, which explored how helping professionals (n=131) incorporate animal-assisted therapy and equine-based therapy, however, uncovered a diverse context of nomenclature, characterised by varying terminology, education and training levels.²¹ The divergent interpretations of practices have resulted in a fragmented and ambiguous landscape surrounding the practice and implementation of equine-based therapy. This lent support for the current study, which sheds light on some of the processes guiding equine-based therapy in a social work context. Whilst empirical research that explores the standards for the effective implementation of equine-based therapy is still lacking,²² insights into the approaches used to facilitate equine-based therapy have the potential to expand its application amongst social work clinicians, thereby amplifying its benefits for clients. Vincent and Farkas have argued that a lack of understanding regarding the methodology and use of equine-based therapy in practice may have contributed to a reluctance to engage in equine-based therapy and a lack of understanding of the potential value of the horse-human bond.²³ This study was significant, as it can deepen an understanding of equine-based therapy and how practitioners engage with this intervention with vulnerable populations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The fundamental understanding of the systems approach in social work and the central focus on the person-in-environment perspective have influenced the profession and its practice. The enduring relationship between humankind and animals has also been a notable aspect of many families, households, and communities. Throughout history, the significance of animals in people's lives has been widely acknowledged.²⁴ It has been approximated that the United States hosts more than 2,500 animal-assisted programs.²⁵ Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) has been characterized as a purposeful intervention where a specially trained and safety-vetted animal becomes an integral component of the clinical healthcare treatment process.²⁶ The delivery or administration of animal-assisted therapy involves a professional health or human service provider with expertise in the clinical implementation of human-animal interactions.²⁷ Buck et al. argued that the nuanced language of equines, conveyed through the horses' body language, offers clients immediate feedback regarding their emotional states and functioning, making it a valuable therapeutic approach in social work practice.²⁸ This feedback helps clients to better recognize the interplay between their body and mind, enabling a new embodiment experience. Such feedback-driven processing also enables clients to secure greater insights into their

Science Practice in the Classroom: A Case Study in Primary Schools in Brazil," *Education and Information Technologies* 28, no. 2 (February 2023): 2383–2403, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-022-11278-z>.

- ¹⁸ McCullough, "Integrating Body-Mind-Attachment Practices into Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy: A Case Example of Oppositional Defiant Disorder."
- ¹⁹ Bachi, Terkel, and Teichman, "Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy for at-Risk Adolescents: The Influence on Self-Image, Self-Control and Trust"; Trotter et al., "A Comparative Study of the Efficacy of Group Equine Assisted Counseling With At-Risk Children and Adolescents."
- ²⁰ Evelyne Chardonens, "The Use of Animals as Co-Therapists on a Farm: The Child Horse Bond in Person-Centered Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy," *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies* 8, no. 4 (December 2009): 319–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2009.9688496>.
- ²¹ Schultz, Remick-Barlow, and Robbins, "Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy: A Mental Health Promotion/Intervention Modality for Children Who Have Experienced Intra-Family Violence."
- ²² Lynne Murphy, Jacqueline Wilson, and Stacey Greenberg, "Equine-Assisted Experiential Learning in Occupational Therapy Education," *Journal of Experiential Education* 40, no. 4 (2017): 366–76.
- ²³ Vincent and Farkas, "Application of Attachment Theory to Equine-Facilitated Therapy."
- ²⁴ Leo K Bustad, "Reflections on the Human-Animal Bond," *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 208, no. 2 (1996): 203–5.
- ²⁵ W Benda and R. Lightmark, "People Whisperers: Integral Health and Healing." *Shift: At the Frontiers of Consciousness*, 2004, 30–33.
- ²⁶ Daniel Mota-Rojas et al., "An Overview of the Benefits of Animal-Assisted Interventions in Medical and Therapeutic Contexts for Human Health: Cognitive Mechanisms, Sensory Perception and Welfare Considerations," *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* 13 (2026).
- ²⁷ Philip Tedeschi, Jennifer Fitchett, and Christian E. Molitor, "The Incorporation of Animal-Assisted Interventions in Social Work Education," *Journal of Family Social Work* 9, no. 4 (August 14, 2005): 59–77, https://doi.org/10.1300/J039v09n04_05.
- ²⁸ Page Walker Buck, Nadine Bean, and Kristen De Marco, "Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy: An Emerging Trauma-Informed Intervention," *Advances in Social Work* 18, no. 1 (September 24, 2017): 387–402, <https://doi.org/10.18060/21310>.

psychological functioning, which facilitates a more constructive and healthier expression of their emotions.

Fry described how constructing equine interactions and activities that nurture attachment, attunement, competency, mastery, challenge, and cognitive reframing also contribute to the healing process.²⁹ Incorporating self-soothing techniques, symptom management, social and emotional learning, and physical movement generates an environment conducive to client recovery. Bennet and Woodman further endorsed the implementation of creative, goal-directed equine therapeutic sessions, designed to equip clients with skills and self-regulation, and facilitate relational regulation, saying it holds promise to alleviate mental health distress.³⁰ This can nurture client-driven behavioural change and create positive psychological transformation.

Burton, Gammage, and Hebden presented a set of fundamental principles derived from therapeutic and equine encounters, underscoring the following essential core principles for effective implementation.³¹ This includes establishing a secure environment, both emotionally and physically; prioritizing client and horse autonomy and decision-making; embracing acceptance and refraining from judgment of both client and horse; recognizing the centrality of relationship dynamics; facilitating learning through modelling and, when necessary, instruction with a foundation of respect and empathy; prioritizing a process-oriented approach over a task-oriented one and embracing the "being" mode as opposed to the "doing" mode.

EAGALA further expounded upon the following guiding principles that underpin equine-based therapy, saying:³²

- Collaborative Approach: Equine-based therapy employs a collaborative model, uniting a licensed mental health professional and a qualified equine specialist in a joint effort. Horses and clients become equal partners in an experiential process that facilitates transformative outcomes.
- Dedication to Innovation: Equine-based therapy involves horses that possess heightened sensitivity and awareness, providing a secure environment for clients to explore their inner selves and uncover their own insights.
- Solution-Oriented: The EAGALA approach is founded on the belief that clients hold the most effective solutions for themselves. Instead of prescribing solutions, clients are empowered to experiment, problem-solve, embrace risk-taking, harness creativity, and discover solutions tailored to their unique needs.
- Grounded Focus: All therapeutic work within the arena takes place on the ground, with horses placed prominently at the forefront. These horses remain unhindered and are never ridden, allowing them to interact with clients naturally. This setup enables clients, with the guidance of professional facilitators, to introspect, project, and cultivate profound connections.

Equine-assisted psychotherapy supports individuals facing emotional and mental health challenges by facilitating personal exploration of feelings and behaviours.³³ It necessitates an ongoing therapeutic relationship with well-defined treatment goals and objectives. An example involves a client observing and discussing behavioural dynamics in a horse herd, allowing for the exploration of internal experiences.³⁴

The therapeutic efficacy of horses can be attributed to several factors. Horses possess a remarkable ability to sense and respond to human emotions, functioning as mirrors for human feelings.

²⁹ Nina Ekholm Fry, "Conceptualization of Psychotherapy Incorporating Equine Interactions in the United States," *Human-Animal Interaction Bulletin*, December 1, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1079/hai.2021.0036>.

³⁰ Bindi Bennett and Elise Woodman, "The Potential of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy for Treating Trauma in Australian Aboriginal Peoples," *The British Journal of Social Work* 49, no. 4 (June 1, 2019): 1041–58, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcz053>.

³¹ Hannah Burton, Di Gammage, and Jenny Hebden, "Hoofbeats and Heartbeats: Equine-Assisted Therapy and Learning with Young People with Psychosocial Issues – Theory and Practice," *Journal of Social Work Practice* 32, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 3–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2017.1300878>.

³² EAGALA, "Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Academy (EAGALA)," 2018.

³³ Jennifer Jolly, "A Qualitative Study on Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy and Its Impact on Cognitive, Behavioral, Social, and Emotional Growth Through Interpersonal Bonding" (Drake University, 2022).

³⁴ Jolly, "A Qualitative Study on Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy and Its Impact on Cognitive, Behavioral, Social, and Emotional Growth Through Interpersonal Bonding."

This sensitivity allows them to detect shifts in body language and in the emotional states of individuals.³⁵ Trösch et al., added that, unlike humans, who rely on both verbal and nonverbal cues, animals such as horses predominantly rely on nonverbal communication to express their intentions.³⁶ Salah asserted that when used in a therapeutic context, horses can facilitate client self-awareness of their interpersonal approach and its impact on their interactions with others.³⁷

Experts in behavioural and evolutionary biology have highlighted shared mechanisms, that underlie social behaviour in both humans and animals. According to Hebesberger, Beetz and Kotrschal, these mechanisms contribute to the evolution of relationships and subsequently influence human social interactions.³⁸ Acri et al., added that universal mechanisms such as biophilia, the innate human tendency to connect with other living entities, and attachment, a reciprocal bond between humans and animals, both play a role in the effectiveness of therapy involving horses.³⁹

Anastasya et al., posited that equine-based therapy harnesses the healing power of horses in the treatment of psychological problems.⁴⁰ Therapists can integrate equine-based activities to complement other approaches such as cognitive behavioural therapy and psychotherapy. Takacs recommended that clinicians promote alternative and complementary therapies (e.g., therapeutic riding, equine-assisted therapy, and hippotherapy) as additional treatment interventions, in addition to mainstream interventions.⁴¹ However, it is essential to ensure that such integration aligns with the ethical and professional frameworks of their respective fields of expertise.

METHODOLOGY

This study was guided by qualitative research methodology, which is an approach that delves deep into real-world issues and offers profound insights into the study phenomenon.⁴² It revolves around gathering information about participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviours, delving into the questions of "how" and "why," as opposed to the mere quantification of "how much" or "how many".⁴³ The data was gathered from mental health practitioners to gain a more meaningful understanding of the equine therapeutic process and the facilitation of equine therapy.

Sample

For this study, non-probability purposive sampling and snowball sampling strategies were used to recruit participants. The use of purposive sampling was to purposively select participants engaged in equine-based therapy, as this was the crux of the study. The researcher started recruiting participants from a national organisation called the South African Equine Facilitated Intervention Association (SAEFIA). The members from the organisation were purposefully selected as the researchers wanted to engage with mental health practitioners using equine therapy. A total of nine participants were purposefully selected. However, data saturation was not reached, and more participants had to be recruited.

Snowball sampling was then used, given that there were very few practitioners available in the field of equine-based therapy. Hence, the participants who were initially interviewed were requested to

³⁵ Chiara Scopa et al., "Emotional Transfer in Human–Horse Interaction: New Perspectives on Equine Assisted Interventions," *Animals* 9, no. 12 (November 26, 2019): 1030, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani9121030>.

³⁶ Miléna Trösch et al., "Horses Categorize Human Emotions Cross-Modally Based on Facial Expression and Non-Verbal Vocalizations," *Animals* 9, no. 11 (October 24, 2019): 862, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani9110862>.

³⁷ F A Salah, "Understanding of Therapists' Experiences and Perceptions of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy, an Interpretative Phenomenological Study," 2024.

³⁸ Denise V. Hebesberger, Andrea Beetz, and Kurt Kotrschal, "Behavioral and Physiological Effects of Equine-Assisted Early Intervention for Mother- Child Dyads with Insecure Attachment," *Human-Animal Interaction Bulletin*, December 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1079/hai.2019.0003>.

³⁹ Mary Acri et al., "Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapies: Enhancing the Social Worker's Armamentarium," *Social Work Education* 35, no. 5 (July 3, 2016): 603–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2016.1173669>.

⁴⁰ Karina Shasri Anastasya et al., "Mechanisms and Benefits of Equine Therapy for Enhancing Mental Health," *Research & Development* 5, no. 1 (March 7, 2024): 40–43, <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.rd.20240501.16>.

⁴¹ Jillian Claire Takacs, "It's Not Just About Petting Horses": *Understanding Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy and Horse-Human Healing Relationships* (Queen's University (Canada), 2022).

⁴² Albine Moser and Irene Korstjens, "Series: Practical Guidance to Qualitative Research. Part 3: Sampling, Data Collection and Analysis," *European Journal of General Practice* 24, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 9–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375091>.

⁴³ K. Hammarberg, M. Kirkman, and S. de Lacey, "Qualitative Research Methods: When to Use Them and How to Judge Them," *Human Reproduction* 31, no. 3 (March 2016): 498–501, <https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dev334>.

refer the researcher to other practitioners who were using equine therapy in their practice. A further six participants were recruited using this approach, bringing the sample size to a total of fifteen practitioners. The sample consisted of three social workers, five psychologists, five equine facilitated learning specialists and two wellness coaches, who were based in KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, Eastern Cape and the Western Cape, in South Africa.

Data collection

Permission had to be sought from the university ethics committee to conduct interviews with the participants. The researcher started the interview process with the members of the South African Equine Facilitated Intervention Association. These participants were purposefully selected as they were mental health practitioners who were directly involved in the facilitation of equine-based therapy. The participants were informed of this study by the secretary of the association, with whom the researcher liaised regularly via email and WhatsApp. The secretary assisted in setting up the interviews with each participant from the association. The interviews were conducted in October 2020 with participants at each of their respective farms and offices. The research visits were undertaken in the Eastern Cape, Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Gauteng. A total of nine interviews were conducted in this initial round of interviews. However, after the interviews and the recordings and transcripts were reviewed, a second round of interviews had to be conducted as the data had gaps, and saturation had not been reached.

Hence, the recruitment of participants was expanded through snowball sampling. The participants from the initial round of interviews referred the researcher to other participants. A further six participants were recruited. These participants and the initial group were contacted via email from the details provided by other participants. Arrangements were made to collect data during the period October 2022 to December 2022. The interviews were conducted at their respective farms and offices.

Before each interview, a letter of information and informed consent were given to each participant to sign. Participation was voluntary, and interviews were recorded with permission from the participants. A pre-tested interview guide was used to guide the interviews.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis, which is a method of identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data, guided the analysis.⁴⁴ It is a descriptive method that reduces the data in a flexible way that dovetails with other data analysis methods. The data analysis followed a six-phase process rooted in qualitative methodology. It began with familiarisation, where the researchers immersed themselves in the data through repeated reading and listening to recordings and by making analytical notes. Initial codes were then generated to label meaningful features of the data, followed by the construction of themes through clustering of related codes. These themes were reviewed recursively to ensure coherence and relevance across the dataset. Each theme was then defined, refined, and named to capture its scope and narrative. Finally, the write-up phase involved integrating thematic analysis with participant quotations and existing literature to produce a cohesive and contextualised account of the findings. While an independent coder was not engaged for this study, the co-researcher fulfilled the role of second coder to support analytical rigour and credibility. She has expertise in qualitative methodology and therapeutic practice and reviewed a sample of coded transcripts to verify thematic consistency, challenge assumptions, and ensure alignment with the aim of the study. This collaborative process facilitated reflexivity and strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings, while maintaining transparency in the analytic approach. Although the absence of a fully independent coder is noted as a limitation, the supervisory involvement provided a critical layer of oversight and scholarly validation appropriate to the study's scope. Moreover, an expert validation committee was used to validate findings made.

⁴⁴ V. Braun and V. Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (SAGE Publications, 2021).

Trustworthiness

To ensure rigour in qualitative research, the study upheld all four key trustworthiness criteria. Credibility was maintained through a detailed audit trail documenting all research decisions and procedures, allowing transparency and traceability. Transferability was supported by rich contextual descriptions and cross-referencing with existing literature, enabling readers to assess relevance to other settings. Dependability was achieved by continued data collection until saturation was reached, ensuring stable and comprehensive findings. Confirmability was reinforced by using verbatim participant quotes and engaging a validation committee to review interpretations, safeguarding objectivity and alignment with the data.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Five themes emerged from the data as follows:

Theme 1: Processes underpinning equine-based therapy

Two sub-themes, namely diverse approaches applied in equine-based therapy and the partners that form the equine therapy team, emerged under theme one.

Sub-theme one: Diverse approaches applied in Equine- based therapy

There were different approaches to equine-based therapy, as described by one of the participants:

“One of the key aspects of understanding the process is that there are mental health and horse professionals who follow an approach called equine-assisted psychotherapy and learning, and then there are those of us who follow an equine facilitated psychotherapy and learning approach. Although there are crossovers between the two approaches in terms of how people run a session, how they work with the horses, a key distinction is that the equine assisted focuses more on the human facilitation of the therapeutic process. Whereas in facilitated, the horses are co-facilitators. They guide...you could say drive the process of a session or the focus in a session.” (SW 1)

Another participant described the hippotherapy approach, saying:

“There are programs that work with riding in the physical therapy field, of course. It's called hippotherapy, so hippotherapy is where the motion of the movement is used for brain stem injuries, for developmental delays...so our focus is on clients who are cognitively able to process and able to reflect on processes and they are all on the ground. So, there is a touch of it if it is okay for the horse and okay for the client.” (SW 1)

Subtheme two: The partners that form the equine therapy team

The process of equine-based therapy was found to involve key partners that form the equine therapy team to ensure a successful therapeutic outcome. The participants shared that equine therapy involves collaborative work between the mental health practitioner and horse professional, saying:

“I work very much with the value of collaboration, that's very important for me. I work from the space of the value that I bring in my experience and training, and the horse specialist brings their experience into the session, and of course, the horse brings their own special power.” (Psych 2)

“You would have the horse professional always be with you. He/she will guide you in terms of what they've seen in horses, which then informs you about how you're going to therapeutically talk to your client about what's seen, so what you need is your strong therapeutic grounding and counselling skills. And then you're just using this added information to build into that. So, there are some mental health practitioners, where some of them don't know horses, but they are actually fine because they have a strong therapeutic background and a horse specialist working with them.” (Psych 1)

“I would say that equine therapy is quite a deep, powerful sort of therapy. It requires a mental health professional and normally a horse specialist and an equine partner. And the equine partner will often give the clients insight about themselves, their patterns of behaviour, or maybe things that they're struggling with. And it's also an experiential therapy because they get the opportunity to try something different in their relationship with the horse in the arena and through that learning, they can then use that metaphor to transfer it to life. So that's why I say it's quite powerful because they can see the results if they change.” (Psych 3)

Participants also described the use of the EAGALA model as an approach to facilitating equine-based therapy, saying:

“There has to be at least one certified EAGALA model practitioner facilitator within to be able to call it an EAGALA model. So, if neither of you is trained EAGALA, then you obviously wouldn't be able to call it an EAGALA model.” (SW2)

“There are four tenets to guard, and that is one of the tenets for you to be able to say that you are doing any EAGALA model therapy session, you have two facilitators in the arena at the same time, both of them don't have to be certified by the Model, so only one facilitator can be certified by the model. So the horse professional and I do the whole process together. So, we will meet the clients wherever we are.” (SW2)

“I belong to an association called EAGALA, which is the Equine Assisted Learning and Growth Association, and we follow a couple of principles. Firstly, we have quite a strong ethical code of conduct and background. So that informs a lot of what we're doing. Secondly, equine therapy works as you work in a team, so you always have a second person with you, so there's never a time when you miss something; there's always somebody to be there with you. The second person is also a psychologist. It also includes a horse specialist, so their focus is on my horses and horse behaviour. And then working as a team, it means that you yourself hold the greatest sense of accountability and safety for the post decision.” (Psych 1)

Theme 2: The setting for the therapeutic session

The second theme that emerged from the data was the setting for the therapeutic session. Participants emphasised that nature formed the context for the facilitation of equine therapy, describing it as follows:

“The first thing people notice when they're doing a session is that it's so nice to not be confined to a room in a small space, so being in a natural environment, I think, it really does add to the experience. The client is able to actually think clearly.” (SW 3)

“I think equine therapy and nature go hand in hand. If you were doing equine therapy in a stable or an indoor arena, I think you'd lose part of the benefit because I think that people are grounded by being in nature. There's just something about nature that allows us to take a deep breath and put both feet on the ground and just feel calmer. They're just driving out to the farm and being surrounded by all the beauty. And then you meet the animal that's a part of that. And it just all sort of comes together to support the whole process.” (Psych 3)

“Outdoors plays a huge role, everything, from the time they arrive. Everything plays a role, but mostly I think that human nature has a tendency to be drawn towards nature, it's less threatening, it's more open, so it allows them the freedom to express themselves a whole, so I think that's probably why the nature side of it, and we use everything that we can in the environments of these birds or cats or whatever have arrived in the arena. That forms part of the story. And we find that quite useful.” (Psych 1)

Other participants explained that the natural environment allowed clients to connect on a deeper level and relate their stories. They described this as follows:

“Everything happens in the arena. We believe the power is in the experience. It’s not about the talk therapy, which is why we don’t take the client out of that experience and bring them to the office, but when we do equine work, we try not to go into the mind like the headspace, where you talk about everything too much, because then we might lose the client. You lose the potency of the equine experience” (SW 3)

“Essentially, we work in a space with the horses, where we’re working with people’s narratives. We work with stories, we work outside in the space with horses, and that whole space can represent a story. That has like a storyboard, and we’ve got live characters, and these characters can choose how they want to interact in the story.” (Psych 2)

Theme 3: Engagement between the mental health practitioner, client, and horse

Theme three focused on how equine-based therapy occurs. Participants shared that before a session could commence, clients were required to book a session based on the problems they were presenting with and a referral. A brief assessment was important, as described below:

“A client would call or e-mail or message asking for a booking, asking for a session, reporting the reason, generally, why they are coming or who referred them or what they may have been referred for, and then they would book the session.” (SW 1)

“Then the client would arrive... making sure that they feel that they are very welcome and that this is a safe space, and then talking through just some confidentiality aspects and always checking in with a client, you know what your experience with horses is before this? Do they come with fears? Do they come up with certain pre -ideas? What’s their history? Sometimes people arrive, and they suddenly tell you about the traumatic experience they had with horses in their childhood. So, you just get a sense of how they arrive, and then there’s always some form of grounding exercise.” (SW 1)

Another social worker emphasised that clients should complete an indemnity form before a session because of possible safety concerns, as follows:

“There is an indemnity form for them to sign. Because we are working on farms that do not belong to us, and it is a model of therapy that is experiential, so we ask them to sign the indemnity form because injuries can happen.” (SW2)

Theme 4: Check-in session between the horse and the mental health practitioner

The fourth theme reflects the basic procedures that are adopted between the mental health practitioner and the horse, prior to a session. This interaction between the practitioner and horse was described as follows:

“The horses are freely moving around, they are able to move in and out of connection interaction, make contact as they choose, so they’re not being held or forced in any way. So, there’s always this pre-check-in, where am I at, because I come with my own stuff when I walk in, and the horses pick up on everything, what’s the weather doing? Is it windy? What impact might that have on the horses and on my own system? You know where I’m feeling it in my body? What are their bodies showing me and telling me about the setting for the day?” (SW 1)

“You have this very intimate relationship with your herd right from the start. It is an ongoing relationship of mutual choice. When the herd feels that they are in the right space, they arrive and interact with us.” (Psych 1)

Theme 5: A deconstruction of the equine therapy process

Subtheme one: Orientation of clients into equine therapy sessions

This subtheme reflected how clients are oriented to equine therapy. One participant said that before the client engages with the horse, a brief introduction is presented to the client on equine therapy as follows:

“So, first of all, we explain to the client what equine therapy is, and what they can expect from the session, then we invite the client to go and meet the horses. It will depend on what it is that they are there for. Say if they do the session, to maybe be able to work on setting boundaries, you would say, well, that is the purpose of the session. So maybe you can go out and see what boundaries are out here. So, then they would go out, they would meet the horse.” (SW 3)

Other participants shared that they conduct an assessment with the client to determine how the process should move forward. This was described as follows:

“We like to assess and see where the clients are at and what their needs are. We don't ask for too much history, so don't ask for detailed history. I prefer to see what comes out, because it's a client solution-oriented process. The clients think they need to work on something, but often it's something else that comes up in the sessions. So, when we move into the space, we then invite them to meet and greet the horses. And once they've done that, we reflect on that. And then what starts to happen is, depending on the reflection process, we have all those issues and activities in our heads, you know, at our disposal.” (SW2)

“We look for things like the person can feel their heartbeat, or they are aware of their breathing, or they will look down at the ground, or they'll look up at the sky. The moment that they do that orienting, then you have a sense that okay, they have arrived...Then you choose a very neutral space in the paddock so that there's enough space around.” (SW 1)

Subtheme two: Facilitation of equine therapy

This subtheme shed greater light on how equine-based therapy was facilitated with a client. One participant expressed that the client and horse/s are observed the moment the client arrives. Participants described this as follows:

“One of the things that we have learned about horses is that they actually can sense a person. Physiologically, from quite a distance. The horse responds as soon as the person arrives, but also as they walk into the arena. So, everything that is happening from the time they walk in and walk into the arena, that is an opportunity for us to give feedback and to notice how the person is processing.” (Psych 1)

“The aim of the session is really to see how the person processes their environment, their understanding, and their interaction skills. It's all those variations that have been processed. And then there's usually time where they just spend time doing certain activities with the horse, sometimes on their own, sometimes it's (together), ... it's always processing, and it really depends on the client's understanding of what is happening around them and their awareness, that we will get a sense of the process of the therapy. And that's usually what happens. We often find that it will bring up some insight or some question that they have, but often we find that the real therapy happens afterwards, where they start to think about what's happening, and they start to talk about the onset.” (Psych 1)

Other participants explained that themes or topics are developed to enable assessment, and the client has to work with those themes during a session. Thereafter, a discussion is facilitated with regard to aspects that emerged during the exploration of the theme and the feedback provided. Participants described this process as follows:

“What starts to happen through the process is we will say to the client, we are going to invite you to explore your connection with the horses. And they will go out and explore the connection. Come back, reflect with us and what we are able to do is to create a metaphorical link between the client's experience with the horses and then connect it to what's happening with them in their life. So, who or what has also reminded them of the situation? Is it an emotion? Is it a feeling? And then we start to work with that, so it becomes quite a powerful process and parallel to their life. And we tend to get quite quickly into their reasons for coming because it's a very non-

judgmental space and the horses, the process or processing is all done through the horses and so it feels like the pressures off them. So, we all engage with what's happened with them.” (SW2)

Another participant described how interaction with the horse shapes the therapeutic process:

“You invite the client to find the themes that have emerged. How does that connect with what you're experiencing in your life right now? Or who does that connect with your relationship? You know what the wisdom is that you've drawn from this? What is a possible solution if there's a conflict, or if clients are in a change situation, they're getting divorced or recently divorced or kind of like sort of trying to draw the generics.” (Psych 3)

The practitioner then focuses on the strengths, abilities, and skills that the client has. They use these personal assets to empower and assist the client to build on their strengths as part of the healing process. This strengths-based approach was described by one participant as follows:

“It's a very strength-based perspective. What are the strengths that you have? What are the resources that you got and then drawing that back to where they felt it in their body? It's around helping the client connect with where they are in their body, such as every time they hear the horse's breath on their shoulder or when they bring back the moments that stood out for them in the session. A stopping foot, a breath that they took now, then they're immediately connecting with a felt sense of what potential healing is, the horses will tell you, because they'll immediately react. Its goal is to help calm the nervous system. Help the client remain calm and connect again. With the parasympathetic system, which is where all that healing is just so powerfully available to them.” (SW 1)

One of the social workers in the study clarified this, saying:

“So, there isn't always necessarily touching; there isn't always necessarily an activity like you're going to go and put a halter on the horse, and you're going to go and groom the horse and you're going to take the horse from point B, which is what a lot of the assisted activities are more focused on. You will do an activity with the horse and then you'll come back to the mental health practitioner and the horse professional, and you will unpack it.” (SW 1)

Hence, the therapeutic session will involve an interaction with the horse, be it emotional or physical and the themes that emerge from those interactions are then unpacked with the client, the horse professional and the mental health practitioner. This was described as follows:

“There's no conversation or actual unpacking of what happens there in an office space. So that unpacking happens with the horses. It's always happening. There's always something happening within this space and so many times other things also play a role, a squirrel, a tortoise walking through, or a horse jumps out while we're busy talking, and that's all part of the story.” (SW2)

DISCUSSION

This study found that equine therapy involves two distinct therapeutic approaches: equine-assisted psychotherapy and equine-facilitated psychotherapy, which may include a crossover depending on individual client needs. The key difference lies in the facilitation: equine-assisted approaches are primarily human-driven, while in equine-facilitated approaches, the horse serves as the primary co-facilitator. Pendry, Smith, and Roeter noted that terms like equine-assisted learning or equine facilitated learning are often used interchangeably, focusing on improving communication skills, self-awareness, confidence, and self-control through horse interaction.⁴⁵ Other methods, such as hippotherapy, involve riding to develop balance, coordination, confidence, and a sense of connection with the horse. All three approaches, however, utilize the horse as a conduit for emotional and psychological growth, as supported by White-Lewis et al., who noted benefits like improved communication, reduced emotional blunting,

⁴⁵ Patricia Pendry, Annelise N. Smith, and Stephanie M. Roeter, “Randomized Trial Examines Effects of Equine Facilitated Learning on Adolescents’ Basal Cortisol Levels,” *Human-Animal Interaction Bulletin*, December 1, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1079/hai.2014.0003>.

enhanced attachment, and increased self-esteem and reflectivity.⁴⁶ Burgon, Gammage, and Hebden added that these outcomes can be achieved through activities such as grooming, riding, and saddling, integrated with communication techniques, play therapy, and mindfulness practice.⁴⁷

Equine therapy is inherently collaborative, relying on diverse professionals and individuals to provide effective treatment and client support. This collaborative effort enriches the therapeutic experience for everyone involved, including the mental health practitioner, horse specialist, and clients. Wilson et al., identify the mental health practitioner as the primary professional responsible for conducting sessions.⁴⁸ Turner further specified that these professionals combine expertise in psychotherapy and horsemanship to design and facilitate therapeutic activities, assess client progress, and ensure safety.⁴⁹ Bennet and Woodman highlighted the importance of collaboration with mental health professionals like psychologists, counselors, or social workers for psychological assessment, diagnosis, and treatment planning.⁵⁰

The horse professional or specialist is crucial for ensuring the horse's physical and emotional well-being, managing safety protocols, and monitoring client interactions during sessions. Their expertise in horsemanship is vital for creating a supportive environment and informing therapeutic adjustments. The mental health practitioner then integrates these horse and client interactions with the horse professional's insights to facilitate healing. Beauchen and Ayala et al. described the horse as a key component, offering a unique way to connect and facilitate personal growth.⁵¹ While White-Lewis and Diaz et al. emphasized the mental health practitioner's role as a guide, helping clients navigate their experiences with the horse and apply those experiences to their daily life.⁵² Fry further states that these partners collaborate to create a safe, supportive, and client-focused therapeutic environment.⁵³

According to Tobin, clients actively participate in the therapeutic process, seeking support to achieve their therapeutic goals alongside the equine specialist and mental health professional.⁵⁴ The EAGALA model often requires at least one certified practitioner, which underscores the need for collaboration and partnership between the equine specialist, mental health professional, and client to achieve therapeutic goals.⁵⁵ The EAGALA model is designed to provide safe, supportive, and effective interventions that promote growth and learning.⁵⁶

The study revealed that equine therapy typically occurs in a natural space in the outdoors. This nature-based setting provides a unique and calming therapeutic experience, allowing clients to connect with the natural world.⁵⁷ Participants indicated that natural spaces such as farms, open fields, or

⁴⁶ Sharon White-Lewis et al., "An Equine-Assisted Therapy Intervention to Improve Pain, Range of Motion, and Quality of Life in Adults and Older Adults with Arthritis: A Randomized Controlled Trial," *Applied Nursing Research* 49 (October 2019): 5–12, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnr.2019.07.002>.

⁴⁷ Burgon, Gammage, and Hebden, "Hoofbeats and Heartbeats: Equine-Assisted Therapy and Learning with Young People with Psychosocial Issues – Theory and Practice."

⁴⁸ Kaitlyn Wilson et al., "Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy for Adolescents Experiencing Depression and/or Anxiety: A Therapist's Perspective," *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 22, no. 1 (January 27, 2017): 16–33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104515572379>.

⁴⁹ Mandi J Turner, "Horses in Therapy: The Practice of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy," 2018.

⁵⁰ Bennett and Woodman, "The Potential of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy for Treating Trauma in Australian Aboriginal Peoples."

⁵¹ Kate Beauchen, "Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy in the Body Psychotherapy Session: Horse as Surrogate for Therapeutic Touch.," *International Body Psychotherapy Journal* 16 (2017); María Dolores Ayala et al., "Pilot Study of the Influence of Equine Assisted Therapy on Physiological and Behavioral Parameters Related to Welfare of Horses and Patients," *Animals* 11, no. 12 (December 10, 2021): 3527, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani11123527>.

⁵² White-Lewis et al., "An Equine-Assisted Therapy Intervention to Improve Pain, Range of Motion, and Quality of Life in Adults and Older Adults with Arthritis: A Randomized Controlled Trial"; Carolina Diaz-Bonilla et al., "Global Poverty Monitoring Technical Note - October 2022 Update to the Multidimensional Poverty Measure" (Washington DC, 2022).

⁵³ Fry, "Conceptualization of Psychotherapy Incorporating Equine Interactions in the United States."

⁵⁴ Kelly Marie Tobin, "The Relationship between Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy and Client-Therapist Attachment on Symptom Reduction" (Walden University, 2020).

⁵⁵ Jeffry R. Nurenberg et al., "Animal-Assisted Therapy With Chronic Psychiatric Inpatients: Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy and Aggressive Behavior," *Psychiatric Services* 66, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 80–86, <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201300524>.

⁵⁶ Laurie Haig and Kelly Skinner, "Use of Equine-Assisted Services to Improve Outcomes Among At-Risk and Indigenous Youth: A Scoping Review," *Frontiers in Public Health* 10 (March 28, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.730644>.

⁵⁷ Anna María Pálsdóttir, Marie Gudmundsson, and Patrik Grahn, "Equine-Assisted Intervention to Improve Perceived Value of Everyday Occupations and Quality of Life in People with Lifelong Neurological Disorders: A Prospective Controlled Study," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 7 (April 3, 2020): 2431, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17072431>.

paddocks enable clients to engage more meaningfully with natural elements such as birds or outdoor scents, thereby enhancing the healing experience holistically. Almasloukh suggested that this is particularly beneficial for individuals with symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress, as the natural elements also serve as symbols or metaphors for clients to explore and reflect on during therapy, with practitioners enabling them to draw parallels with their own lives for deeper insights.⁵⁸

There are several common steps that guide the equine-based therapy process. Several procedures are typically followed before the sessions begin. Firstly, clients book sessions, allowing the mental health professional to gather their background history and develop an appropriate therapeutic plan. Initial assessments determine the needs of their clients, goals, and suitability for equine-based therapy, review their history and also address their expectations or concerns.⁵⁹ Clients are then required to fill in an indemnity form, which outlines the risks and ensures informed consent.⁶⁰ Of significance, however, is a "check-in" session between the mental health practitioner and the horse to assess physical and emotional readiness of the horse, as they are highly intuitive and sensitive to human emotions.⁶¹ This includes awareness of the horse's health, observing its demeanor, and considering environmental factors like the weather and herd dynamics. Patience is crucial to allow horses to engage willingly in a therapeutic session with the client.⁶²

Orientation for clients typically introduces what equine therapy is about and what to expect, which is followed by an invitation to interact with the horses. This process adopts a client-solution-oriented and strengths-based approach, which focuses on present experiences and empowering clients to identify solutions rather than extensively dwelling on past issues.⁶³ Experiential learning, which is when clients directly experience the equine therapy process through hands-on interactions with horses, is central to gaining insights and self-awareness for the clients.⁶⁴

During a therapeutic session, client-horse interactions are closely observed from the moment of arrival, as horses sense human physiology and the emotional state of people from a distance. These observations provide continuous feedback to the practitioner on how clients process their environment, understanding, and interaction skills. Activities such as grooming or leading are designed to elicit emotional responses and encourage connection. Post-activity, a debriefing session helps clients to process their experiences and emotions. Beauchen described the process, saying clients received a tour of the paddocks and safety protocols, with the equine specialist then selecting horses based on their temperament.⁶⁵ The mental health practitioner then assists clients in exploring symbolic meanings and metaphors related to the horse's behaviour and responses, connecting these to their personal life and therapeutic goals. This "unpacking" of emotions and experiences helps clients explore critical issues and interpersonal dynamics reflected in the horse-human interaction.⁶⁶ Themes that emerge are used to identify therapeutic goals and areas for growth, enabling therapists to apply insights to real-world situations.

⁵⁸ Khalid Bandar Almasloukh, "Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapies: State-of-the-Art Review," *Nursing Science Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (January 23, 2022): 92–100, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08943184211051367>; Hannah Louise Burgon, *Equine-Assisted Therapy and Learning with at-Risk Young People* (Springer, 2014).

⁵⁹ Patricia M Moj dara, "A Quantitative Examination of Two Equine Therapy Models on Veterans With Mental Health Needs" (Fielding Graduate University, 2025); Rob Townsend and Michelle Hood, "Horse Talk: Equine Based Learning Programs and Their Engagement with Individuals," *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 59, no. 2 (2019): 254–68.

⁶⁰ Caitlin S Lowry, *Straight from the Horse's Mouth: A Thematic Analysis Exploring Client and Practitioner Perceptions of an Equine-Assisted Family Therapy Session* (Nova Southeastern University, 2023).

⁶¹ Tiffany M. Naste et al., "Equine Facilitated Therapy for Complex Trauma (EFT-CT)," *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 11, no. 3 (September 17, 2018): 289–303, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-017-0187-3>; Léa Badin et al., "Effects of Equine-Assisted Interventions on Older Adults' Health: A Systematic Review," *International Journal of Nursing Sciences* 9, no. 4 (October 2022): 542–52, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnss.2022.09.008>.

⁶² Julia Schmidt, Andrea Wartenberg-Demand, and Simon Forstmeier, "Equine-Assisted Biographical Work (EABW) with Individuals in the Second Half of Life: Study Protocol of a Multicentre Randomised Controlled Trial," *Trials* 21, no. 1 (December 15, 2020): 857, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13063-020-04784-3>.

⁶³ Kay Sudekum Trotter and Jennifer N Baggerly, *Equine-Assisted Mental Health for Healing Trauma* (Routledge New York, NY, USA, 2018).

⁶⁴ Buck, Bean, and De Marco, "Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy: An Emerging Trauma-Informed Intervention."

⁶⁵ Beauchen, "Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy in the Body Psychotherapy Session: Horse as Surrogate for Therapeutic Touch."

⁶⁶ Katy Schroeder et al., "Therapeutic Factors in Equine-Facilitated Group Psychotherapy for Women Survivors of Interpersonal Violence," *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work* 43, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 326–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2018.1516707>.

Equine therapy is also premised on a strengths-based approach, which focuses on identifying and building on an individual's strengths during the therapeutic process. This reflects the horses' natural way of responding to genuine interactions, serving as co-practitioners by helping clients to discover strengths. As clients build trusting relationships with horses, they often transfer these qualities to other relationships, fostering hope, resilience, and empowerment. Connecting with bodily sensations during therapy, which includes feeling the horse's breath or warmth, is fundamental to grounding clients in the present moment and heightening their body awareness of their own feelings and emotions.⁶⁷ Not all interactions, however, involve touch as observational exercises, ground-based activities, and mindfulness approaches are also used. Clients engage in various activities and then return to the mental health practitioner and horse professional to process their experiences, gaining a deeper insight into their feelings, thoughts, and reactions. Ultimately, the goal, as shared by Schroeder et al., is to provide structure, observe processes, and help clients make meaning of their equine experiences in relation to treatment goals.⁶⁸

Limitations of the study

The reasonably small sample size could be considered a potential limitation of the study. However, the small sample size did not affect the findings of the study. Since the research assumed a qualitative and not a quantitative approach, the sample size was sufficient for generalisations to be made from the findings.

CONCLUSION

This study provided rich insights into the equine-based therapeutic process, highlighting the roles of the mental health practitioner and that of the horse within a natural setting. Despite an increasing number of studies, there remains a gap regarding the unique features that underpin processes in equine assisted social work. The study found that certain processes may differ depending on the expertise of the mental health practitioner, as different disciplines have their own therapeutic guidelines that are incorporated into equine-based therapy. Moreover, the processes and techniques that are used in equine-based therapy may also vary based on the approach used by the mental health practitioner (e.g., hippotherapy, equine facilitated learning or equine facilitated psychotherapy). The findings however cohere with the processes used within a psychotherapeutic context and can be easily applied to a clinical social work context.

Equine-based therapy can be viewed as a valuable tool in the social work field, offering a novel way to engage clients, promote healing, and enhance overall well-being. However, its successful implementation requires a balanced understanding of its benefits, limitations, and ethical considerations. Although interest in equine-based therapy is growing, and research is gradually expanding, more studies should be conducted to increase awareness.

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⁶⁷ Buck, Bean, and De Marco, "Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy: An Emerging Trauma-Informed Intervention."

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