

Trails of Discovery Equine Assisted Therapy Australia



Type of intervention



Group Work



Individual Work

Target groups, levels of prevention and sub-groups:

(Potential)
Offenders

Secondary and Tertiary Prevention

Young People (12-17 Years), Young Adults (18-20 Years), Adults (21 Years +) | Male & Female
| Group Work, Individual Work | English

Children and Young
People (Victims)

Tertiary Prevention

Young People (12-17 Years), Young Adults (18-20 Years), Adults (21 Years +) | Male & Female
| Group Work, Individual Work | English

Target Population

Children, adolescents and adults from the Australian, Aboriginal, Torres Strait and South Sea Islander and other non-English speaking backgrounds, who have experienced sexual violence, who display sexualised or sexually abusive behaviours and who have experienced physical, emotional and domestic abuse. Some children and adolescents have been subjected to statutory intervention and live in more or less stable foster homes, away from their families.

Delivery organisation

Phoenix House, Queensland, Australia

Mode and context of delivery

A group work or individual equine facilitated therapy-based programme.

Level/Nature of staff expertise required

Staff require a tertiary qualification in mental health, counselling, psychology or social work, for the mental health component. They undergo ongoing specialist training in the fields of equine assisted therapy and equine facilitated growth and learning and are required to be a member or associate member of one of the Equine Facilitated Therapy Associations, such as EAGALA (see below) or EPONA. Facilitators conduct ongoing empirical research into the benefits of Equine Assisted Therapy (EAT) and participate in training programmes with international experts in the field. Both the equine specialist and mental health workers have thorough training in horsemanship.

Intensity/extent of engagement with target group(s)

A group would typically have six to seven participants and would comprise nine to 10 sessions per school term, per group. There can be up to four groups running each school term.

Description of intervention

This programme has a modular structure. It is dynamic and is designed to respond to individual issues that may arise during the session. Horses as co-facilitators can create powerful metaphors for the clients to relate to and utilise in their everyday lives. Models used during the therapy are wide ranging and include:

- The Foundation Horsemanship model
- The EAGALA model (The Mindfulness/Awareness and Authenticity model)

The EAGALA Model (Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and Learning) incorporates horses experientially for emotional growth and learning. It is a collaborative effort between a therapist and a horse professional, working with clients and horses to address treatment goals. The Trails of Discovery programme is based on a combination of the EAGALA Model, the principles of Foundation Horsemanship and the principles of Personal Growth and Awareness. The Horsemanship component teaches positive, safe interaction between participants and horses. It enhances self-awareness, boundaries, non-verbal communication and responsibility for one's actions. The EAGALA and Personal Growth and Learning components involve activities with horses which require individuals to develop healthy boundaries, assertiveness, creative thinking, problem-solving skills, teamwork, trust and attitude. Mindfulness and awareness play a significant role in the therapeutic approach. All activities are ground-based and there is no riding involved.

Healing does not occur only on a cognitive level. It needs also to happen on an emotional and instinctual level. Activities with horses typically include grounding exercises and awareness-raising exercises, where clients are first recognising, and then operating within their window of tolerance. One of the grounding exercises involves the participant standing close to a horse and synchronising their breathing with that of the horse. Quite often, a relaxed state is achieved. A typical awareness-raising exercise would involve a mindful scan of one's own bodily sensations, noticing any feelings of discomfort (tensions, burning eyes, blocked ears) and also those of comfort, such as relaxation of the body. When clients say they feel nothing or they cannot feel certain parts of their bodies, they may be dissociating from those parts. The aim is not to try to fix these sensations, but to notice them. Quite often, when standing next to a horse, it will shift its weight,

sigh or yawn. Clients are encouraged to do the same and they notice that, when taking deep breaths as the horses do, or when they shift weight, the sensation dissipates.

Other exercises include mirroring the horse; i.e. giving it space. Most of us are conditioned in micromanaging others or in being micromanaged. In this exercise, the participant is encouraged to act like a mirror image of the horse, so when the horse walks to the left, the person turns to the right; when the horse turns away, the person also turns in the opposite direction. The horse walks closer, the person walks closer. During this exercise participants recognise their anxiety levels rising with the increasing/decreasing space between themselves and the horse and become aware of their own issues of boundaries and how much person space they are prepared to give. Other things that surface include levels of neediness, the need for control and the fear of rejection. Once recognised, these issues can be worked with. Some of the horsemanship activities involve leading the horse on a loose rope, increasing and decreasing speed through body language, reading the horse's expression, maintaining safe distance, changing direction rather than yanking on the rope if the horse 'gets stuck', and subsequent conversations about what this means to the client. For example, how do you react when you get stuck in a situation or are blocked by an obstacle?

Not all people respond to counselling in a clinical environment. They often feel intimidated and pressured by the perceived imbalance between the counsellor and the counselled. In EAT such individuals feel free of scrutiny, as the focus is on the behaviour and response of the horse, rather than on themselves. They feel more able to identify patterns in their own thinking or behaviour which do not bring favourable results and to explore alternatives which can lead to positive outcomes. EAT has proved to work extremely well at Phoenix House with children, adolescents and adults of both genders, people with intellectual disabilities and people of Aboriginal background. The language of delivery is predominantly English, but many non-verbal cues are also used, such as facial expressions, silences, body language and appropriate responses, the language of tunes, rhythm, movement etc. This enables non-verbal clients to respond well to the programme, which is also delivered in Czech, Russian and German.

During their interaction with the horses, participants learn new skills and identify their needs and strengths with respect to their feelings, emotions, abilities, skills, patterns, communication and family and social environments.

All of this occurs in a non-confrontational, safe environment, where the focus is on the horse rather than on the client. There are very positive responses from vulnerable children, adolescents and adults, who would not engage in one to one clinical 'in room' counselling, but who develop a strong commitment to this form of therapy and who actively participate in the programme. This is supported by clinically significant outcomes of evidence based research (see below).

Evaluation

Evidence based research conducted over a two year period by Phoenix House and Central Queensland University. This is the first research in Australia to explore the benefits of Equine Facilitated Therapy in relation to survivors of sexual abuse. The results demonstrated significantly reduced trauma symptoms, depression and anxiety among children, adolescents and adults of both genders and from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural backgrounds.

References

Kemp K, Signal T, Botros H, Taylor N, Prentice K, *Equine Facilitated Therapy with Children and Adolescents who have been sexually abused: a Program Evaluation Study*. Journal of Child and Family Studies, Vol 22, Number 2, February 2013

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