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**Understanding Equine-Assisted Therapy and Its Impact on the Counseling Field**

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CCC 499: Senior Practicum and Project

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### **Understanding Equine-Assisted Therapy and Its Impact on the Counseling Field**

According to a survey done by the National Center for Health Statistics, about nineteen percent of the American adult population received mental health treatment in 2019, and of those nineteen percent, about ten percent received counseling or therapy (Terlizzi & Zablotsky, 2020). The use of counseling and therapy to treat mental health issues has become increasingly popularized within the past few years (American Psychological Association, 2021, para. 3). Although seeking treatment is ideal for those struggling with their mental health, the sharp increase in the need for treatment is distressing. The demand for mental health professionals has become extreme, and the workload for those already in the field is heavy. Many have turned to emotional support animals and service animals to soothe their everyday struggles. Some animals, like horses, are widely used in therapy for various reasons. The use of horses to assist in the therapeutic process is called, “equine-assisted therapy,” or EAT (McKissock et. al., 2022, p. 2). EAT offers a unique approach to therapy that can help treat a wide variety of issues. The incorporation of EAT in regular modes of treatment may offer additional assistance in the current mental health crisis.

### **Equine-Assisted Therapy Explained**

For centuries horses have been known to possess unique healing qualities. These healing qualities have been used for various purposes including emotional support, psychotherapy, and even for physical healing (Boatwright, 2013, p. 77). There are many different terms to describe EAT. Some refer to it as equine-facilitated therapy, and others simply call it equine therapy. For consistency, equine-assisted therapy, or EAT, will be used. Despite the many names for EAT, there are four main categories. These are hippotherapy, equine-assisted learning, therapeutic horseback riding, and equine-assisted psychotherapy (Shaw & Benzio, 2018). Each mode of

therapy assists in the treatment of different issues. These therapies may be used alone, together, or in addition to mainstream treatments such as medication or talk therapy.

#### *Four Types of Equine-Assisted Therapy*

**Hippotherapy.** Hippotherapy is a form of EAT used for physical therapy purposes (Abdel Ghafar et al., 2022, p. 2). It may include occupational therapy, speech therapy, or other physical treatments. In this form of physical therapy, trained professionals use the horse as a tool to assist with improving motor function, balance, and stability. The benefits, however, are not limited to those three. Abdel Ghafar et al. (2020) also mention how hippotherapy has mainly been studied for its uses with cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorder, and multiple sclerosis (p. 2). The treatment is still being researched for its uses with other disorders and conditions.

**Equine-Assisted Learning.** Equine-assisted learning (EAL) is a great choice for those who seek to learn life skills, social skills, communication skills, and other helpful tools for everyday life (Pelyva, Kresák, Szovák, & Tóth 2020, p. 2). EAL can be especially beneficial for those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and children. Where equine-assisted psychotherapy may help reduce the symptoms of disorders, EAL helps with skill-building. The benefits of EAL translate into the client's daily life, affecting friendships, relationships, and self-efficacy.

**Therapeutic Horseback Riding.** Another form of EAT is therapeutic horseback riding. This is a technique commonly used for those with cognitive and learning disabilities, as well as those with ADHD (Aviv, Katz, & Berant, 2021, p. 2). This form of EAT utilizes horseback riding and practical equine maintenance skills to teach physical, emotional, and relational health. The instructor will oftentimes provide feedback to the rider about the horse's behavior. This gives the rider time to learn about how their behavior affected the horses.

**Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy.** The fourth type of EAT is equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP). This is when a mental health professional utilizes horses to treat psychological problems (Shaw & Benzio, 2018, para. 6). EAP aligns with Gestalt's teachings of psychotherapy (Lac, Marble, & Boie, 2013, p. 7). This differs from hippotherapy, therapeutic horseback riding, and EAL because it focuses on the psychological aspect of treatment more than skill-building or equine maintenance. The clients can work through emotions and behavioral patterns that are a result of psychological disorders.

### **History of Equine-Assisted Therapy**

Although psychotherapists did not start treating psychological disorders with EAT until the mid-1900s, the use of horses in therapy has been practiced since the second century (White-Lewis, 2019, para. 2). The beginning practices of EAT focused mainly on using horses in physical healing. This can be seen in ancient Greece when they used horses to treat disabilities. The term "hippotherapy" is derived from the Greek term "hippo," meaning horse (GoodTherapy, 2017, para. 3). As time went on, physicians around the world started using horseback riding for treatment and rehabilitation (Boatwright, 2013, p. 4). People began recognizing equine therapy as a valid form of treatment, and in the 1960s, the first official equine therapy organizations were formed. In the 1990s, people began experimenting with equine therapy for psychological purposes. As a result, the Equine Mental Health Association was formed in 1996.

### ***Equine-Therapy in the Past***

Throughout history, horses have been revered as powerful beings that facilitate relational bonds with humans. This can be seen throughout Greek mythology and ancient literature. Greek philosopher, Xenophon, even wrote about this in 400 B.C. He taught his cavalry that if their horse is fearful of something, to gently show them that it is safe and reassure them that it is not a

threat to such a strong animal as they are (Vincent & Farkas, 2017, p. 2). This is a great representation of EAT and the bond between horses and humans.

Horses remained a large figure in literature and media as time went on. The stories about the horse-human connection and equine-facilitated healing continued to pique society's interest. This can be seen in movies such as *Black Beauty*, *Secretariat*, and *Flicka*. Although the relationship between horses and humans has been recognized for centuries throughout literature, film, and medicine, it was not until recently that the mental health-related fields began utilizing it as a valid form of treatment. The lack of historical evidence for EAP has made accessibility to treatment difficult for many.

### ***The Therapeutic Nature of Horses***

Those who work with horses for non-therapeutic reasons tend to experience similar benefits as those who intentionally do therapeutic work (Boatwright, 2013, p. 75). Therapeutic horseback riding and EAL are two forms of EAT that focus on learning how to ride the horse and take care of the horse. Through learning these skills, the clients experience various benefits. Those who work with horses in a non-therapeutic setting are engaging with horses in similar ways to those who are using horses in therapeutic ways. Although they may not recognize it, they are benefitting from a horse's unique ability to facilitate skill-building, healthy relationships, and emotional healing.

The use of horses has remained constant in the lives of many. Horses were originally used as a tool for farming, working, and transportation (Vincent & Farkas, 2017, p. 2). Even today horses are still used for these purposes. They can also be seen in recreational activities. These include sports like polo, horse racing, dressage, and rodeo. Horses are also used in many hobbies. These hobbies may include trail riding, pony rides, and horse shows. Those who work

with horses in these ways have great opportunities to build relationships with horses. The special horse-human relationship involved with these activities has helped to sustain equine use throughout the years.

### ***Equine-Therapy Today***

As aforementioned, the use of EAT for mental health purposes was not common until about thirty years ago. Although significant work can be accomplished within thirty years, the field of EAT is relatively new. The research evidence regarding EAT is slim, and the totality of benefits has yet to be discovered. Despite it being new, there has been some progress in finding evidence to support the benefits of EAT. The types of issues and disorders that can be treated with EAT range from slight learning disabilities to post-traumatic stress disorder in military veterans (Boatwright, 2013, p. 77). The impact of EAT is slowly being discovered, but there is still much work to be done.

### **Importance of Equine-Assisted Therapy**

EAT has become increasingly used for the past thirty years for a good reason. There are numerous benefits to EAT, but there are also numerous benefits to other forms of therapy. It is important to discuss why EAT is unique and necessary to research further. EAT offers a different approach to treatments for several disorders. For those who have tried mainstream modes of treatment, EAT offers a new perspective and hope to those who have seen little improvement with past treatments.

### ***Mainstream Treatment Methods***

There are five main approaches to psychotherapy (“Perspectives in Psychology,” 2021). They are the psychodynamic approach, the behavioral approach, the cognitive approach, the humanistic approach, and the biological approach. Within each approach are multiple different

treatment methods. Each method of treatment may have specific disorders or issues that it is used for more than others. Some of these treatment options are rarely used, but others have become mainstream treatment methods for a myriad of psychological disorders.

**The Psychodynamic Approach.** The psychoanalytic therapeutic approach was originally founded by Sigmund Freud. Freud's ideas were based on the premise that human behavior develops from unconscious desires and innate drives. The term "psychodynamic" refers to much more than just Freud. It includes all of the theories that were developed by the psychologists that followed his ideas. These theorists include people like Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, and Erik Erikson (Mcleod, 2019a).

Psychodynamic therapy is usually used to treat depression and anxiety disorders. This type of therapy is rooted in the belief that human behavior is strongly determined by the unconscious mind and uncontrollable drives. Some of the main focuses of psychodynamic theory are the unconscious mind, the human psyche (Id, Ego, Superego), defense mechanisms, and psychosexual development. The typical treatment methods used within this theoretical framework include dream analysis, free association, projective tests, and hypnosis. Although some still practice psychodynamic therapies, many have turned to more current treatment methods (Mcleod, 2019a).

**The Behavioral Approach.** Behavioral psychology was founded by John Watson in the early 1900s. The behaviorist theory states that all human behavior is learned through conditioning from environmental stimuli. Behaviorism mainly focuses on observable behavior and does not factor in free will. The idea is that everyone is born as a "blank slate" with no innate behaviors. Many behaviorists do acknowledge human emotion and cognition but do not like to study them. Behaviorism has reduced human behavior to only being a stimulus-response



interaction. Other behaviorists include B. F. Skinner, Ivan Pavlov, and Albert Bandura (Mcleod, 2017a).

Behavior therapy may help treat phobias, depression, aggression, and addiction. The treatments mainly focus on changing maladaptive behavior. Typical treatment methods may include aversion therapy, systematic desensitization, and behavior modification. Behavioristic theories are helpful because they provide clear insight into certain human or animal behaviors. However, the lack of emotional inclusion and the ignorance of free will make behaviorism less popular than other methods (Mcleod, 2017a).

**The Cognitive Approach.** Cognitive Psychology focuses on the human mind and how it accepts information, processes information, and makes sense of that information. This approach was created because many did not like the behavioristic approach and its view of behavior. Behaviorists focus on measurable, observable behavior. Cognitive theorists emphasize mental processes and how they interact with human behavior. Although mental processes are not as observable as behavior, cognitive theorists still use the scientific method to make conclusions about cognitive processes. Some cognitive theorists include Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Lawrence Kohlberg (Mcleod, 2015a).

Cognitive therapy is useful in many areas. Its uses can be seen in education, intelligence, memory, attention, and depression (Mcleod, 2015a). One main treatment method that utilizes cognitive therapy is cognitive-behavioral therapy. Cognitive-behavioral therapy, or CBT, uses talk therapy to combine cognition, emotion, and behavior. It is based on the premise that thoughts influence feelings and behavior. This type of treatment helps reduce psychological distress by changing the way people think (Mcleod, 2019b).

**The Humanistic Approach.** Humanistic psychology began during the 1970s and proposed the idea that people are basically good. It is rooted in the whole-person belief that each individual is unique and has free will. This approach was created in opposition to psychoanalytic and behavioristic theories. It does not agree with their statements that human behavior is determined by outside forces. Humanism became popular because it highlighted the individual and offered new methods of researching human behavior. Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow are two major proponents of the humanistic approach (Mcleod, 2015b).

A major part of the humanistic approach is that people have a desire to grow and reach self-actualization. Because of its qualitative nature, humanistic therapy does not prioritize the scientific method in its studies. It is more focused on gathering data through human interaction (e.g., journal entries, questionnaires, interviews, and observations). Humanistic therapy focuses on motivation, education, and self-worth. The main form of treatment utilized is client-centered therapy. This type of therapy is widely used to help people move past difficulties they encounter so that they can experience a higher quality of life (Mcleod, 2015b).

**The Biological Approach.** The biological approach to psychology focuses on the biological reasons behind human behavior. It addresses the connection between the mind and the body and how human behavior is impacted by it. This perspective is founded upon the belief that human behavior is directly caused by biology, and it is the only physical approach to psychology. Studying the brain from this approach means utilizing neurosurgery, electroencephalograms, and brain scans. It is important to understand that the biological approach has its roots in natural selection and evolution (Mcleod, 2017b).

The biological approach is important in psychotherapy because it offers biological perspectives on psychological disorders. This is a unique perspective that is vital to

understanding the human brain. Many disorders have genetic causes and need to be understood on a physical level. The biological approach can assist in the treatment of things such as abnormal psychology, stress, aggression, and sleep abnormalities. One method of treatment that can be related to the biological approach is the use of psychotropic drugs (McLeod, 2017b).

### ***Equine-Assisted Therapy Treatment Methods***

There is no direct answer on which theoretical approach EAT is based upon. This makes it more difficult for the research to have a consistent foundation. It has been proposed that EAT utilizes psychoanalytic theories, ecological theories, and humanistic theories. Many different theories have been applied to EAT, making for a more integrative approach to therapy. However, attachment theory has been proposed as an appropriate explanation for the importance of horse-human interactions (Vincent & Farkas, 2017, pp. 12-13).

John Bowlby's theory of attachment was initially proposed as an explanation of attachment styles between two or more people. Vincent and Farkas (2017) argue that it can be applied to the relationship between horses and humans. If this theory is valid, it can help support the idea that EAT is a relational therapeutic approach. Additionally, the existence of attachment theory in EAT can help offer secure attachments to those who may have been denied them in childhood. This theory offers hope for healing in those suffering from poor attachment styles and unhealthy relationships (pp. 13-14).

According to Lac, Marble, and Boie (2013), EAT utilizes the humanistic approach found in Gestalt psychotherapy (p. 7). Gestalt psychotherapy focuses on the relational therapeutic approach and the mind-body connection. The same is true for equine-assisted psychotherapy. Horses are relational animals that rely on one another for survival. Because of this, they are keenly aware of their surroundings at all times. This situational awareness grounds them in the

present moment. Horses do not meditate on the past or worry about the future. When clients interact with them, they, too, are forced to focus on the present moment.

The methods of treatment in EAT are special because they inadvertently force the client to switch their focus off of themselves and onto the horse. The treatment is often subtle, unlike typical methods of treatment like talk therapy or aversion therapy. Horses can sense what humans are feeling, even when humans are unable to recognize their feelings (Boatwright, 2013, p. 76). This is a unique tool utilized in EAT that cannot be found in other methods of treatment. The horse's innate ability to feel what humans feel is extremely valuable. This is especially helpful in the treatment of anger management, emotional awareness, and lack of empathy. These methods of treatment found within EAT offer different treatment options for those who may have trouble with mainstream methods. The introduction of the animal and the change in environment bring a different perspective to the healing journey for clients.

### **Literature Review**

Although empirical research on equine-assisted therapy is limited, there remains a good number of studies that display the benefits of EAT as a valid form of treatment. The proposal of EAT being incorporated into regular modes of therapy is supported by many researchers. Because of the emphasis on hippotherapy in the past, there tends to be more research on the physical benefits of EAT rather than psychological benefits. However, the lack of research leaves room for many studies to be done in the future. The literature surrounding hippotherapy, equine-assisted learning, therapeutic horseback riding, and equine-assisted psychotherapy will be analyzed.

### **Hippotherapy**

According to Abdel Ghafar et al. (2022), hippotherapy “involves specially trained physiotherapists using the horse as a therapeutic tool to deliver 3-dimensional stimuli to the musculoskeletal system of the rider” (p. 2). This form of therapy focuses on treating physical disorders and pain. Although not a psychiatric form of therapy, hippotherapy still offers psychological relief. Chronic pain and the stress of physical disorders can cause extreme mental distress. Through hippotherapy, one’s mental health can benefit from the relief of physical pain.

Hippotherapy has an extensive history. Dating back to 460 B.C., using horses to aid in healing has been practiced around the world (Peterson, n.d.). It became more well-known when equestrian Liz Hartel won an Olympic medal and shared how the incorporation of horseback riding assisted in healing her from polio. In the 1960s, the western world became more acquainted with hippotherapy as therapeutic riding centers began to develop. The North American Riding for the Handicapped Association was formed in 1969, and physical therapists began utilizing horses in treatment in the 1970s. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, hippotherapy became more standardized and the American Hippotherapy Association (AHA Inc.) was formed. As time went on, AHA Inc. began to regulate standards for treatment and hippotherapy became a more credible form of treatment.

### ***Hippotherapy in Action***

A common condition often treated with hippotherapy is cerebral palsy. Cerebral palsy affects one’s motor skills, balance, and muscle strength. It is usually the reason for motor disabilities in children. Because of the nature of this condition, therapy is often needed for many years. Clients and therapists may have a difficult time finding new treatment methods that are effective as well as exciting. Hippotherapy offers a unique style of therapy that is fun and beneficial for everyone involved (Lightsey, Lee, Krenek, & Hur, 2021, p. 2).

Hippotherapy for individuals with cerebral palsy involves focusing on the client's form while riding the horse. This can include the way they sit, their movements, and how they interact with the horse's movements. To properly ride a horse, the rider must interact with the movements of the horse. One must appropriately respond to the movements so that the horse can continue moving naturally. The horse's pelvis moves in a more complicated fashion than that of humans, causing the rider to adjust accordingly. Because of this, those with cerebral palsy are forced to change their position back to a state of normalcy. This forced adjustment helps the rider's body move in a new way, overall benefitting their motor skills (Lightsey, Lee, Krenek, & Hur, 2021, p. 2).

In a study done by Lightsey, Lee, Krenek, and Hur (2021), they took four children with cerebral palsy and put them in eight sessions of hippotherapy. They analyzed functional mobility through different tests and measurements. They found that the children's movements improved throughout the therapy sessions. Interestingly, their movements seemed to have synchronized with the horse's movements. The horse's gait is similar to that of humans, causing those with abnormal gaits to move with a normal gait pattern in therapy sessions. This correction can cause improvements in the children's mobility (Abstract).

Another condition that may benefit from hippotherapy is scoliosis. In a study done by Abdel Ghafar et al. (2022), researchers studied the effect of hippotherapy on adolescents with idiopathic scoliosis. Scoliosis is a spinal condition that affects the chest wall, thoracic cage, and respiratory muscles (p. 1). Forty-five participants received fifteen sessions of hippotherapy. During these sessions, the participants rode the horse in different positions as it was walking or trotting. To help assist with spinal adjustment, they were occasionally asked to ride with their arms in various positions such as above their head or out to their sides. At times, a pad was

placed underneath the rider's pelvis to correct lumbar convexity (p. 3). The results showed that hippotherapy displayed "improved pulmonary function and aerobic capacity in adolescents with idiopathic scoliosis" (Abstract).

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is another condition that has been studied in relation to hippotherapy. MS is a disease that affects the central nervous system, resulting in many different chronic muscular problems in the individual. Those with MS have trouble controlling their movements, balance, and gait. A review done by Lavín-Pérez et al. (2022) gathered ten studies and analyzed their results. These displayed "positive effects on quality of life, fatigue, balance, spasticity, gait speed...and postural control" (Abstract).

### ***Benefits of Hippotherapy***

It has been shown that hippotherapy does produce positive results in those dealing with common medical conditions such as cerebral palsy, scoliosis, and multiple sclerosis. The benefits of hippotherapy are not limited to only assisting with these conditions. It can be hypothesized that hippotherapy may be a beneficial form of treatment for a wide range of physical ailments and disorders. Specifically, those that hinder muscle movements, gait, balance, posture, and strength. Incorporating hippotherapy into the treatment of other physical conditions should be considered.

Collado-Mateo et al. (2020) note that when individuals suffer from chronic pain, it causes a decrease in quality of life. They state that chronic levels of pain can even lead to psychological problems like depression (p. 1). Additionally, the impact of chronic pain on the overall lifestyle of someone is negative. It not only potentially causes depression, but can also hinder one's ability to perform daily tasks. This may lead to losses of jobs and an overall decline in health. This added stress only worsens one's mental health. EAT is beneficial for those suffering from

psychological pain as well as physical pain. Both are important, and both can benefit from the incorporation of EAT.

### **Equine-Assisted Learning**

One category of EAT that teaches social skills, life skills, and communication skills is called equine-assisted learning, or EAL. According to Jung, Park, Kwon, and Sohn (2022), EAL is a unique program in which people can learn how to navigate emotional and behavioral issues with the help of horses (p. 3). EAL utilizes less psychotherapy and more education-based approaches. The clients psychologically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally benefit from learning horsemanship. The learning is facilitated by program leaders through constant feedback and individual attention. Some programs incorporate group sessions to assist clients with social skills. Participants are able to gain personal awareness, interpersonal skills, confidence, empathy, self-efficacy, problem-solving skills, and much more through EAL.

EAL may be beneficial for anyone needing to gain the aforementioned skills. It also helps those who may be struggling with these skills due to a psychological disorder. Although EAL can be helpful for anyone of any age, the effects of EAL may be particularly beneficial for children, those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and those with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Children are often in need of skill-building through experiential learning. This is precisely what EAL aims to do. Those with ASD may struggle with social, interpersonal, and communication skills. These are two areas that EAL heavily focuses on. Individuals with ADHD may struggle with giving their attention to one task or person at a time, therefore needing help in these areas as well. Due to the nature of ASD and ADHD, the onset is typical during childhood (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2022). The combination of these facts leads to the assumption that EAL may be highly beneficial for children with ASD or ADHD.



### *Autism Spectrum Disorder*

According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA) (2013), "Autism spectrum disorder is characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, including deficits in social reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, and skills in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships" (p. 31). Additionally, to diagnose someone with ASD, there must be "restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities" (p. 50). These may include things such as lining up objects, echolalia (repetition of speech), extreme dislike of change, hyperfixations, or severe reactions to sensory input or stimuli. These symptoms usually arise in children during the early stages of development and may progress as they grow. ASD causes clinically significant distress in the daily functioning of these individuals. Just because someone may not like change or gets anxious in overstimulating situations does not mean they have ASD. The symptoms must be clinical and impair normal life.

**Causes of Autism Spectrum Disorder.** Understanding the etiology of different disorders is important. The underlying belief that one has about the causation of a disorder can affect the way one approaches treatment. For example, if a parent believes that their child's depression is a result of spiritual causes, then they would be more likely to take their child to church than to a doctor. If the true cause of their depression is biological or environmental, then the child may never receive the help that they need. The same can be said for those with ASD. If a parent believes that their child has ASD because of a vaccine they got as a baby, then they will go about treatment in a different manner than parents who believe their child's ASD was caused by prescription drug use during pregnancy. However, there are repercussions if the treatment plan is

based on an inaccurate assumption. Understanding the root cause of ASD is not simple, so choosing the correct treatment plan may be difficult for many.

There are many ongoing debates about the true causes of ASD. Some people believe it is caused by vaccines; others believe it can be caused by mercury poisoning. Although one singular cause cannot be unanimously agreed upon, Fleury and Kemper (2022) note that genetics, parental age, and drugs that were taken while the mom was pregnant with the child are the leading causes of ASD (p. 3). Since there is a lack of clear evidence on what causes ASD, many people do not know what to believe. They come to their own conclusions based on what they see or hear around them. This can lead to a lot of misinformation and mistreatment of ASD. Without a clear cause, it is difficult to have a clear treatment plan. Many therapies that have been used have been harmful or ineffective (Fleury & Kemper, 2022, p. 3). This makes it very difficult for those with ASD or caretakers of those with ASD to find evidence-based tools to help them.

**Typical Treatments for Autism Spectrum Disorder.** Discussing the treatment of ASD can be complex because there is no universal treatment for ASD. As the name states, autism is on a spectrum. One person with ASD may look completely different than another person with ASD. The disorder itself can be seen as one name placed on a myriad of symptoms and behaviors. Someone with ASD may exhibit more subtle behaviors like a misunderstanding of social cues or sensory overload. Another person with ASD may exhibit more extreme behaviors like speech delays or catatonia (APA, 2013, p. 51). These two people, while both having ASD, need to receive different modes of treatment.

Although ASD cannot be eliminated with some medication or therapy, there are ways to assist in lessening maladaptive behaviors and increasing positive behaviors or skills. According to Hyman, Levy, Myers, and AAP Council on Children with Disabilities, Section on

developmental and behavioral pediatrics (2020), there are three main goals in treating those with ASD (p. 20). These goals are to minimize negative qualities like a lack of social skills or hyperfixations, maximize their independence by helping the children build these skills, and prevent behaviors that cause issues in everyday functioning. There are multiple types of approaches to treatment for ASD. These include ABA (Applied Behavioral Analysis), developmental relationship-focused interventions, naturalistic developmental behavioral intervention, combined approaches, and parent-mediated treatment or parent management training (pp. 21-24). These different approaches to intervention may not eliminate ASD in the individual, but they are a start in the process of reducing the impact it can have on one's life.

**Equine-Assisted Learning Applied to Autism Spectrum Disorder.** Children with ASD suffer from a lack of normal social and communication skills (APA, 2013, p. 57). As a result, they may have learning difficulties. EAL offers a unique way for those with ASD to learn these social and communication skills. A study done by Borgi et al. (2016) found that social functioning, ameliorated executive abilities, and motor skills were improved during EAT (p. 5). They state that the interaction with animals in this way can be used as an effective tool in treating those who struggle with social withdrawal (pp. 5-6). Animals bring a special quality to treatment plans, emotionally connecting with the clients. This is a form of treatment that cannot be replicated by medicine, talk therapy, or in classrooms.

There are many other studies that have been conducted that show positive results for treating those with ASD with EAL. Peters, Wood, Hepburn, and Bundy (2020) found that the physical aspects of learning horsemanship (grooming, tacking, and riding) can improve behavioral regulation in those with ASD (p. 2). They go on to mention the benefits of EAL in decreasing irritability, hyperactivity, and aggression. These are significant changes for those with

ASD. EAL not only helps those with ASD interact with others, but it also helps with their emotional regulation, creating a more peaceful internal state. A different study done by Dawson et al. (2022) utilized an EAL curriculum that focused on youth with ASD learning how to interact, communicate, and build bonds with the horses (p. 4). They discovered that overall social functioning was improved based on the participants' involvement in EAL (p. 16). It has been displayed in several studies that EAL does assist with the symptoms of ASD.

### ***Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder***

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder is another disorder that affects many children. The APA (2013) describes ADHD as "a neurodevelopmental disorder defined by impairing levels of inattention, disorganization, and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity. Inattention and disorganization entail inability to stay on task, seeming not to listen, and losing materials, at levels that are inconsistent with age or developmental level" (p. 32). ADHD is found in about five percent of children and has no biological marker that can be used to diagnose the disorder (p. 61). Thus, most of the diagnostic features are behavioral. There are temperamental, environmental, and genetic risk factors for those with ADHD (p. 62). Traits like reduced behavioral inhibition, low birth weight, and first-degree relatives with ADHD can all increase the risk of a child developing the disorder, but they are not innate causes. The effects of ADHD can cause significant distress in children and adults. In children, it may affect their ability to perform well in school or get along with other children; in adults, it can cause things such as poor achievement and punctuality, increasing the chances of unemployment (p. 63). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), ADHD can be treated with behavior therapy and medications. EAL may be a potential form of treatment for this disorder.

### **Equine-Assisted Learning Applied to Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.**

Utilizing EAT in treatment plans for those with ADHD has not been studied as much as its use in the treatment of other conditions. A systematic review was done by White, Zippel, and Kumar (2020) to explore the benefits of EAT for those with ADHD. In this review, ten valid studies were found and analyzed. They found that only a few of the studies they researched produced statistically significant results (p. 4). Overall, there were generally positive results in behavioral symptoms, although some tests noted there was no change between certain groups. When assessing psychological symptoms, there was an overall improvement in those with depression and anxiety, but less improvement in self-esteem. There were also general improvements in physical symptoms (p. 5). The researchers concluded that although there were some improvements in all areas, the lack of statistically significant results suggests that caution must be used when interpreting the effects of EAT on those with ADHD and that more research needs to be conducted.

There could be potential benefits in utilizing EAT for those with ADHD, but the lack of current research hinders further confirmation. EAL has been shown to be beneficial for those with ASD. The behavioral and emotional results shown from its incorporation in treatment for those with ASD suggest potential results when applied to the treatment of other disorders with behavioral and emotional impacts. Children with ADHD may benefit from further research on the effects of EAT on ADHD symptoms and behaviors.

### **Therapeutic Horseback Riding**

Therapeutic horseback riding is another form of EAT that is mainly used for treating those with cognitive and learning disabilities (Aviv, Katz, & Berant, 2021, p. 2). With the assistance of horses and therapists, participants are able to work on emotional awareness and

interpersonal relationships through horseback riding, grooming the horses, working in the stables, and training the horses. It is through these given tasks that participants are able to utilize executive functions such as planning, working memory, and emotional and behavioral self-regulation. The therapists work with the participants to help them set specific goals while working with the horses. The horses and the therapists may give positive reinforcement when the participants accomplish their goals. When the participants fail to meet their goals or mess up, the horses usually respond in a negative way because they mirror human behaviors. This gives the therapist an opportunity to explain what did not work and use the horse as a feedback tool. The participants are then able to work through their failures and explore new ways of meeting their goals, exercising their executive functioning skills.

### ***Benefits of Therapeutic Horseback Riding***

There are many benefits for those who participate in therapeutic horseback riding. These benefits may be emotional, social, psychological, or even physical. According to Kemeny, Burk, Hutchins, and Gramlich (2022), multiple sessions of therapeutic horseback riding displayed significant decreases in cortisol levels in those with ASD (p. 15). Being around, taking care of, and riding the horses introduces a tactile way for participants to lower their stress levels. Those with cognitive disabilities may have a more difficult time participating in psychological de-escalation methods. Therapeutic horseback riding might be an easier option than utilizing mindfulness or meditation for some because of the hands-on approach. Additionally, Aviv, Katz, and Berant (2021) report that children with ADHD that participated in twenty weeks of therapeutic horseback riding displayed higher executive functioning and self-esteem (p. 8). The repeated executive function exercises allowed participants to grow in their abilities, therefore positively impacting their self-esteem. Another study done by Zhao, Chen, You, Wang, and

Zhang (2021) found that children with ASD that participated in a sixteen-week therapeutic horseback riding program displayed higher functioning in social skills, communication, responsibility, and self-control (p. 9). The benefits of therapeutic horseback riding cover a multitude of areas. It not only helps participants internally but also externally. Their skills, competence, and relationships may all be positively impacted as a result.

### ***Therapeutic Horseback Riding Applied to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder***

Not only has therapeutic horseback riding been applied to cognitive and learning disabilities, but it is also beginning to be applied to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Johnson et al., 2021, p. 1). The form of EAT that has been mainly used in treating PTSD is EAP. However, the study conducted by Johnson et al. specifically focused on therapeutic horseback riding. The etiology and treatment of PTSD will be further discussed later on. For now, the background of PTSD will be briefly summarized to give context surrounding this study.

**A Brief Background of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.** PTSD is a disorder that may occur after a traumatic event, and it persists for longer than one month (APA, 2013, pp. 276-279). It entails many symptoms like flashbacks, nightmares, hypervigilance, intrusive thoughts, and mood dysregulation, amongst many others due to experiencing a traumatic event (pp. 271-274). These traumatic events may include but are not limited to being involved in a war, experiencing abuse, experiencing attacks, obtaining severe physical injuries, or the sudden loss of a loved one. Many may experience the symptoms for only a few months after onset, but others may experience it for decades. PTSD may be treated with various forms of psychotherapy or medications.

**Therapeutic Horseback Riding to Treat Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.** A study conducted by Johnson et al. (2021) looked at U. S. military veterans that had been diagnosed

with PTSD or traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) and how therapeutic horseback riding may positively impact their health. PTSD and TBIs are comorbid, therefore some of the veterans were experiencing one or both conditions (APA, 2013, p. 280). Johnson et al. (2021) hypothesized that “the relaxation that occurs when people engage in THR, coupled with a sense of horseback riding mastery, and stress-reducing physical activity may be the mechanisms through which THR could benefit those with PTSD” (p. 2).

In this study, twenty veterans participated in a six-week-long therapeutic horseback riding program. They were matched with a horse that would best serve their needs, and they rode the same horse for one hour every week. These sessions consisted of learning basic horsemanship (learning about the horses, proper grooming skills, proper mounting and dismounting form, how to tack up the horse (putting the riding equipment on the horse), and how to interact with the horse), safety protocols, and riding the horses (p. 3).

The overall results were positive. Many participants experienced a deep connection to their horses. They believed that the horses could understand what they were feeling and that they built a relationship with them (p. 3). Others stated that the experience was relaxing and stress-reducing. They were able to shift their focus off of their problems and onto the tasks at hand. Some recorded that they experienced a complete shift in moods. They were now more empathetic towards animals and had a more positive attitude (p. 4).

The depth of impact displayed in the results of this study is profound. When surveyed afterward, many reported a deep appreciation for the program and the horses. They would reference the horses by name and talk about them as if they were a friend (p. 6). The experience made some participants emotional and report that they anticipate missing the horse. All participants reported that they would recommend therapeutic horseback riding, specifically to



anyone with PTSD or depression (p. 7). Many stated that the experience made them more confident, more empathetic, gentler, and allowed them to experience connection in ways they have not felt in a long time. Participants experienced relief from stress, a great feat for those with PTSD. Those with PTSD need to have moments where they can feel relaxed, at peace, gentle, and deeply connected to another being. Therapeutic horseback riding offers that and has proven to be a helpful tool in the treatment of PTSD.

### ***Therapeutic Horseback Riding Applied to Those with Disabilities***

It has been previously stated that EAT assists with physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy and multiple sclerosis, as well as assisting with cognitive disabilities such as ASD and ADHD. A study done by Lovrić, Farčić, Mikšić, and Gvozdanović Debeljak (2020) aimed to assess the benefits of therapeutic horseback riding on children with varying types of disabilities. They mainly focused on the parent's perceptions of their children's improvements. In this study, the researchers assessed these improvements over twenty-four weeks of therapeutic horseback riding. There were thirteen children that continued with the program, participating in twenty-five-minute sessions once per week. Of the thirteen children, the disabilities assessed during this program included but were not limited to intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy, down syndrome, DiGeorge syndrome, ASD, speech and language impairment, learning disabilities, sensory integration disorder, and psychophysical development retardation (pp. 3-4).

Throughout the six months, the parents observed changes in their children and recorded them on given forms (p. 5). The results showed "that parents of 11 children recorded only positive changes in their children's basic life needs, whereas parents of two children...did not record any changes" (p. 6). The improvements recorded were displayed in the children's basic life needs such as breathing, clothing, safety, learning and curiosity satisfaction, elimination,

hygiene, rest and sleep, play and recreation, nutrition, movement and posturing, and communication. The professionals involved in the therapeutic process also recorded progress notes. They stated that there were improvements in collaboration, communication, attention and mental concentration, motor skills, spatial and temporal orientation, and emotional control (p. 10). It is clear that there is a multitude of significant improvements in those with disabilities because of therapeutic horseback riding. One parent even stated:

I think my child's contact with the horse is a key factor in all the improvements. This is indisputable. We had previously and unsuccessfully tried with various other therapies and failed. [Therapeutic horseback riding] has improved our child's quality of life. (p. 11)

Therapeutic horseback riding provides a hopeful alternative to treatment for those with disabilities. On its own or in addition to other therapies or medications, it would be a beneficial therapeutic option for many.

### **Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy**

The fourth category of EAT is equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP). This form of EAT is focused less on skill-building or physical therapy and more on attending to coping strategies for psychological disorders like PTSD, anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. It utilizes a mental health therapist along with an equine specialist so that participants with mental illness may find treatment (Boatwright, 2013, p. 76).

The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) provides a universal standard for EAP and has created a model with parameters to ensure quality treatments (Harvey, Jedlicka, & Martinez, 2020, p. 3). The goal is for EAP to become incorporated into standard treatment methods. EAGALA has its own approach to EAP methods. The approach is different from other forms of EAT because it includes more work on the ground and no riding inside the

arena. Horses are used alongside mental health therapists and equine specialists, all working together to assist clients in coping with psychological challenges. The horses are not just bystanders but are viewed as part of the team. They are herd and prey animals, meaning that they are keenly aware of their surroundings and the feelings of others at all times. These are unique traits that greatly assist in the healing process.

### ***A Continued Discussion on Post-traumatic Stress Disorder***

PTSD was already briefly discussed in the “Therapeutic Horseback Riding” section; however, continued discussion is needed to fully understand how this disorder is impacted by EAP. It is a disorder that significantly impacts lives. As previously stated, it is caused when someone experiences a traumatic event. Trauma can be defined as experiencing an event that causes physical or psychological threat or harm (APA, 2013, p. 271). Symptoms cause significant distress and may include flashbacks, nightmares, irrational behavior, or may cause the development of other psychological disorders like obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), depression, or anxiety (p. 280). The symptoms may show up immediately after the event, or it may take a few months to develop (p. 276). They must last for at least one month and may continue to impact the individual for years to come (p. 277).

There are many treatment methods for PTSD. According to the American Psychological Association (2020), treatments may include cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), cognitive processing therapy (CPT), cognitive therapy, prolonged exposure, brief eclectic psychotherapy, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, narrative exposure therapy (NET), and medications like sertraline, paroxetine, fluoxetine, and venlafaxine. Many forms of CBT are strongly recommended for treating PTSD. Despite the available treatments, they may not work for everybody and others may not want to be involved in these therapies or have to take

medications (Arnon et al., 2020, p. 2). Oftentimes, when someone is suffering from PTSD, they might not ever receive treatment. This can be due to a lack of understanding, misinformation, fear, or stigma surrounding mental health treatment. Those who receive treatment may leave or stop taking medications due to the adverse side effects. EAP offers a new mode of treatment for those who have not had success with normal treatment options.

**Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy in Military Veterans.** According to Arnon et al. (2020), ninety-five percent of those who have served in the military experience highly traumatic events (p. 1). However, they have a hard time asking for help. Less than half of the veterans involved in the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attack that tested positive for a mental health disorder sought treatment (p. 2). EAP is unique and provides a novel therapeutic experience for many. Because of this, some may be more inclined to try this mode of treatment. Arnon et al. (2020) go on to write that many patients were excited about this form of therapy and wanted to complete the ongoing treatments (p. 6). This is a significant change in attitude than seen before in typical CBT treatments.

Despite the benefits that have come from utilizing EAT in those with PTSD, many still wonder if it is a valid form of therapy. A study conducted by Shelef et al. (2019) found that EAT is an effective form of therapy for those with PTSD (p. 5). They had thirteen participants complete their six-month-long study. Each participant experienced EAT for three hours each week, doing a combination of grooming, riding, and groundwork (p. 2). After the study was completed, the researchers found a significant decrease in PTSD symptoms and improved daily functioning (p. 5). Furthermore, another study conducted by Sylvia et al. (2020) found that utilizing EAT is an acceptable form of adjunct treatment for those with PTSD and TBIs (Abstract).

Involving the partners of veterans with PTSD in EAT could be another way to help reduce symptoms and encourage healing. Another study by Romaniuk, Evans, and Kidd (2018) included veterans' partners in the EAT process. This study aimed to assess the benefits of EAT in veterans who identified as "wounded, injured, or ill" and their partners' involvement in decreasing the effects of PTSD, depression, anxiety, or stress and improving their quality of life and happiness (Abstract). They found that "Independent samples t-tests revealed participants in the Couples program reported significantly less symptoms of depression, stress, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at follow-up compared to participants in the Individual program" (Abstract). This displays that perhaps the involvement of partners in the treatment of wounded veterans in EAT could increase the benefits of the program and help to decrease the symptoms.

### ***Benefits of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy in Treating Anxiety and Depression***

**Anxiety.** According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), anxiety is "anticipation of future threat" (APA, 2013, p. 189). The perceived threat may be real or imagined, but the feelings are the same. This can be a particularly debilitating disorder for children. They are not as experienced in the world as adults and are often already fearful. With the addition of anxiety, it can be difficult for children to function properly. Typical anxiety disorders may include separation anxiety disorder, selective mutism, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, phobias, and generalized anxiety disorder (pp. 189-190). Many anxiety disorders develop in childhood and tend to get worse if left untreated (p. 189).

Childhood anxiety is becoming increasingly more common, yet half of those struggling with it do not receive proper treatment (Acri et al., 2021, p. 1). Typical treatments for anxiety include CBT and medications like selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) (p. 2).

Similarly to veterans with PTSD, children with anxiety may not receive treatment due to stigma, mistrust of mental healthcare providers, or long waitlists. The lack of treatment is concerning when there may be more acceptable and accessible treatment options. EAP remains one of those alternative options for those with anxiety.

Acri et al. (2021) implemented five known elements of anxiety treatment into EAT and recorded the results. These five elements included: in vivo exposure; cognitive concepts of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors being connected; client psychoeducation; relaxation; and parent/caregiver psychoeducation (p. 3). Their developed program was called “Reining in Anxiety” and consisted of ten weekly one-hour sessions with children. During these sessions, the children would groom and connect with the horses, warm up the horses and themselves, participate in the session activity, cool down with the horses, participate in parent/caregiver psychoeducation, and listen to homework instructions for the week (p. 5). This study displayed that this newly developed program can be implemented as an alternative option for anxiety treatment.

**Depression.** According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), depressive disorders include but are not limited to disruptive mood dysregulation disorder, major depressive disorder, persistent depressive disorder, and premenstrual dysphoric disorder (APA, 2013, p. 155). These disorders can all be identified by a “sad, empty, or irritable mood, accompanied by somatic and cognitive changes that significantly affect the individual’s capacity to function” (p. 155). In many of the aforementioned articles examined in this paper, relief of depression or depressive symptoms has been a common result of EAT. The study done by Sauer and Gill (2020) specifically focuses on treating disruptive mood dysregulation disorder with EAT.

Disruptive mood dysregulation disorder (DMDD) is a relatively new diagnosis recently added to the DSM-5. It is characterized by “the presentation of children with persistent irritability and frequent episodes of extreme behavioral dyscontrol” (APA, 2013, p. 155). It is only diagnosable for children ages six to eighteen, and many children with it develop other depressive or anxiety disorders as they age. Some of the diagnostic criteria for DMDD include consistent temper outbursts, developmentally inconsistent outbursts, and persistent angry or irritable mood (p. 156). Treatment of DMDD is often difficult. The recommended modes of treatment are medication, CBT, and parent-training interventions (Sauer & Gill, 2020, p. 2).

The study conducted by Sauer and Gill (2020) aimed to use EAT through an Adlerian lens in treating a teenager with DMDD (p. 2). A major part of Adler’s theory is that many people view themselves and others through their lifestyle goals and rules (p. 3). Sometimes, people’s goals and rules are dysfunctional. For those with DMDD, these dysfunctional goals may include “[attention-getting], power struggle, revenge, and demonstration of inadequacy” (p. 3). Understanding the client’s goals is important in treating their maladaptive behavior. However, this may be difficult for a client to do in talk therapy. Utilizing animals in therapy may ease this pressure and allow clients to receive feedback within a safe and comforting environment.

The study focuses on a teenage boy named Dan. Dan’s behavior meets the criteria for DMDD, and it has impacted his ability to sustain positive self-regulation, work, friendship, and love. He has an absent father and an unreliable mother, as well as a lack of friendships due to his behavior. The researchers utilize the psychotherapy structure developed by the EAGALA. The therapeutic sessions involve observation, relationship, movement/no movement, and creation (p. 8). All of these are done utilizing a horse and equine specialist rather than a typical talk therapy session. The results displayed that Adlerian therapy and EAT can be used to treat behavioral

problems in those with DMDD (p. 12). This study provides hope for those who have had minimal progress in utilizing typical modes of treatment for DMDD.

### ***Benefits of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy in Treating Eating Disorders***

Another area in which EAP can help is eating disorders. The DSM-5 describes eating disorders as “a persistent disturbance of eating or eating-related behavior that results in the altered consumption or absorption of food and that significantly impairs physical health or psychosocial functioning” (APA, 2013, p. 329). Some of these disorders include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge-eating disorder, and avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder. Eating disorders are often caused by relational and cultural environments (Lac, Marble, & Boie, 2013, p. 2). This can mean familial environments, friendship dynamics, or cultural expectations. In late adolescence and into adulthood, even genetics may begin to play a strong role in the development of disordered eating (p. 3). Eating disorders are becoming increasingly prevalent; a dangerous realization as they are the most deadly psychiatric disorders (pp. 2-3).

Common treatment methods for eating disorders focus on biological and psychological influences (p. 5). These may include treatments like inpatient programs, CBT, and dialectical behavioral therapy. However, some of the main causes of eating disorders are the relational and sociocultural influences on individuals. Focusing on the relational and social influences in treatment may bring healing to areas that have previously been ignored. The main idea of relational approaches to eating disorder treatment is that eating disorders do not develop without unhealthy social and relational patterns, behaviors, and influences (p. 6). They develop because of these negative relational impacts. EAP offers a relational approach to treating eating disorders.

Lac, Marble, and Boie (2013) propose Gestalt psychotherapy as a means of treatment for eating disorders. Gestalt therapy focuses on the mind-body connection as well as relational



processes (p. 6). Both of these influence disordered eating patterns and behaviors. Interestingly, both of these are also involved when integrating Gestalt therapy and EAP (p. 7). The mind-body connection and being relational are instinctive to horses. Because of their herd nature, horses are forced to be keenly aware of their surroundings. This includes their own feelings and the feelings of those around them. They live in the present moment and those who interact with horses are forced to focus on it, too. This may be especially beneficial for those with eating disorders because it forces them to focus less on anxiety, their appearance, social expectations, and food. Additionally, horses are naturally skeptical and cautious. In order for someone new to interact with horses, they must earn the horses' trust. This creates a relationship between the horse and the individual. The horses will stay aware of the individual's emotions and react accordingly. As the authors state, "the relational nature of horses can help facilitate the healing process for those suffering from eating disorders" (p. 8).

Although there is not an overwhelming amount of evidence to prove EAP's effect on eating disorders, many still believe that it is a potential option for those seeking alternative modes of treatment (Cumella, 2003, p. 1). The newness of research on EAT has restricted the amount of empirical data, but animal-assisted therapy in general has proven to be highly effective in treating many disorders. The logic behind utilizing horses in psychotherapy is sound, the research just needs to prove it.

Hippotherapy, equine-assisted learning, therapeutic horseback riding, and equine-assisted psychotherapy are all different forms of equine-assisted therapy. Although some of their techniques overlap, they each have a distinct purpose. All forms of EAT are intended to help treat either physical or psychological disorders, conditions, and setbacks. EAT is a great alternative treatment, adjunct treatment, or stand-alone treatment for those who are interested in

more holistic forms of therapy. The incorporation of horses into the therapy sessions creates a sense of novelty for clients. It may provide comfort and unique relational bonds that cannot be created with traditional forms of therapy. It offers a type of treatment free of stigmas and negative social underpinnings, creating a more welcoming environment. More research should be conducted to provide undeniable evidence in support of EAT becoming a more mainstream form of treatment. EAT continues to provide a wholesome and beneficial mode of therapy for many.

### **Biblical Teaching**

In the field of Christian caregiving and counseling, it is important that each individual develops their own theology on the topic. Many may not believe that Christians should seek out therapy or counseling outside of the church. They believe that receiving salvation and having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is enough. While I do believe that Jesus Christ is enough, sometimes seeking out earthly forms of healing, comfort, and counsel is a wise choice. God has given humans certain giftings to impart healing to others. He has also given us His Holy Spirit to help assist us in caring for those in need. Being a Christian does not mean that we should neglect those around us and tell them that God will fix them. It means that we show love and compassion to the broken. It means that we should live our lives according to Jesus' example; not that we sit back and ignore problems simply because "God is enough." Mental illness is something that should be talked about just as much as physical illness is in the church. You cannot be physically healthy and mentally ill and expect harmony. God not only cares about our physical healing, but our mental, emotional, and spiritual healing as well.

### **Counseling Theology**

The field of counseling is a form of ministry. Counselors care for the brokenhearted and aid in their healing process. This is what Jesus did here on earth in His ministry. He performed many healing miracles (New Living Translation Bible, 1996/2015, Luke 5:12-26; Luke 6:19; Luke 9:6; Luke 13:32). His efforts display His great love for the wounded. This is exactly how we should be living our lives as well.

The extraordinary love of God is what leads us to Him. Utilizing alternative forms of therapy to impart healing in others is showing God's love. Creating new unconventional ways to assist those in pain displays the same love that was given to us by Him. Equine-assisted therapy is an example of this. It shows clients that we are willing to meet them where they are, just as God would. Even when traditional forms of treatment may not be working, there are people who are willing to go out of their way to discover unconventional ways to heal their pain. This is exactly the character of God. It displays a great amount of love and care that aligns with the heart of the gospel.

### **God as Our Counselor**

In addition to utilizing earthly counselors, God is also a counselor. When both are used at the same time, great levels of healing can take place. Isaiah 9:6 says, "For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (New Living Translation Bible, 1996/2015). God cares for us so much that He sent Jesus to be our counselor and source of peace. Additionally, in Psalm 32:8, the Lord says, "I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you." God, Himself is telling us that He will guide us and give us advice. He was intentional in creating our emotions, and He cares deeply about the

pain that we go through. Even though we are not promised a life free from hardships, He wants to see us succeed.

Just as God cares for our pain, so should we also care for the pain of others. In 1 Thessalonians 5:14 it says, “Brothers and sisters, we urge you to warn those who are lazy. Encourage those who are timid. Take tender care of those who are weak. Be patient with everyone.” Here, it is clear that Paul has instructed us to be compassionate, empathetic, and patient with others, for this is God’s will. This is what a counselor aims to do. They do not ignore the emotional pain in others, but they acknowledge it and mourn with them. They take care of the broken and are patient with them in their healing process. Similarly, this is how horses are as well. They can feel the emotions of others and help them understand their pain. God’s design of horses’ emotional intelligence was intentional. In the same way that doctors can use plants to facilitate physical healing, I believe that counselors can use animals to facilitate psychological healing. God gave us everything we need to thrive on this earth, and horses are no exception.

### **Application**

Equine-assisted therapy can be very beneficial in the realm of Christian caregiving and counseling. Not only does it involve caring for the broken, but it also involves a part of God’s creation. Nature can be very healing physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Combining animals, therapy, and God in order to facilitate healing in others is a strategic way to ensure maximum healing efforts for clients. When horses are not used in therapy sessions, healing can still take place. However, when they become an additional aspect of the therapeutic process, there is an added layer of healing. In a regular talk therapy session, the client may be anxious and their cortisol levels may be high. If the therapy session happens with a therapeutic horse working as an active participant as well, the client may experience lower levels of anxiety and cortisol,

creating a more calm experience. Simply having the animal present may help the sessions go smoother.

Despite the benefits of EAT, there is a lack of accessible, beneficial programs. Many may not be able to access an EAT facility near them. Others may not be able to afford it, as it is not universally covered by insurance companies. There are some studies that show a promising future for EAT, but some lack evidence. This is part of the struggle in developing more EAT programs. Many researchers agree that there is great potential for EAT to assist with numerous physical and psychological conditions. In the future, there should be more inquiry into the specifics of EAT and how it can become a universally accepted form of therapeutic treatment.

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