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An Arena for Success: Metaphor Utilization in Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy

Paper based on a program presented at the 2007 Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Conference, October 11-14, Columbus, Ohio

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Introduction

If people are having problems in their lives, they should go to horse therapy to get in touch with their inner selves, relieve stress. Once they leave there, they'll have smiles on their faces. Most dudes like to be tough, but on the inside, a horse opens up that weakness and brings out the softness.

Juvenile, age 17

The big white van, with barred windows slowly pulled up in front of the stable. Five juveniles of varying ethnicity exit the van accompanied by two youth counselors; one Black male and one White woman. The youth were dressed the same, with tan pants, white-t-shirts sticking out from their perfectly clean white sweatshirts, and black boots, some of which were untied. The youth shuffled as though in a slow march, and entered the waiting room. The boys made brief eye contact in response to the verbal greetings as their eyes gazed about taking in the new, unfamiliar sites.

The youth announced having no previous interactions with horses, but hesitantly began to disclose information they had heard from the prior juvenile group. They queried about the horse pictures in the room. "Is that Rocket? We heard he was big and the leader? Where is Prince? Is he the one that likes to run? Where are the horses?" The clatter of their din began to escalate with peals of excited laughter and as one youth resounded, "Man, am I nervous. I ain't been around horses before!"

Walking down a long hallway, complete with abandoned old stalls, the youth began again to ask questions about the horses' whereabouts and did they sleep in the boxes, which they likened to their cells. Two of the youth walked slowly and were silent. They glanced furtively side to side.

Entering the arena, the youth came upon five horses of various color and size, milling around. Directly in front of the arena was a stage with plastic summer chairs and each youth took a seat. Two boys retreated to the back of the stage while three leaned

over to get closer to the horses. One of the horses walked back and forth and the youth whispered, "They are here to check us out." One in back stated, "Well, we are here to interact with them and I hope they like us, cuz we want them to do lots of stuff." All the youth were instructed to enter the arena and began a process of change for 12 weeks.

Importance of EAP

The rate of criminal offenses committed by youth continues to increase. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) reported that over one and a half million cases are processed annually (OJJDP, 2004). A longitudinal study concluded that adolescents exhibiting antisocial behavior with minor delinquent acts escalated to serious criminal activity (Henggeler & Sheidow, 2003). The recidivism rate of prosecuted youth remains high and requires a variety of interventions to create a positive change in this area.

Reviews of counseling approaches indicate a wide variance from several having little impact on youth, to some efficacy with behavioral parent training, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and functional family therapy (Borduin, 1999). The success of treatment approaches was defined by Henggeler and Sheidow (2003) in a review of over 500 treatment designs. They concluded that only three programs, which were multisystemic, reduced criminal behavior. Further studies stated that they were four primary factors that contributed to positive behavioral changes with adjudicated youth: client factors, relationship factors, hope, and model techniques (Clark, 2001).

The client factors are self-awareness and self-concept of the youth in treatment. Relationship factors describe youth's perceived empathy and establishment of attachment. Hope and encouragement are paramount to facilitate change. The model techniques factor refers to youth applying the counseling device or method utilized in therapy to promote their own growth.

A multisystemic program that incorporates the above factors for change may well be integrated in a unique counseling approach. Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is a fairly new treatment modality that was developed in the late 90s (Kersten & Thomas, 1999). Psychotherapy is conducted in an arena utilizing horses with clients having mental health problems. The theoretical basis is experiential and incorporates solution-focused counseling. There is a small amount of groundwork literature that posits EAP's success with difficult and challenging youth.

Evolution of EAP

Animals have long been ascribed to providing meaningful relationships with human beings (Morrison, 2007). Research indicates that ancient civilizations used animals in treatment goals (Pitts, 2005). The first documented case of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) was in England in 1699, utilizing dogs and cats as relaxation techniques for mentally ill (Parshall, 2003).

A small study was conducted in 1942 at an Army convalescence hospital in United States. Patients were exposed to animals to help in their recovery and reported to

have less anxiety (Morrison, 2007; Parshall, 2003). Research became more prominent in 1962 when Levinson, a psychologist, wrote about his dog, Jingles, who inadvertently entered the counseling room during a session with an autistic child, who began to respond (Parshall, 2003). This resulted in a flurry of studies (Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002) and universities such as Purdue and Pennsylvania were paramount in research in animal-assisted therapies in the 1970s (Morrison, 2007; Parshall, 2003).

The North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) was created in 1969 and coined the term Equine-Facilitated Therapy, which serves patients benefiting from health related conditions. Out of EFT is a specialized faction, *hippotherapy*, designed to increase sensory integration processing, such as balance, and improve speech and language, both expressively and receptively (NARHA, 2007).

Another division grew out of the positive emotional effects of equine-assisted therapies, Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP). Noted in clients, especially children and adolescents, who additionally had mental health concerns, was increased self-esteem, improved confidence, and reduced anxiety (Vidrine et al., 2002).

The implementation of using equines for improvement in mental health was further explored in the late 90s by Greg Kersten, who was noted to coin the term Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) (Trotter, 2006). Kersten was working in an incarcerated facility when he began to use his own horses for inmates to interact with by having inmates perform simple grooming exercises. The activities did not utilize any riding of horses. Kersten noticed positive behavioral changes. He then co-created, with a therapist, an educational program, Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA). The purpose was to train licensed mental health therapists and equine-specialists as teams in the art of using horses for change (Kersten & Thomas, 1999).

More recently, Kersten has created another educational program called the O.K. Corral Educational Series. O. K. stands for observation and knowledge. The O. K. program broadens EAP foundations for utilization to community members such as parents and teachers. The primary purpose is to assist in the application of how metaphors for change can be implemented in settings without a horse.

Therapeutic Components

EAP components include (a) a team approach toward treatment, (b) structured experiential problem-solving activities, and (c) a unique environmental setting.

The Therapeutic Team

The unique team is comprised of a licensed mental health specialist, an equine-specialist, and of course, at least one horse. Horses are viewed as part of the team, owing to their reported ability to respond or react to humans' internalization of feelings.

The role of counselor is to oversee treatment. The counselor attends to the emotional aspects and attends to verbal and nonverbal responses of the client toward the horse. Counselors also create and co-create metaphor for change.

The equine specialists, on the other hand, attend to the horse's behaviors and are charged with providing physical safety for the clients and counselor, as well as for the horses.

The horse's role is perhaps the most important of the team members'. They provide a backdrop of herd dynamics, which in most cases parallels socialization behaviors in the human community. Horses are always interactive in communication with one another, albeit subtle at times. Horses are quick to respond to any risk by retreating (Kersten & Thomas, 1999). This fear can be triggered by something as simple as leaves blowing in the wind, or someone approaching the horse suddenly or aggressively. The responses of the horses' however, provide the milieu for creating metaphors. Karol (2007) posits that a horse's sensitivity and reactivity, provides immediate feedback to the client. For example, if clients are frustrated or angry, horses can respond in kind by pinning their ears back or "being uncooperative."

Semi-structured Activities

Activities are designed to enable clients to have the opportunity to solve problems. For example, one of the first activities is to catch and halter a horse. The horses can appear to "not cooperate" and move away or the halter may not fit. Youth usually have no conception of how to approach a horse, let alone to halter one. The goal of all EAP activities is experiential, thus, directions are not provided. This creates a challenge for clients and engages them in creative solution problem-solving to succeed.

A more challenging activity, such as constructing an obstacle course, is an excellent model for adjudicated youth to discuss what their obstacles are to succeed outside the arena, or in their community.

The Setting

The use of a nontraditional setting creates an atmosphere whereby clients physically move about in an atmosphere that provides opportunities to learn about themselves from their own interactions with horses. The setting has a set of unfamiliar rules and provides a window of change that can counteract resistive behaviors.

EAP Metaphorical Communication Constructs

Metaphorical constructs are the primary mechanism utilized for change (Irwin & Weber, 2001; Karol, 2007; Kersten & Thomas, 1999). Four prime target areas in EAP facilitate metaphor: (1) using metaphors to explain a horse's behavior (what is the horse running away from?), (2) analogous language to discuss props or tools (what does the halter mean to the horse and what is your halter in life?), (3) clients relating life lessons learned (what does it mean that you all walked to get the horse over the obstacle?), and (4) clients inferring lessons learned in coping (when we work through our obstacles, we succeed) (Kakacek & Ottens, 2008).

The counselor attends to the clients' verbal and non-verbal responses to each of these areas and then designs or constructs metaphors to help clients develop and retrieve emotional responses (Lyddon, Clay, & Sparks, 2001). There are general communication

patterns that have emerged in working with adjudicated youth. These are references to themselves and horse behaviors, team building, anthropomorphizing, transferences, and metaphors for the future.

Metaphor Communication Themes in EAP

The metaphor themes noted were (1) communication skills that the youth attributed to the horses and themselves (including emotional labeling), (2) the transference of the horses' characteristics like themselves, and (3) the transferring of metaphor problem-solving in the incarceration facility.

You Gotta Be Calm!

The participants in EAP ascertain rather quickly, that to interact with the horses, they need to develop relationships with the large animal. Immediately upon entering the setting, youth explicate they are "scared and frightened." Youth immediately anthropomorphize the intent of the horses to be leaders. For example, a youth noted a need to respect the horses "He (equine) is like me, cuz if you get mad they know it and run around ready to fight. You gotta be calm."

We Need to Work Together

All activities in the EAP group are designed to increase self-awareness through team building. During catching and haltering with three horses, the counselor noted who took a halter, who took a rope, and how they paired up or attempted to problem-solve. One juvenile who was initially very quiet, became a leader and repeatedly encouraged others, for example by phrases such as, "Come on, help us. Quit being scared." The reported "leader" of the herd discussed afterwards that they accomplished this by "working together." Team-building became a recurrent communication theme in all aspects of EAP.

They Got Feelings Too!

It's often understood in conducting EAP that there is no way to tell what's going to happen with the horses and how the horses will react to the youth at any given time. The ambiguity of the sessions led to significant outcomes. For example, during a session, a horse became ill and fell down straight in front of all the youth. One boy noted that the horse needed help. Once Rocket was able to get up and had been given some medicine so he wouldn't continue to colic (a life-threatening condition in horses), the youth pondered "What should I do, is this the right thing to do, how do we help him?" The youth then took it upon himself to walk Rocket around. The whole time he was walking him he continued to soothe him and state the horse needed us (team) to be positive.

He was very overwhelmed with emotion. His voice quivered and he had tears in his eyes. The other boys were also greatly impacted, however the youth said later this was the best session he had ever had because he learned how useful he was, how to be helpful, and felt very powerful "in a new way." He also stated that he thinks in his future that he'll become a helper and that this incident of helping Rocket "changed his life."

Later when processing the session, he said that he knew for sure now that horses had feelings because he could see in Rocket's eyes that he was in pain. This unexpected incident created many very powerful experiences for the youth.

Are You Mad or Is Rocket?

Group sessions continually assess the youths' emotional state prior to entering the arena. For example, a youth reported feeling "crabby" and that the horse would know and "be mean, just like me." The transference of emotions to the horses is quite common.

Obstacles of Life

An activity designed to increase problem-solving skills, which generally results in multiple attempts for numerous sessions, is to construct a hurdle. The goal is to build an obstacle and choose a horse to go over it. The rules established are that youth may not touch the horse, or bribe or pretend to bribe. The team creates their own consequences should they violate a rule.

During a youth's last session, he approached Lily quietly and gently and said to her "come on, it's ok you can go, it's ok follow me" and he kept repeating this mantra. The other boys would say "tell her again because she listens to you!" He became a leader and more importantly, a gentle leader. While he was coaxing Lily to move over the obstacle, he kept gently cajoling the other boys stating, "We have to help her overcome her obstacle. She needs us all."

Processing what worked with Lily, youth are asked what obstacles are in their way of succeeding. Responses vary, however, categorically, youth respond with issues of school, gangs, substance abuse, and poor peer models. Asking what helps them over the obstacles, they reported that family and even the courts help to remind them of the rules.

You Gotta Stick With the Plan

Youth participate in twelve sessions. Concluding group is an opportunity for youth to prepare for the transition back to their community. The final session is full of emotional responses. A youth reported EAP helped him, stating "I'm just like the horses cuz I don't always want to do what people say and my mood affects others-it can rub off. Sometimes you got to do what people tell you. In the past negative behaviors used to cause me to be negative."

Utilizing open-ended questions, responses became the youth's discovery of individual truth. For example, recalling the catch and halter exercise, responses can vary such as "it makes me feel like I'm trapped. I can't do what I want to" contrasted with another's "its control and guidance, a way to direct me positively."

Discussion

This paper explicated a brief overview of EAP and the primary change mechanism of metaphoric application. Examples from incarcerated youth whom had participated in EAP were presented. The broader implication for utilizing EAP is the creation of new alternatives for difficult and challenging youth. Gang affiliations and

substance abuse areas need to be treated with a new paradigm for change: one that is experiential and attends to youth creating what is truth and reality for themselves.

Future research needs to explore the specific metaphors used by youth and whether or not these may indeed be universal. Additionally, examining specific communities whereby youth are returned to, or a longitudinal study can further explore the efficacy of EAP.

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