

Examination of the effects of equine assisted activities on PTSD symptoms, quality of life and participation in combat veterans

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The aim of the study was to investigate the effects of an 8-week structured therapeutic horseback riding (THR) on Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, depression, quality of life, and functioning of combat veterans diagnosed with PTSD. The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) model was used to help guide the study.

One hundred twenty-five (125) veterans were recruited as possible participants. Eighty-nine (N= 89) veterans met inclusion criteria and were enrolled in the study. Fifty-one (51) participated in the THR program and 38 were in the waitlist/control group. Seventy-six percent (n=39) completed all 8 weeks of the program and 55% (n=28) completed the 2-month follow-up surveys. Twenty-nine of the 38 waitlist/control group members completed all 8-weeks. Most of the participants had completed at least 2 tours of duty in at least one of the Operation Iraqi and Enduring Freedom, Operation New Dawn (OIF/OEF/OND) conflicts. The sample consisted of 62 males and 27 females. The average age was 39 years of age.

Overall, the findings of this study support the beneficial effects of THR for veterans with PTSD. The participants reported clinically meaningful improvement in PTSD symptoms and mental health, and marked improvement in participation and overall functioning over the course of the program. The differences in PTS and depression symptoms and overall mental health and functioning scores between the THR and Control group grew larger overtime; the THR group reported more improvement in overall functioning than the Control group. The size of the differences (effect size) was found to be medium to large, indicating a moderate to high practical significance.

Noted changes in mental health and functioning of the THR group were supported by the participants' responses to the questions concerning how they changed from participating in THR and the emerging themes. Qualitative analysis of post intervention interviews revealed several emerging themes that were consistent with the quantitative findings. Participants reported feeling anxious, depressed and isolated prior to the intervention. Post intervention responses indicated feelings of self-acceptance, increase confidence, gratitude, hope, less anxious/angry, and more patient. The participants also stated the importance of the barn environment and the unique relationship with the horse as key components that contributed to their improved quality of life and functioning.