



Reciprocal Therapy for Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Rehabilitated Race-Horses

Grace Miller

Dr. Heide Island, Dept. of Psychology | Pacific University | 2043 College Way | Forest Grove, OR 97116

Introduction

Problem

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychological condition that results in neural changes that globally affects the nervous and endocrine systems following a traumatic event (E.g. natural disaster, abuse, military combat, etc.). All ages, genders, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds are vulnerable. Post-Traumatic stress disorder as described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5) is diagnosed using 5 criteria with debilitating symptoms lasting at least one month. The disorder is a result of exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence. Most reported instances of traumatic events in the United States are physical and sexual assaults with a (52% lifetime prevalence) and accidents or fires (50% lifetime prevalence), worldwide accidents and injuries are most frequently reported (Shalev et al., 2017).



Source: Berkshire Horseworks

Treatment

For those who have been diagnosed with PTSD there are various treatments available such as cognitive behaviorally therapy, exposure therapy and group therapy. Using horses in a therapeutic setting for individuals with PTSD has yielded positive results making it an ideal treatment for individuals seeking alternative therapies. The inclusion of animals in therapeutic settings is beneficial to both the client or patients, as well as the animal. Equine therapy is especially useful, given horses can develop PTSD-like symptoms

Horses experience PTSD like symptoms and the treatment for them can go hand in hand with the treatment for humans with PTSD. The connective relationship creates a safe space for both the horse and the human involved. Within this relationship disruptive human emotions are forced to be filtered and processed in order to create a relationship with the animal. As for the horse a nurturing space is created where anxiety can be relieved.



Do non-human animals experience PTSD and how does equine therapy beneficial to both the client and the horse?

Evidence

PTSD among Humans

The psychological responses to PTSD can look like sensitization, heightened startle response, avoidance, depression and anxiety. The presence of intrusion symptoms is associated with traumatic event; Recurrent, involuntary intrusive memories of the traumatic event, distressing dreams related to the traumatic event, dissociative reactions as if the traumatic event is recurring and psychological distress as a result of exposure to symbols or resemblances of the traumatic event as well as physiological reactions. Avoidance is also associated with PTSD individuals with PTSD find themselves avoiding the memory or thoughts associated with the traumatic event and may avoid reminders of the event such as people, activities, places or situations. Lastly, alterations in arousal and reactivity may occur. This can look like irritability, reckless and self-destructive behavior, hypervigilance, exaggerated startle response, lack of ability to concentrate, and sleep disturbance (SAMHSA, 2014).

PTSD among Horses

Horses serve as an ideal medium for individuals with PTSD in a therapeutic setting because they themselves display symptoms of PTSD. Horses have played a major role in the lives of humans for decades. A consequence of this relationship between humans and horses as working animals is the abuse and trauma they experience do to our irresponsibility. Performance horses unfortunately encounter abuse far too often and the aftermath of this abuse is evident. Due to the pressures of being a performance animal race-horses are especially at risk of developing PTSD like symptoms. Their startle response becomes highly sensitized comparable to human responses to PTSD.

Why include horses therapy settings?

The therapeutic benefits of nonhuman animals in therapy has yielded positive results for many people, attributable to a sense of connection and understanding they feel with the animal. Animals in therapy settings serve as mediums allowing the client's inner world to be expressed. A medium in a therapeutic setting is something the client can use as a means of expressing their inner thoughts without explicitly stating them or confronting them. The presence of an animal also adds a sense of normalcy and contributes a positive perception of a situation (Lockwood, 1983). Horses are excellent emotional communicators and absorb the emotional energy of the environment they are in. This allows them to communicate subtly within their herd and with humans. Pairing an individual with PTSD and a horse with PTSD like symptoms can be beneficial for both parties. The connective relationship creates a safe space for both the horse and the human involved. Within this relationship disruptive human emotions are forced to be filtered and processed in order to create a relationship with the animal. The ideal horse and human pairing or this situation would be a horse that is the adjunct within the herd dynamic. An adjunct horse in a herd is an upper level member that goes from leadership to underling in times of high stress. This high-level communicator acts as the emotional buffer between the ranks and protect the actual leadership from predators. They are ideal for participating in nurturing tasks like the ones used in EFP/EAP.

Conclusions

Animals do experience PTSD

Animals specifically Horses experience PTSD like symptoms in which they express avoidant, anxious and aggressive behaviors. This knowledge is important for both the treatment of horses and individuals with PTSD in the sense that

Animal Therapies is Beneficial in Treating PTSD

The inclusion of animals specifically horses in therapeutic settings will serve as a tool for the individual, the therapist and the animal. This holistic approach is meant to benefit the human by allowing them to feel a sense of control in the environment around them without putting them in danger. Horses also serve as appropriate mediums in a therapy setting by serving as a buffer between the client and the therapist. As flight animals horses are very intuitive and sensitive to the emotions of the people around them. This is extremely beneficial to the client and therapist because it creates space where the inner thoughts and emotions of an individual are expressed without being explicitly talked about.

Broader Implications

When incorporating animals in therapeutic settings it is vital to ensure the safety of both the individual in treatment and the animal. Working with an individual with PTSD alongside an animal who displays PTSD symptoms may be beneficial however it must be practiced with great caution for the welfare of the animal and the horse.

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A Complete Reference List is Available Upon Request