Investigating the Efficacy of Equine Therapy for Combat Veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

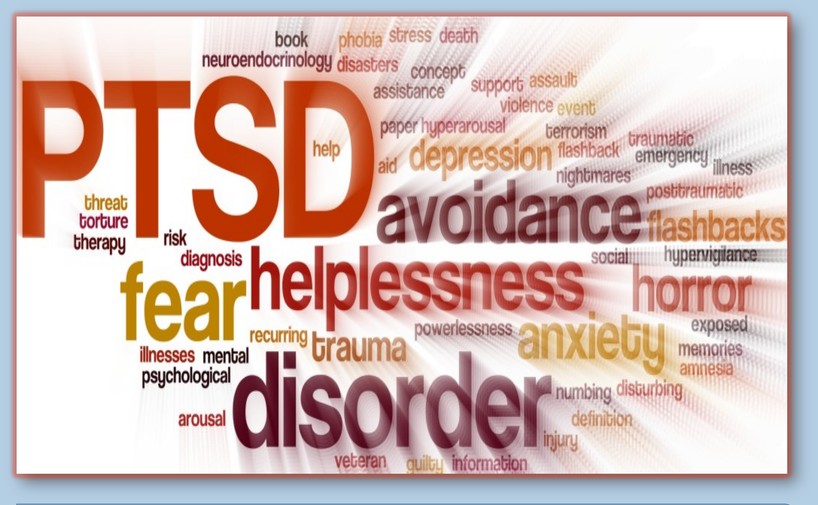
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Abstract: Combat veterans are besieged by multiple psychological conditions from mental health disorders, traumatic brain injury, and high suicide rates to social challenges from unemployment to homelessness, and the negative stigma associated with mental illness. In 2012 alone more than half million veterans of all combat eras in the United States sought care for PTSD through the Veterans Affairs healthcare services, and almost 24% of these veterans served in the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts (Institute of Medicine, 2014). This prevalence of combat-related PTSD has continued to rise with many recently returning veterans report experiencing partial or full symptomology. While evidenced-based therapies, like cognitive or behavioral therapy, provide suitable frameworks to help, there appears to be a gap in treatment efficacy with almost 40% reporting significant symptoms 10 years after initial onset (Sharpless & Barber, 2011).

An emerging trend in research is the evolving field of Equine Therapy, a non-traditional, experiential approach that is centered upon the therapeutic benefits inherent in the nature of horses. As prey animals, they are continually aware of their environment and provide instant feedback to human behaviors and emotions, addressing the biopsychosocial needs of the veterans. The hypothesis is that Equine Therapy can improve self-efficacy, self-awareness, and emotion regulation, while decreasing PTSD and comorbid conditions such as depression, insomnia, or hostility. However, the literature on its efficacy is scarce and are mostly anecdotal, qualitative studies, leaving large empirical gaps. The goal is to expand on prior research, and contribute empirically validated evidence that explicates the mechanisms by which Equine Therapy may be an efficacious intervention.





EQUINE THERAPY – THE HEALING POWER OF HORSES

Equine Therapy incorporates activities and interactions with an equine partner designed to promote the development of life skills, emotional wellbeing, and improved psychosocial functioning. This equine-human partnership allows for the processing of painful emotions and experiences while simultaneously:

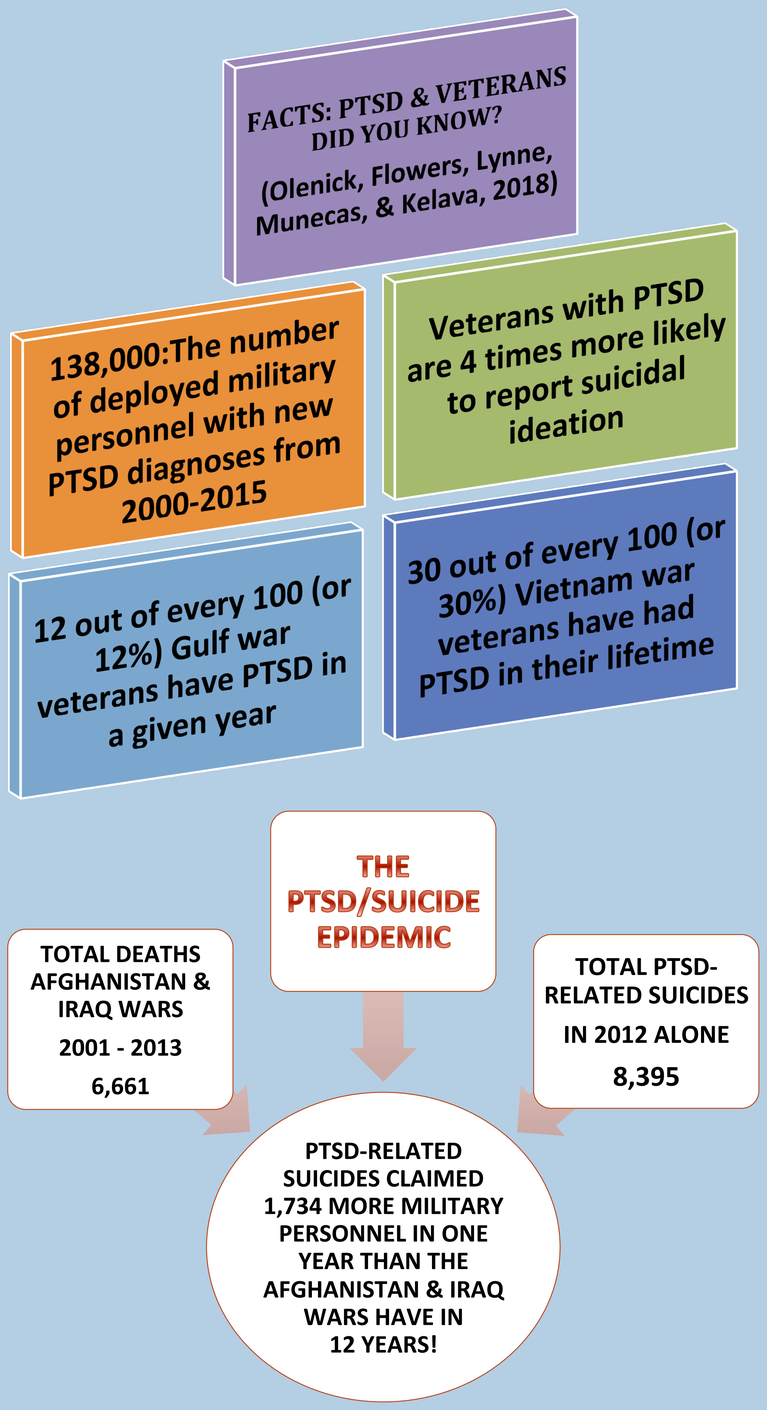
- Developing intimacy, identity, and respect
- Building trust, hope, and confidence
- Decreasing emotional avoidance
- Repairing and strengthening mindbody connection

EMERGING TREND– LITERATURE REVIEW OF EQUINE THERAPY

Lanning and Krenek (2013) investigated the outcomes of an equine-assisted activities program for 13 veteran participants using a mixed-methods approach.

- **Qualitative Analysis:**
  Prior to participation in the program, qualitative analysis revealed common themes of "hopelessness," "need for healing," "isolation," and "depression" as descriptors of the veterans' current state. When the veterans were asked to reflect on the changes they experienced as a result of the intervention, themes of "increased sociability," "reduced feelings of isolation," "increased sense of trust and hope," and "increased need to serve others," were noted.
- **Quantitative data:**
  Veterans who completed the 12 sessions of the program reported less physical and emotional limitations across a number of health domains as well as reduction in depression symptoms over time. However, no statistical analysis was conducted on the data to determine if this drop in symptoms was significant.

Essentially, despite the strengths of this research study, limited conclusions can be drawn regarding the efficacy of the intervention as outcomes could not be attributed to other non-controlled factors.



PROPOSED RESEARCH STUDY IN EQUINE THERAPY

The current study seeks to expand on prior research and proposes using a mixed-methods approach to gain a better understanding of the effectiveness of Equine Therapy.

- The aim is to evaluate outcomes across the psychological domains of posttraumatic stress, depression, and quality of life using standardized psychometric questionnaires.
- The research will consider length of the intervention being delivered as well as ensure a method of follow-up is included, to mitigate potential mental health deterioration among participants.
- This may include the implementation of equine-assisted therapy 'booster sessions' to occur at regular intervals following the core program conclusion to facilitate ongoing self-reflection and consolidation of skills learnt.

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BIOGRAPHY



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Jennifer Nagrath is a social services advocate, cofounder and honorary chair of a non-profit organization. With 15 years experience as a leader, designer, and practitioner of systemic change from vision and strategy to execution and long-term sustainability, she has built high performance teams to successfully execute organizational goals, and cultivating understanding of multiculturalism in the community. Through a spectrum of offerings from symposiums, workshops, and community events, she supports individuals by providing culturally-sensitive programs on healthcare access, youth leadership, aging and caregiving, including supporting survivors or violence and abuse, as well as building capacity for Bhutanese refugees.