Benefits of Equine Assisted Psychotherapies in the Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Combat-Exposed Military and Veterans: A Literature Review

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Learning Objectives

Participants will be able to:

1. Describe
2. Possible explanations
3. Positive impacts
Outline

- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Empirically Supported Treatments
- Problems with Empirically Supported Treatments
- Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP)
- Benefits of using EAPs
Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

• Symptoms of PTSD
• Prevalence of PTSD
Symptoms of PTSD

Categories

1. Arousal
2. Changes in cognitions or beliefs about the self, others, and the world
3. Re-experiencing
4. Avoidance

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Lehavot et al., 2019)
US military and veterans: 10% to 30%

Combat-experienced Afghanistan and Iraq: 34.9% to 60%

Prevalence of PTSD (Fisher et al., 2021; Wharton et al., 2019; Wisco et al., 2014)
Life Impacts of PTSD

- Negative impacts of PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Wharton et al., 2019; Wisco et al., 2014)
- Complex PTSD (Marchand et al., 2021)
Negative impacts of PTSD

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Wharton et al., 2019; Wisco et al., 2014)

- Hypervigilance
- Problems trusting the self
- Avoidance
- Keep from being reminded
- Re-experiencing
- Interfere with staying focused
- Changes in thinking
- Arousal
Negative impacts of PTSD

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Wharton et al., 2019; Wisco et al., 2014)

Insignificant/Significant

- Staying busy
- Avoid relationships
- Substances
Complex PTSD

(Marchand et al., 2021)

1. 80% of combat exposed military and veterans

2. Mood, anxiety, and substance use comorbidities

3. Suicide, which may be the ultimate avoidance technique
Prevalence of Problems
(Marchand et al., 2021)

- Psychological scars
- Difficult to resolve
Outline

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Empirically Supported Treatments

Problems with Empirically Supported Treatments

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP)

Benefits of using EAPs
Empirically Support Treatments

Exposure-based (EB) Therapies

• Prolonged Exposure (PE)
• Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)

(Hamblen et al., 2019; Kehle-Forbes et al., 2016; Kehle-Forbes et al., 2014; Marchand et al., 2021; Sciarrino et al., 2020; Steenkamp et al., 2015; Wharton et al., 2019)
Departments of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA)

• Primary treatment source (Hundt et al., 2018; Wharton et al., 2019)

• Goals for treating PTSD (Hundt et al., 2018; Hundt et al., 2020; Wharton et al., 2019)
Problems with Treatment

**Avoidance**  
(Aron et al., 2020; Hundt et al., 2020; Marchand et al., 2021; Steenkamp et al., 2015)

**Dropout rates**  
(Aron et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2021; Hundt et al., 2020; Marchand et al., 2021; Miles & Thompson, 2016)

**Lack of improvement**  
(Fisher et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2021)
Problems with Treatment

Avoidance (Arnon et al., 2020; Hundt et al., 2020; Marchand et al., 2021; Steenkamp et al., 2015)

Dropout rates (Arnon et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2021; Hundt et al., 2020; Marchand et al., 2021; Miles & Thompson, 2016)

Lack of improvement (Fisher et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2021)
Problems with Treatment

Avoidance (Arnon et al., 2020; Hundt et al., 2020; Marchand et al., 2021; Steenkamp et al., 2015)

Dropout rates (Arnon et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2021; Hundt et al, 2020; Marchand et al., 2021; Miles & Thompson, 2016)

Lack of improvement (Fisher et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2021)
Problem and Alternative

EAP is one treatment with promise

(Arnon et al., 2020; Buck et al., 2017; Marchand et al., 2021; Wharton et al., 2019)
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- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
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Mental health treatment by professional providers (Burton et al., 2018; Fisher et al., 2021; Flynn et al., 2022; Wharton et al., 2019)

Equines specified in planned interventions (Beggs & Townsend, 2021; Buck et al., 2017)

Experiential and present focused (Arnon et al., 2020; Beggs & Townsend, 2021; Buck et al., 2017; Ferruolo, 2016; Fisher et al., 2021; Flynn et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2021)

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP)
Experiential and present focused (Arnon et al., 2020; Beggs & Townsend, 2021; Buck et al., 2017; Ferruolo, 2016; Fisher et al., 2021; Flynn et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2021)

EAPs = Experiential Therapy

- Improve the participants self-awareness
- Increase sensitivity
- Improve their communication
- Problem-solving skills
Animal Assisted Therapies

General Advantages

• Engagement
• Relationships
• Comfort and Safety
• Lack of preconceptions
• In the moment

(Aron et al., 2020; Beggs & Townsend, 2021; Burton et al., 2018; Flynn et al., 2022)
Animal Assisted Therapies

Equine Advantages

• Social
• Non-judgmental
• Size

(Aron et al., 2020; Beggs & Townsend, 2021; Burton et al, 2018; Flynn et al, 2022)
EAPs Address the Problems

- **Focus on current issues** (Arnon et al., 2020; Beggs & Townsend, 2021; Buck et al., 2017; Ferruolo, 2016; Flynn et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2022)

- **Well tolerated** (Burton et al., 2018; Fisher et al., 2021; Wharton et al., 2019)

- **Found to be safe** (Arnon et al., 2020; Burton et al., 2018; Fisher et al., 2021)
EAPs and PTSD

Present focused

(Aron et al., 2020; Beggs & Townsend, 2021; Buck et al., 2017; Ferruolo, 2016; Flynn et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2022)

Safety and engagement

(Buck et al., 2017; Fisher et al., 2021; Flynn et al., 2022; Germain, 2018; Wharton et al., 2019)

Exploring and understanding behaviors

(Aron et al., 2020; Buck et al., 2017; Frewin & Grardiner, 2005; Wharton et al., 2019)
EAPs and PTSD

Present focused

(Aron et al., 2020; Beggs & Townsend, 2021; Buck et al., 2017; Ferruolo, 2016; Flynn et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2022)

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  (Arnon et al., 2020; Beggs & Townsend, 2021; Buck et al., 2017; Ferruolo, 2016; Flynn et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2022)

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  (Arnon et al., 2020; Buck et al., 2017; Frewin & Grardiner, 2005; Wharton et al., 2019)
EAPs and PTSD

Present focused
(Aron et al., 2020; Beggs & Townsend, 2021; Buck et al., 2017; Ferruolo, 2016; Flynn et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2022)

Safety and engagement
(Buck et al., 2017; Fisher et al., 2021; Flynn et al., 2022; Germain, 2018; Wharton et al., 2019)

Exploring and understanding behaviors
(Aron et al., 2020; Buck et al., 2017; Frewin & Grardiner, 2005; Wharton et al., 2019)
Weaknesses in the Literature

1. Lack of standardization (Arnon et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2021; Kinney et al., 2019)
2. Not rigorously tested (Fisher et al., 2021)
3. Very early scientific development (Marchand et al., 2021)
4. Many gaps (Marchand et al., 2021)
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Proposed Mechanisms of Action

- Changes in the brain (Arnon et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2021)
- Cortisol and Resilience (Burton et al., 2019)
- Improved relationships
  - Behaviors
  - Emotions (Burton et al., 2019; Compitus, 2019; Fisher et al., 2021; Wharton et al., 2019)
- Practicing (Brandt, 2013; Buck et al., 2017; Compitus, 2019; Frewin & Grardiner, 2005; Nieforth & Craig, 2021)
Research Studies

• Targeting psychosocial outcomes (Burton et al., 2018; Kinney et al., 2019)

• Safe, acceptable and tolerable (Amon et al., 2020; Brandt, 2013; Ferruolo, 2016; Germain et al., 2018)
New Manualized Protocol

- Participants – 63
- Attrition – 5 (7%)
- Adverse events - 0
- Remission – 46%

(Fisher et al., 2021)
EF-CPT

- Participants – 27
- Attrition – 2 (7%)
- Adverse events - 0
- CPT
- Remission rates – 72-84%
- Benefit of Equines – Assist relationship

(Wharton et al., 2019)
The State of the Research

Research is Rudimentary

Physiological changes (Arnon et al., 2020)

Relational changes (Fisher et al., 2021)

Symptom reduction (Fisher et al., 2021; Wharton et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2021)
Implications for Moving Forward

- Standardization will strengthen research (Marchand et al., 2021)
- Conduct large trials with control groups and random assignments (Marchand et al., 2021)
- Use EAPs in conjunction with empirically supported therapies (Wharton et al., 2019)
Conclusions

• EAPs –
  ✓ Are safe and well tolerated
  ✓ Address current problems
  ✓ Build social skills
  ✓ Improve symptoms

(Aron et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2021; Wharton et al., 2019)
Learning Objectives

Participants are able to:

1) Describe: what is required to qualify as an equine assisted psychotherapy

2) Possible explanations: why equine assisted psychotherapies work better than exposure-based

3) Positive impacts: through increased client engagement and stronger therapeutic relationships
Thank you for your attention
I have no conflict of interest to report.
Questions?
Contact Information

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References


References Continued


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