



***Healing the Wounded Warrior: A Qualitative Inquiry of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy
in Treating PTSD for Female Veterans***

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Presentation Outline



- Overview
- Research Question and Methods
- Participants/Recruitment
- Data collection
- Participant Info and Demographics
- Results and Significant Findings
- Discussion
- Contributions and Implication
- Conclusion

Overview of Research

- Purpose was to **discover out how EFP impacts veterans with PTSD** and how **interaction with the horse** may or may not lead to positive changes in mental health
- This study was an **exploratory qualitative inquiry** examining the lived experience of **female veterans with PTSD** who participated in **EFP treatment**, with particular attention to the **interconnectivity of the human–animal bond**
- Transpersonal psychology was considered the best fit in which to examine the phenomenon



Research Question and Methods

The research question:

“What is the lived experience of EFP in female veterans with PTSD?”

- Intended to address how the relationship and interactions with a horse in EFP may affect PTSD symptoms for traumatized veterans

Methods:

- The research was designed as an exploratory qualitative inquiry
- Postmodernism and social constructivism and interpretivism comprised philosophical lens used as the interpretive framework of study
- Used thematic analysis of in-depth descriptions of their experiences
- Participants were considered the expert of their own lived experiences
- Utilized semi-structured interviews



Inclusion Criteria

- Female veterans of the U.S. military who served between 1990 and 2016
- Who had a verifiable professional diagnosis of military-related PTSD
- Who had participated in an EFP program within the previous three years prior to the time of participation in study



Data Collection

- In-person and phone audio-recorded **open-ended, semi-structured interviews**
- All interviews were given goddess pseudonym and all identifying information removed
- The validity of this research project was held to qualitative standards of descriptive and interpretive validity measures that attempted to make sense and meaning of the subjective experiences of participants



Participant Information and Demographics

- **10 participants total**
- Women from **seven different states** in the United States
- **Ages:** 30 to 59
- **Ethnicity:** Caucasian (70%), 20% were Hispanic or Latino, and 10% were from multiple races
- **Military service:** Ranged from 29 years to 2 years, with a mean of 9.2 years.
- Majority of participants serving in the Army (70%), followed by 40% Navy, 20% Air Force, and 20% Reserves; and several in multiple branches



Participant Information and Demographics

- ****9 out of 10 participants reported MST****
- All reported **prior psychotherapy experience**
- All received **multiple treatment interventions** combination of treatment provided by the VA (50%), 50% received psychotherapy with private practice and alternative therapies, and 20% received in-patient treatment
- All participants participated in equine assisted activities and therapies that included EFP treatment and were provided by established equine programs and organizations.
- A majority of participants had EFP treatment with other women veterans (60%); 80% had more than one EFP experience, and 20% had a one-time EFP experience.
- A majority taking psychotropic medications



Results

- Findings from this study included **6 theme groupings** with a total of **33 themes found**.
- **6 Theme Groupings:**
- Section A, “Experience of the horse–human relationship” (*6 themes found*)
- Section B, “Interviewee perception of supportive behavior” (*3 themes found*)
- Section C, “Beneficial experiences from EFP treatment” (*6 themes found*)
- Section D, “Impact on PTSD symptoms” (*4 themes found*)
- Section E, “Additional factors to consider in treatment of military-related PTSD” (*5 themes found*)
- Section F, “Pre-EFP treatment military-related experiences” (*9 themes found*)



Significant Findings

The most significant themes common to five or more participants included from the 6 theme groupings were 11 themes:

1. Emotional discomfort with the horse
2. Spiritual experience with the horse
3. Experience of safety with the horse
4. Visual contact with the horse
5. Emotional connection with the horse
6. Beneficial impact of therapy
7. Increased connection with others
8. Reduced anxiety
9. Reduced withdrawal
10. EFP advocacy for others
11. Delayed awareness of PTSD



Discussion

- Findings were **consistent with interconnectivity variables** in the field of transpersonal psychology that **included peak experiences, present moment awareness, and connection with Nature/All That Is**
- Majority of participants experienced short-term and/or long-term **benefits of reduction of PTSD symptomology** that transferred from EFP sessions to their everyday lives
- **Majority reported experiences in EFP were profound** and made **bigger impact** on their PTSD symptoms and general well-being than the VA treatment or traditional office-based therapy approaches had



Contributions of Study

- **The first study of its kind that asked female veterans to participate in interviews** in order to learn of their **lived experiences** as a female veteran who **had participated in EFP treatment**
- This research **revealed invaluable insights into the healing power of horses** and alternative mental health treatment options, and served to honor women's pre- and post-experiences in the military
- Interconnection between species became understood **to be a nonverbal energy connection potential from one being to another**; and it was looking beyond just the physical world, but opened up consideration for spiritual experience evoked through relationship with a horse



Implications of Findings

- **EFP was helpful for all participants in some way**
- Provided hope that healing and reduction of the severity of PTSD symptoms was possible
- **Connection with horses was a catalyst** for participants to experience emotional safety and to become open, vulnerable, and motivated beyond EFP sessions to get better
- Demonstrated the voices of women who self-reported shifts they noticed and felt reconnecting with who they are, their families and loved ones, and their community was significant in being able to assist participants healing and recovery processes from PTSD
- Demonstrated the power of their lived experiences participating in EFP



Conclusions

- **The significance of the bravery of these women** to share their stories with this interviewer and to advocate helping other women who experienced MST **was powerful and moving**
- **Their stories and lived experiences of EFP are part of the movement to help other MST victims** and to advocate the U.S. military to be more aware of why these incidents happen, place measures for preventing or encouraging this type of perpetrator development, rules and guidelines for how to safely report without whistleblower ostracization or career sabotage, to find appropriate restitution and integrated treatment for post-MST
- Advocacy to increase awareness of impacts of MST and military-related PTSD, and accessibility for integrated treatment options



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