

Animal Assisted Group Interventions for the Treatment of Trauma

Molly DePrekel, MA, LP, and Kay Neznik, LICSW

Introduction

As a licensed clinical psychologist and social worker working with clients who are survivors of trauma, we believe therapeutic interactions with animals have value in their healing process. According to Perry (2006), “Beginning the recovery process for relational neglect can start with animals” (pg 38). As a part of this recovery process, our equine assisted or facilitated psychotherapy sessions provide clients with a safe environment to begin to deal with the traumatic events, or series of events, that have shaken their ability to function and/or feel by creating negative belief systems about their self, others and the world.

Our equine partners help bring our clients, usually young women who have experienced sexual trauma, out of their shells. They motivate them to talk, while at the same time soothing them. Adolescents, in particular, often find it awkward to connect with group facilitators. However, in the process of developing a relationship with an equine partner, an adolescent is often better able to move beyond initial discomfort and build trusting relationships. Clients grow in confidence and gain a more positive sense of power in a world where they have historically felt powerless.

In our work, we are always cognizant of how the human-animal connection acts as a catalyst for communication, insight and change. Through their body language, equines give immediate feedback to clients on how they are functioning and handling their feelings. This feedback helps clients learn how to pay better attention to the connection between their body and mind so they can inhabit their body in a new way. Processing this feedback also offers clients insights, which assist them in a more productive and healthier expression of their emotions.

Rationale

In one session, for instance, a group member grew quite frustrated when she could not get her equine to follow her without a lead. She became visibly agitated, so we asked her to take a minute and relax before she tried again. As soon as she let out a breath of air and relaxed her body, the equine came up to her and nuzzled her. This gave her immediate feedback on how she processes tension in her body when she gets stressed. Because the equine responded positively to her physical calming “out breath” response, the client was able to reorganize what she did. This gave her and the group a different approach to talk about how she deals with daily frustration and ways that might work better for her.

Description

Training & Preparation

In working with equine assisted group therapy, it is important that the therapeutic team have training and experience in therapeutically relevant skills for working with trauma clients and that sessions remain safe for all parties. Because therapy may trigger intense stressful or traumatic reactions from the client, the therapist must be able to understand the client’s process and help manage feelings as they surface.

Sessions should also include an equine specialist to monitor the animal’s well being during sessions. For individual sessions, the clinician and equine specialist may be dually trained and function in both roles; however, it is critical to have two or more treatment team members present with groups. The treatment team-to-client ratio in a group is based on the number of clients and equines, as well as the expertise and cross training of the facilitators. *Editors Note: This book does not endorse any specific model of “equine therapy.” References to any treatment*

or therapy model, or to any program, service or treatment are solely the views and opinions of authors.

A main component for successful EAT group sessions is an appropriate equine facility. It is recommended that the location include a private area conducive to safe expression of potentially strong emotions and check-in spaces. There should be room to meet in a circle and for other experiential activities. It is also imperative that either the facility or treatment team has equine liability insurance; and that the treatment team also carry personal malpractice/ liability insurance and of course all clients complete appropriate paperwork. In addition to the normal mental health forms EAT specific forms include: a hold-harmless agreement, and an emergency consent form to obtain medical treatment. It is recommended that treatment teams work either with trauma survivors or offenders exclusively until they become highly skilled with both populations. In preparing for EAT group work, it is important to:

- Decide how to market sessions and what billing procedures will be used
- Identify the size and length of the group
- Decide whether the group will be ongoing or time-limited, closed or open and mixed-sex or gender specific
- Determine their roles
- Choose a developed curriculum to use as a guide or develop their own. Bear in mind that properly developing a curriculum is very time consuming and requires a lot of concentration and research.
- Plan the goals, outcomes, and content of each group in written form, especially in the beginning stages. That way the staff is able to maintain the group's structure and stay focused. Otherwise, it is too easy to become "off task" and not reach the planned

goals.

- Run practice or mock groups with other staff who are willing to give feedback on the group's content and process.
- Marketing and billing.

Our experience has taught us that marketing is most efficiently done through word of mouth and by sending flyers to other clinicians, treatment programs, schools and families. Many times, individual clinical therapists will refer clients, and often the clinician co-facilitating this group has appropriate referrals that are ready for a group process. Work closely with outpatient treatment programs for sexual abuse; local child protection, county probation and human services groups; social workers; and other referral sources to create a network. Prepare flyers to send and in marketing meetings, and be ready to talk about your group's goals, content and the potential client benefits.

Decide if your services will be insurance reimbursable, private pay, or both. Will they be funded by the county or a grant? Or will a center raise funds to fully or partially cover clients' costs? Note that insurance companies and/or other funders may require that one or both of the facilitators be licensed to practice mental health.

Group Rules

In beginning group work, we first go over four, pre-established ground rules adapted from *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz (1997). These include:

1. Don't take things personally.
2. Always do your best.
3. Don't make assumptions.
4. Be impeccable to your word

These ground rules are important because they give clients four simple, yet profound, principles to strive for, and they also help define boundaries within the group. We ask group members to continue to put these agreements into practice throughout the group process, which demonstrates how they could practice these ground rules in other areas of their life.

Body Awareness Techniques

The treatment team can engage clients in this type of work in many ways. Our treatment involves not only understanding how trauma plays out in cognitive beliefs, but also how trauma is carried in the body. We believe that being in motion, practicing mindfulness and breathing and understanding how our bodies can carry trauma is critical in resolving trauma. Clients seem to listen better and are able to incorporate more of the feedback with less resistance if they can have a hands-on experience and be in motion in their body during sessions. Our therapy incorporates somatic (body) awareness, some sensorimotor psychotherapy techniques based on the work of Ogden (2010), Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Institute and Tellington-Jones (2010) Tellington Ttouch for Your Horse exercises.

Ttouch is a system of gentle circular Ttouches, lifts and slides that works at the cellular level to activate the body's potential. We incorporate it as a way to teach clients relaxation and self-soothing skills and connect better with the animals. Not only does it benefit equines in EAP, or EFP but also it can create deeper rapport between the equine and client. This relational connection develops through an understanding of each other and facilitates more effective communication. We always stress to clients that Ttouch should be done only on the equines or themselves, and not on each other. Ttouch ground exercises can also be beneficial. "Using a variety of obstacles and ground poles, Ttouch exercises result in self-control, focus, self-confidence, cooperation, balance and coordination (Tellington-Jones, 2010).

During and after the sessions, we give clients feedback about how their behavior, individually and as a team, impacts the equine's behavior and willingness to do what is asked. This can be a powerful technique as it is observable behavior occurring in the moment. Research has found this works better than traditional talk therapy group in an office setting. In Krawetz's (1992) study that measured self-esteem involving teens in a equine social and emotional learning program focus group comments by participants included:

“They have ways to talk back to you. Like if you look at them straight in the eyes, or you, like, listen to their breathing, sometimes it sounds like they're talking to you. I just, sometimes, listen or stare them in the eyes...you can hear a story in their eyes and stuff.” Another comment goes on to say, “You can tell them stories, tell you're your problems even though they don't give you an answer. Because sometimes lately I go home crying, because people make fun of me because I don't wear what they're wearing. I'm different. Everyone's different in their own way, and horses are too. You can tell them a secret. Things that you would not tell even, even a priest because they're so private...I feel I can talk to horses. They don't give you an answer, but they always make me feel better”. Yet another participant states, “ I learned to cooperate more with other people. People who are with me, I think they accept me” (pg. 26-27).

This gives some insight into the theory that young people with emotional and behavioral issues can develop relationships with animals rather than people because they are less threatening and provide less opportunity for rejection (Okoniewski, 1984). Utilizing the Behavioral Assessment System for Children (BASC) improvement on the Behavioral Symptom Index which reflects an overall reduction in problem behaviors, indicates that after children and adolescents received equine assisted counseling their ability to cope and adapt to new situations increased, whereas

overall maladaptive behaviors decreased (Trotter, Chandler, Goodwin-Bond, & Casey, 2008).

Expressive Art Techniques

For some groups, we choose to integrate expressive arts to work on the expression of feelings and issues that surround these feelings. This also provides a rainy day option during inclement weather. Examples include:

- Making an equine braid for bookmark or other keepsake as a transitional object (an object to take with them that represents their time in group)
- Designing a “who am I” poster of personality using pictures from magazines of equines and words chosen to describe self
- Designing group posters with half of the pictures showing positive examples and other half negative examples: i.e., positive boundaries, poor boundaries.
- Painting a shirt, or using an iron-on equine patch; designing a logo to represent yourself or painting your own coat of arms

Working in the Moment

In our work with clients, topics are introduced in a meaningful manner. We use the idea of incrementally “increased perceived risk” not only with our equine activities but also with the verbal sharing and discussions. As comfort is established, we increase the expectation for clients to share more about themselves and their trauma stories. It is important as the client shares traumatic past issues for the therapist to help them understand the ways they have survived and thrived. Clients can then begin to state competency-based reframes of survival. For example when a client is asked to take a safe and perceived risk with the equine; it may be to ride the equine with their arms extended outward or to close their eyes while on the equine, or lead an equine through a challenge course. The client is asked what they need to do to complete this task

to feel safe. The client may ask for side walkers or a staff to be with them. When they have completed the exercise the staff and at times the group members comment on their ability. “Wow, you really took a risk but you were able to keep yourself safe and ask for help, while working with an equine. This is quite a success. If you can do that with this large animal how can you use these skills in your everyday life?” Without directly saying it the client is able to see how they shared power with an animal and that asking for help met his/her needs directly. There are risks that can be taken in your life and still be in control and safe.

At the same time, it is important to understand that group therapy is dynamic and fluid. As the group process progresses, it is important, at times, to be flexible and move away from the planned activities and deal with immediate topics and issues that arise. (i.e., re-victimization, sexual harassment at school/work, sexual acting out). These “in-the-moment group shifts can create powerful metaphors for the client’s process as a direct result of their work with the equines. Opportunities for growth and therapeutic transformation occur in every moment. Therefore, group facilitators need to be able to shift focus quickly and move into new reframes that will benefit the clients and sometimes the equines.

Closure

Working with trauma clients with a history of sexual abuse can be both very stressful and rewarding. The clients develop very close relationships with the equines and with therapeutic team. Ending the group can be a very painful process for some of the clients. As the group progresses, some members may continue in the group and others may leave. As part of the therapy, we work on closure rituals to allow members to learn appropriate ways to say goodbye and, if the group is offered again, the ability to make decisions regarding continuing or

terminating the treatment process. This can empower clients, giving them a sense of control over their lives and offer them another chance to have a choice, or ‘say’, in their lives.

Again we need to stress the importance of having therapeutic team that is clinically skilled in the areas of sexual abuse and perpetration. Clinician can never predict what will be revealed in-group. Therefore, they must be able to handle the issues and provide a safe environment for the clients and equines so that this experience is positive and provides growth for the clients, rather than more traumas. For further information please contact us at molly@mwtraumacenter.com and see our ad-offering curriculum following these article.

Application

These techniques and therapeutic tools can be used with any age person that has experienced trauma in their lives. The curriculum we have written in our manual “Animal Assisted Group Interventions for the Treatment of Trauma” can be adapted for other sorts of trauma and does not necessarily have to focus on sex specific trauma. Trauma may look different for various people. It is up to the client to determine their level of trauma and what their needs are in relation to this trauma. Equine assisted therapy works with the client with a hands-on approach. It is especially beneficial to clients who have difficulty expressing their emotions verbally or directly with a therapist. This is why it is especially beneficial to adolescents that may show resistance to being in therapy, whereas it does not have the stigma of one on one therapy. The client may perceive that going to the farm and working with horses is tolerable and not so invasive. Equine assisted therapy incorporates the body and brain to move the trauma to a place where the trauma can be managed in the client’s daily life.

These techniques can be utilized in a group or one on one format. We have found that the group format is the preferable mode of therapy but many clients are not able to work in a group

situation. Applying these techniques in one to one therapy or pair therapy can also be beneficial to the client.

Resources

The authors are available for consulting and training please contact us with your needs at email molly@mwtraumacenter.com and we have the following group manual available: Animal Assisted Group Interventions for the Treatment of Trauma.

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