

Article 5

Equine-Assisted Learning Assists Veterans With Civilian Employment

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Abstract

Many veterans have spent most of their adult lives immersed in the military culture and require support in their transition to civilian life. Equine-assisted learning is an experiential treatment that can provide psychosocial and vocational transitional skill building for the military veteran population, especially for those who acquired a disability in the service.

Keywords: Equine-facilitated learning, service-disabled military veterans, vocational skills training

Upon joining the military, a soldier is sent through extensive training to develop a military mindset (Hautzinger & Scandlyn, 2013). The concept of individualism is replaced by the idea that soldiers think like a unit, depending on their fellow soldiers for survival. When a soldier leaves the military, there is often a lack of services to help with the transition back to civilian life. This can adversely affect veterans' readiness to adapt to a life at home and find employment after their military career. The number of soldiers leaving the military before they planned due to service-related disabilities is now over 3.2 million (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA], 2014a). Only one in three members of this population worked in the public sector in 2013 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015). These numbers continue to increase every year.

Working is integral to the emotional well-being of many adults, especially veterans. Without employment, many service-disabled veterans are left discontent and at a loss for a new meaning in their lives (Ironstone Farm, 2014; Silcox, Castillo, & Reed, 2014). This can lead to feelings of depression, anxiety, and suicide, as well as trigger symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Ironstone Farm, 2014). Being unemployed can contribute to low self-esteem and self-concept, and increased rates of homelessness and crime. Unemployment can also lead to self-medication with drugs and

alcohol (Hautzinger & Scandlyn, 2013; Ironstone Farm, 2014). Equine-assisted learning (EAL) has demonstrated effectiveness with the veteran population as an augmentative approach to facilitate reintegration to civilian employment (Ironstone Farm, 2014; Schultz, Remick-Barlow, & Robbins, 2007; U.S. Army, 2014).

EAL is an experiential approach to learning with the primary intent of facilitating personal growth and development of life skills through equine interactions (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International [PATH], 2015). The presence of the horse helps to reflect individuals' actions in the moment and provides instant feedback on how they are being perceived by others. The facilitator helps translate feedback the horse is giving and prompts the client to think about his or her preconceived ideas about relationships, leadership, and communication (PATH, 2015; Strozzi, 2004). There is a non-confrontational approach and there are no questions asked related to combat trauma. What is focused on is breaking down issues that the trauma has caused in their lives (Hautzinger & Scandlyn, 2013). Some of these problem areas raised include relationships, depression, rage, survivor's guilt, communication, isolation, constant hypervigilance, and searching for meaning in life (Abrams, 2014; Hautzinger & Scandlyn, 2013; Ironstone Farm, 2014; Osran, Smee, Sreenivasan, & Weinberger, 2010; Silcox et al., 2014).

Federal and private funding is being funneled into equine assisted learning programs for veterans, as more research becomes available on its efficacy (All, Loving, & Crane, 1999; Ironstone Farm, 2014; PATH, 2014; Silcox et al., 2014). The number of PATH accredited equine assisted learning programs for veterans went from zero in 2008 to 267 in 2013 (PATH, 2015). This article discusses some of the VA services currently offered to service-disabled veterans and explains how horses can add to the healing process.

Services Currently Offered to Veterans

Department of Veterans Affairs

The Department of Veterans Affairs usually prescribes office-based psychotherapy and medication to help veterans with recovery as a first line treatment (Hautzinger & Scandlyn, 2013). Veterans are often discharged from therapy without much progress and feel abandoned by the system (Hautzinger & Scandlyn, 2013). Veterans are often unwilling to open up to civilian service providers because they have not experienced the intricacies of war, and veterans may feel they will be judged for disclosing what happened in the field (Osran et al., 2010).

Complementary therapies such as EAL can be useful in continuing to involve this population with healing, growth, and learning. This continuing assistance for veterans is integral to developing vocational, leadership, and life skills that keep veterans employable in a civilian role, as well as contributing to their overall wellness (Silcox et al., 2014).

Veterans' Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment

Services offered to service-disabled veterans currently through the Veterans Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) are job training, employment accommodations, résumé development, and job-seeking skills coaching (VA, 2014b).

These services are available to veterans 6 months prior to discharge and up to one year after being discharged. These services are also available to those eligible for the VA education benefit.

Vocational rehabilitation counselors and employment coordinators help honorably discharged veterans with service-related disabilities with training to reach vocational goals (VA, 2014b). These services are helpful for veterans who have a career path in mind and those that are mentally ready to accept the shift into civilian life. However, this transition often requires more than just job skills readiness. Many veterans are struggling with other issues that stand in the way of their employment, and most of these issues can be partially or fully addressed with the addition of equine-assisted therapies to their treatment.

Warrior Transition Units and EAL

Warrior Transition Units (WTUs) are transition units developed by the U.S. Army for veterans who have been wounded and are in recovery waiting to transition back to the military or to civilian life (U.S. Army, 2014). This program has been initiated to provide support through the transition process, as the military has recognized the lack of support provided to service-disabled veterans in this area. One program utilized in their WTUs' Adaptive Reconditioning program is equine-assisted activities. Their online fact sheet highlights the emotional and vocational benefits of equine-assisted activities (see www.WTC.army.mil). Also, there is evidence suggesting that EAL is a cost-effective alternative to other modalities (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015).

Why Horses Work With Veterans

The military recognizes that evidence-based augmentative treatments can be effective for some veterans who do not respond to first line treatments (Abrams, 2014; Osran et al., 2010). EAL is a popular choice because it addresses multiple psychosocial factors that office-based therapy cannot. Some of the life domains the military recognizes as benefiting from EAL are physical, emotional, spiritual, family relationships, social, and career (U.S. Army, 2014). EAL stimulates the mind and body and allows for a safe place to feel and address emotions through the horse-human bond (Abrams, 2014; All et al., 1999).

Horses offer a unique experience for many reasons. Studies have shown that EAL is appealing to populations such as veterans that are not otherwise interested in therapy (Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013). The U.S. Army (2014) has recognized that service-disabled veterans working with horses show decreased signs of anger, depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms.

Unconditional Acceptance

Often veterans experience difficulty in forming and maintaining relationships with non-military personnel upon discharging from the military (Hautzinger & Scandlyn, 2013; Osran et al., 2010). They may feel judged based on their actions at war, or their difficulties in dealing with their actions such as experiencing PTSD symptoms (Osran et al., 2010).

Horses can help heal without judgment. A horse reacts with no agenda and instead responds to what the veteran is doing, feeling, and thinking in that moment. What the participant has done in the past is not reflected in the horse's reaction to his or her actions in the present, which can help the individual formulate new ways of engaging with others (Strozzi, 2004). A horse's reaction to a person tells that person how they are being perceived in the moment. The horse's feedback is more easily accepted and discussed than feedback from another person due to the horse's judgment-free nature (Rector, 2005; Roberts, 2001; Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013; Strozzi, 2004).

Prey Animal Characteristics

John Nash, a veteran and the founder of Combat Veterans Cowboy Up in Castle Rock, Colorado, likens the transition from military life back to civilian life as going from being a predator to being a prey animal (Hautzinger & Scandlyn, 2013). Horses are prey animals, and they rely on their herd for survival, socialization, and protection (Hautzinger & Scandlyn, 2013; Rector, 2005; Roberts, 2001; Strozzi, 2004). This prey mentality and reliance on a group resonates with the military mindset and can promote an affinity to the horse.

Horses rely on the ability to read emotional signals expressed through body language, body signals, and heartbeats. Many veterans have learned to rely on similar nonverbal signals for survival as well (Hautzinger & Scandlyn, 2013). Horses experience a state of hypervigilance as prey animals when a threat is perceived, but they are able to return easily to a peaceful state seconds later. This is something that many veterans struggle with (All et al., 1999; Hautzinger & Scandlyn, 2013). This can provide validation for the necessity of a hypervigilant state at times. This can also provide a model for the veterans on how to return to a state of peace after the perceived threat has come and gone.

Herd Mentality

Horses rely on a hierarchal form of leadership in their herd for survival (Roberts, 2001; Strozzi, 2004). If a herd member reports danger, such as a predator approaching, the survival of each herd member depends on the immediate response of the leader to move the herd. There is absolutely no room for doubt in the leader. Veterans can relate to this need for hierarchy and interdependence on each other for survival (Hautzinger & Scandlyn, 2013). By partnering a veteran with a horse and observing their interactions with each other, a dialogue can be opened by the facilitator on relationships, communication styles, and self-awareness (Strozzi, 2004).

Skill Building

Communication Skills

Veteran communication issues. Veterans, especially those who have experienced being "outside the wire" (i.e., dangerous combat zones off base), often experience significant psychological changes (Osran et al., 2010). Often these veterans feel the only people who can understand this are other combat veterans. The bonds that are formed between soldiers on the battlefield are often so strong that they cannot be replicated in civilian relationships. Veterans often report that being back in civilian life

can feel like living “outside the wire” again, with no set boundaries and constant potential threats to their well-being. The difference in civilian life is that there is no group of soldiers surrounding the veteran experiencing the same thing (Osran et al., 2010). This can cause feelings of loss, isolation, and anxiety that are barriers to communication with others. In addition, the social and relational demands of employment can often be too overwhelming without first rebuilding communication and relationship skills.

How EAL addresses connection and communication deficits. Forming a relationship with a horse takes time and work but provides instant feedback to the participant, something lacking in the more long-term, non-dynamic office-bound approach. People usually respond instantly to affection shown by an animal. The relationship with a horse can start a veteran on the road to recovery by providing a safe outlet for reengaging caring feelings and mutual trust and respect in a relationship. It can decrease feelings of isolation and loneliness and help a veteran to start reestablishing communication and relationships skills as well as boosting self-esteem (All et al., 1999).

Having a facilitator there who is also trusted and accepted by the horse can be a start toward generalizing these feelings and actions to people (Chandler, Portrie-Bethke, Minton, Fernando, & O'Callaghan, 2010). The ability to adjust to change can also be influenced by the horse-human bond (Strozzi, 2004). Horses accept change and adapt in the moment, as a survival skill, and do not question the necessity of doing so (All et al., 1999; Rector, 2005; Roberts, 2001; Strozzi, 2004).

Horses also offer in-the-moment feedback on how a person presents to others. Feedback from the horse allows the person to see himself or herself through the eyes of another (Rector, 2005; Roberts, 2001; Strozzi, 2004). Horses will react to a person's present state. A person may not realize how much he or she has regressed inward until he or she tries approaching a horse who may act like the person is not even there. Learning to have a presence again in communication may be the only way the person would achieve positive results with this horse in an EAL setting (Strozzi 2004). Individuals who tend to have an overly forceful or aggressive presence quickly find that a horse will not allow them to approach. If another person were to tell this overly assertive person that his or her presence is overly aggressive, that person may be met with an aggressive response. When the horse tells the person this by their reactions, a person will usually try to change his or her behaviors and body language so the horse will begin to feel comfortable with that person. These are examples of how EAL can facilitate positive steps toward connecting and developing better communication skills with other people.

Specific interventions. Natural horsemanship is one of the most common intervention themes in EAL work. Many programs focus on round penning and what has been termed “join up” as the main activity for building acceptance and communication (Roberts, 2001; Strozzi, 2004). The participant, with a facilitator close by, enters a circular-shaped enclosure with a loose horse and uses body language to send the horse around the pen until the horse shows signs of wanting to come in and build a relationship with the participant. Once this relationship is established, the horse will follow the participant around the pen like they would a lead herd member. This work with the horse inevitably creates metaphors for dealing with what is going on in the veteran's life. The facilitator then helps relate these metaphors to life skills and issues veterans are dealing with during their transition from military to civilian life (Hautzinger & Scandlyn, 2013).

Vocational Skills

The transition into a non-military career can be challenging for many veterans and exacerbated by those coming home with a disability. Difficulty with employment can cause or inflate feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety, and self-defeat. This often extends into relationships at home, especially when finances are considered. There is evidence that the human-animal bond helps people with employability through its medical, social, psychological, behavioral, and physical benefits (Silcox et al., 2014). The success of partnering with a horse can be the first step on the road to recovery and employment success (Roberts, 2001; Strozzi, 2004).

Some programs for veterans focus on building vocational skills in the field of animal care or equine skills, and some veterans find employment in these areas (Nash, 2013). Most programs have a less direct but equally effective vocational aspect. The experiential work with the horse in a therapy setting raises individuals' awareness, or consciousness, of the present moment, not only of what is going on around them but how their presence affects other people (Maziere & Gunnlaugson, 2015). This helps to increase self-awareness, self-esteem, and intuition, which in turn creates a better employee. Having a stronger awareness of self and one's impact on others leads to better work production, management, and leadership (Hautzinger & Scandlyn, 2013; Maziere & Gunnlaugson, 2015; Strozzi, 2005).

Purpose and meaning. Many civilian employment options available to veterans do not provide the same purpose and meaning that a veteran is used to receiving from a military job. The feeling of work serving a higher purpose, something beyond providing income and opportunity for oneself and family, is much harder to derive from a "mundane" civilian job. For many veterans, the loss of meaning in life is the greatest obstacle they face in reentering the workforce. EAL is a treatment modality that can introduce new purpose and meaning to veterans who are still struggling from this loss (Osran et al., 2010). There is an innate response in most humans to feeling important and needed by an animal that cannot be likened to that same feeling in a human-human relationship (All et al., 1999; Osran et al., 2010; Silcox et al., 2014).

Specific interventions. Choosing a horse and working with it on a consistent basis can become a lifeline to regaining purpose and meaning in life (Strozzi, 2004). Horses see building relationships as necessary for survival and will use every interaction with a person as a stepping-stone in the relationship. This gives the person a feeling of purpose in the moment, as everything that they say or do has an impact on this animal (Roberts, 2001).

An activity as simple as sitting and observing a herd interact can have a deep impact on a person. Projection inevitably occurs, stemming from the person's own interactions and relationships, and can be a powerful tool for growth in self-acceptance and self-awareness. This in turn helps individuals become more aware of how they communicate with others and how they can "fit" into the world around them. The personal growth and renewal of purpose and meaning can be the most influential and important contribution participants take away from their experience in an EAL program (Strozzi, 2004).

Summary

There is an increasing need for vocational development for service-disabled veterans each year, and EAL is recognized as an effective augmentative treatment to fill this need. An increasing number of therapeutic riding centers are offering these services each year.

EAL programs benefit participating service-disabled veterans physically, emotionally, spiritually, socially, and vocationally. They have proven to be cost-effective and have long-term results. As more research is conducted in the field, the hope is that the number of referrals to these programs will increase and the number of veterans receiving the benefits of these equine-assisted programs will increase as well.

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