BEYOND THE CLINIC WALLS: HOW EQUINE-ASSISTED SERVICES SUPPORT WHOLE-PERSON WELLNESS

Whitney Angelini, PT, DPT, HPCS, CTRI

Slippery Rock University

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Storm Harbor
Equestrian Center

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Differentiate the range of services within the equine-assisted services (EAS) continuum and distinguish between at least two EAS modalities.
- Identify at least three evidence-based benefits of EAS for individuals with behavioral health needs, including veterans with substance use disorders.
- Explain how EAS aligns with integrated care principles by listing at least two ways it can complement conventional treatment in rural health settings.

POLL:

- What is your profession?
- Have you heard of equine-assisted services? What do you think they involve?

THE ENGAGEMENT GAP IN BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CARE: QUICK STATS

- 61.5 million U.S. adults had any mental illness in 2024. (SAMHSA, 2025)
- 34.5% of adults with any mental illness also had a substance use disorder (SUD). (SAMHSA, 2025)
- 8.4 million people age 12+ had a past-year SUD in 2024; only 12.3% received substance use treatment. (SAMHSA, 2025)
- SUD treatment dropout across in-person psychosocial treatments averages 30.4%. (Diaz et al., 2022)

- What could be a solution for improved retention and motivation???

A HORSE OF COURSE!

A HORSE? REALLY?

- Studies show….
  - For adults receiving substance abuse use treatment in residential settings, there was a 44% completion rate in the equine group compared to 32% in the standard treatment group. (Gatti et al., 2020, as cited in Diaz et al., 2022)
  - A review of mounted EAT found positive outcomes across multiple populations, including improvements in emotional regulation, confidence, social connection, self-esteem, stress reduction, and quality of life. (Ward et al., 2022)
  - In residential substance use treatment, mounted EAT was described as a motivating intervention and, for some participants, a reason to remain engaged in treatment. (Ward et al., 2022)
  - A veterans trauma review identified 23 EAS studies, with reported benefits for PTSD symptoms, depression, anxiety, craving, functioning, and treatment enjoyment. (Marchand, 2023)


WHY THE HORSE?

NATURE OF THE OF THE HORSE

Horses make a great partner in helping those with behavioral and mental health needs because they are:

- Prey animals
- Herd animals
- Nonverbal communicators
- Large and powerful
- Require calm leadership
- Nonjudgmental presence
- Present-focused

Horses communicate primarily through body language.

- Respond to posture, movement, breathing, tension, and space

Common signals participants may observe:

- Ears forward, back, or moving
- Head position
- Licking/chewing
- Tension or relaxation in the body
- Tail movement
- Attention toward or away from the person

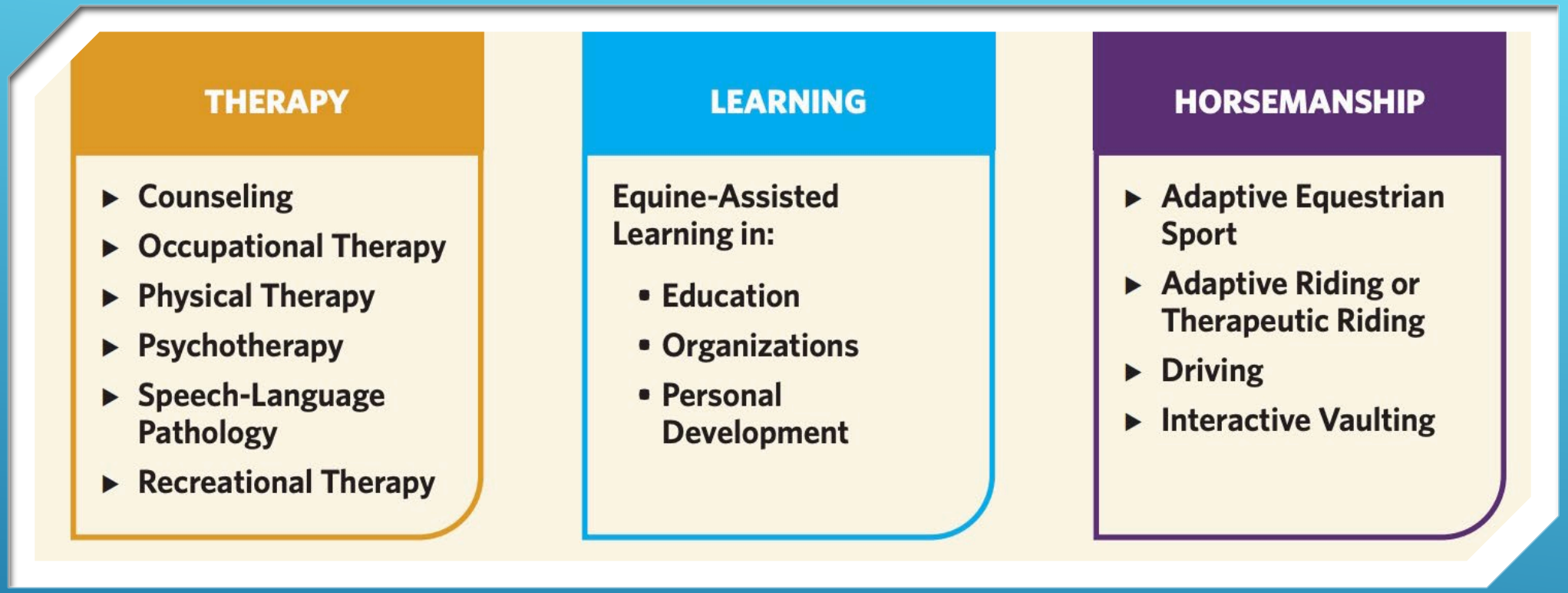
HORSE COMMUNICATION: THE KEY FACTOR

SO, WHY THE HORSE?

Horses can…

- Create nonjudgmental environments
- Give immediate, honest feedback
- Support emotional regulation
- Encourage present-moment awareness
- Help build trust and connection
- Strengthen confidence
- Make treatment feel more engaging

WHAT ARE EQUINE ASSISTED ACTIVITIES?



EQUINE ASSISTED SERVICES

HORSEMANSHIP

- Typical Session:
  - The participant may groom the horse, practice leading, complete a groundwork activity, or participate in mounted riding.
  - The session involves horsemanship goals.
  - The instructor may focus on skills like posture, balance, communication, following directions, confidence, and safe interaction.
- How may this be beneficial?

- Typical Session:
  - Introduce a theme, such as trust, boundaries, or communication.
  - Participants may observe herd behavior, lead a horse through an obstacle, work together to move a horse without touching it, or complete a problem-solving activity using horsemanship skills.
  - In conclusion, the facilitator leads reflection questions: What worked? What was frustrating? What did the horse respond to? How does this connect to relationships, recovery, or daily life?
- How may this be beneficial?

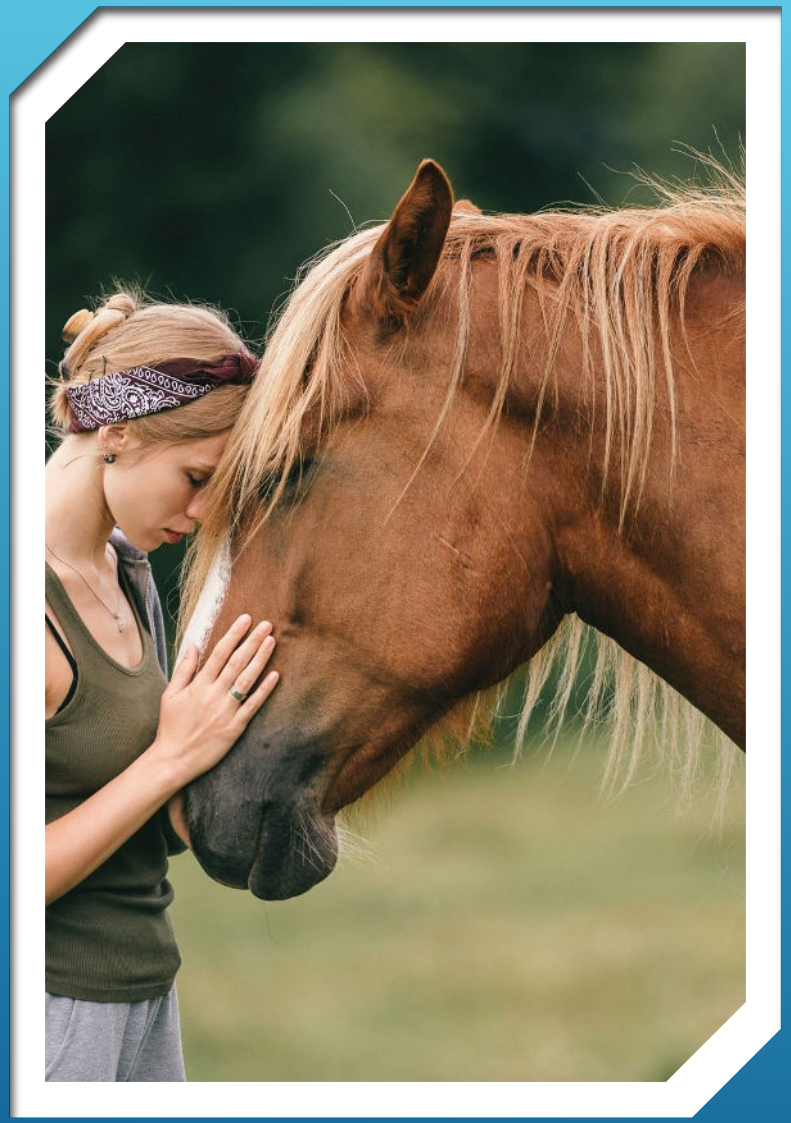
LEARNING

THERAPY

- Typical Session (With a mental health focus):
  - May begin with a clinical check-in and review of the treatment goal.
  - Therapist chooses a horse-related activity that connects to that goal, such as grooming to practice grounding, leading to explore boundaries, or observing horse behavior to discuss emotional awareness and relationships.
  - Therapist helps the client process the experience clinically and connect it back to coping skills, trauma responses, communication, relapse prevention, or treatment goals.
- How may this be beneficial?

EAS: KEY DIFFERENCES

Type of EAS	Main Purpose	Who Leads It?	What a Session Might Look Like
Horsemanship	Riding/horse skills, recreation	Certified instructor/equine professional	Grooming, leading, riding, horse care
Learning	Life skills, communication, personal growth	EAL facilitator/equine professional	Group challenge, obstacle task, reflection
Therapy	Clinical treatment goals based on discipline	Licensed professional + equine specialist/instructor	Based on therapy goals, horse related activity (mounted or unmounted)



- Emotional regulation
- Stress reduction
- Engagement in care
- Healthy connection
- Community and purpose

BENEFITS OF EQUINE ASSISTED SERVICES FOR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

DATA FROM STORM HARBOR EQUESTRIAN CENTER'S VETERAN'S PROGRAMMING

“HORSES DON’T JUDGE YOU IN A WAY THAT A HUMAN CAN.

I LOVE IT — IT REALLY HELPS CALM ME.

VERY RELAXING. FELT LIKE I MADE A BOND WITH THE HORSE.”

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK: WHAT VETERANS REPORTED AFTER EAS SESSIONS

1. Stress relief and relaxation

- "I love it — it really helps calm me."
- "Everything! Made my anxiety go down dramatically."
- "Stress relief 100/10."

2. Connection with the horse

- "Very relaxing. Felt like I made a bond with the horse."
- "Peace of mind connecting with the horse."
- "Building a bond, brighten mood."

3.Nonjudgmental environment

- "Horses don't judge you in a way that a human can."

4. Confidence and accomplishment

- "Exercise builds confidence."
- "Camaraderie with staff and horse, relaxation, lower stress, confidence."
- "It was enjoyable, relaxing, and I got some exercise."

5. Enjoyment and motivation to return

- "I loved it so much — will always come here."
- "Make the trip longer and more often."
- "Good for your soul."

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK: WHAT VETERANS REPORTED AFTER EAS SESSIONS

Across veteran program session evaluations, participants reported:

- **93.5%** improvement in positive thoughts
- **91.7%** improvement in relaxation
- **91.3%** improvement in social engagement
- **87.5%** improvement in mindfulness skills
- **87.0%** planned to use coping skills outside the session
- **83.3%** improvement in emotional regulation

Note: These are participant-reported session outcomes and should be interpreted as program feedback, not clinical outcome data.

HOW CAN EAS BE INCORPORATED IN INTEGRATED CARE FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH BEHAVIORAL HEALTH NEEDS?

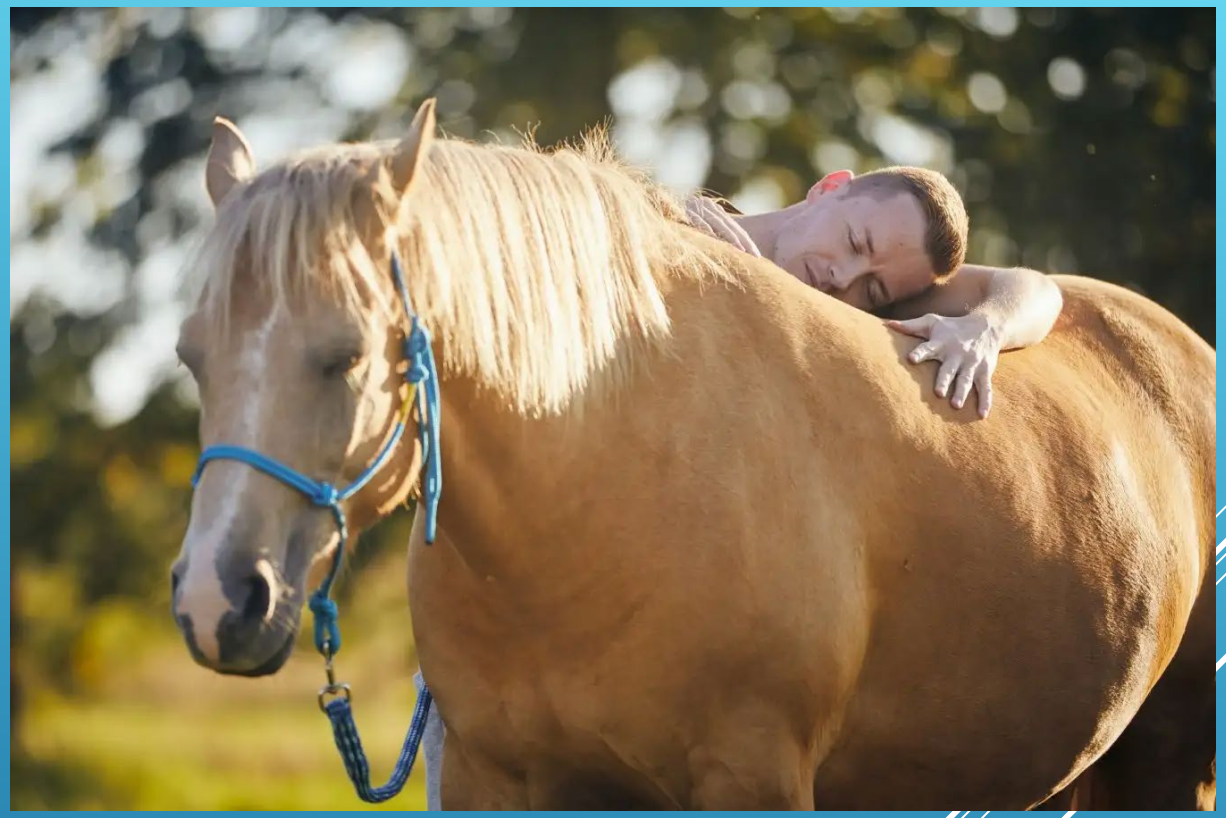
HOW EAS CAN FIT INTO INTEGRATED CARE

- Incorporated as a complementary support for mental health services
- Act as a bridge for engagement
- Practice emotional regulation and coping skills in real time
- Increase motivation and engagement in care
- Supports therapeutic rapport
- Reduce stigma through a nontraditional, community-based setting

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

POLL:

- Do you see equine assisted services fitting into your line of work?
- What was the biggest takeaway regarding equine assisted services and behavioral health?



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