Mindfulness Tools for Equine-assisted Services
by
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Introduction

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  - Professor of Psychiatry (Clinica), University of Utah School of Medicine and Adjunct Professor of Animal, Dairy and Veterinary Sciences, Utah State University
  - Certified by PATH, Intl. as an Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning and certified by Eagala to provide Equine-assisted Psychotherapy
  - Mindfulness teacher and practitioner
  - Horse person
  - Mindful Horsemanship
Agenda

- What is mindfulness?
- How mindfulness can support, horsemanship, EAS, and life
- Developing a mindfulness practice
- Q & A

Stop me with questions
What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the awareness that arises from paying attention in a particular way:

- On purpose
- Moment-by-moment
- Non-judgmentally
What is Mindfulness?

- Maintaining focus on what is happening in the present moment **AND**
- Observing our own sensations, thoughts and emotions without judgement

Autopilot

- The opposite of mindfulness
- Mind wandering
- The normal state of the mind
- Often thinking about the past or future
- Sometimes not helpful
Meditation

- Meditation derives from Latin *meditari*, which means to engage in contemplation or reflection.

- Encompasses various practices generally aimed at bringing mental processes under voluntary control through focusing attention and awareness.

- Mindfulness meditation is one type of meditation practice.
Mindfulness practices

- Evidence-based mindfulness interventions
- Formal meditation practices
- Mindfulness in everyday life
Aims of Mindfulness-based Interventions

- Learn about mindfulness
- Establish a regular mindfulness practice
- Be able to recognize when the mind is in autopilot mode
- Develop the ability to move out of autopilot and into mindfulness

Mindfulness

- Evidence of benefit for:
  - Self-care & stress management
  - Sports performance enhancement
  - Specific mental health and physical disorders
How does mindfulness work?

Mind Full, or Mindful?

Autopilot

Mindfulness is the opposite of autopilot, which includes:

- Thinking about the past or future
- Ruminations and worry
- Habitual thinking and behavior patterns
- Emotional reactivity
- Wanting things to be different
- Resistance to physical and emotional discomfort
Autopilot

- Can be helpful:
  - Multitasking
  - Don’t have to think about every step of a task
  - Learn from the past
  - Planning for the future
It’s ok to be on autopilot sometimes...

Other times it is not such a great idea...
Autopilot cycle

- Stress
- Emotional discomfort
- Increased feelings of stress
- More emotional discomfort
- Rumination

Human-human autopilot cycle

- Horse emotional reaction
- Human emotional reaction
- Train wreck
- Increased horse emotional reaction
- Increased human emotional reaction
Horse-human autopilot cycle

- Horse fear response
- Human emotional reactivity
- Increased horse fear response
- More human emotional reactivity
- Train wreck

Why doesn’t autopilot work?

▶ Does not want to accept reality as it is
▶ Wants things to be different
▶ The reality of each moment already exists and is unchangeable
Why doesn’t autopilot work?

- The reality of each moment already exists and is unchangeable
- Our only choices are acceptance or resistance

Why doesn’t autopilot work?

- Often well-worn thinking ruts that keep us stuck - rather than finding solutions
- Limits our ability to shift perspective and see options
Example

- My new horse, Rye
- Bought as a “project” with history of very rough treatment
- Hard to catch
- Making great progress
- Until the afternoon the farrier comes...
- So, what happened?

Horse-human autopilot cycle

- Horse can't be caught
- Human emotional reactivity
- Increased horse concern about being caught
- Human rumination
- More human emotional reactivity
Horse-human mindfulness cycle

Human acceptance of reality without wanting to change it

Horse can't be caught

Human recognizes his own stress may have created the problem

Autopilot interferes with happiness

- Autopilot is never satisfied
  - It always wants things to be different
    - Get something we don't have
    - Get rid of something we do have
How does mindfulness work?

- Radical acceptance of reality as it is
- Interrupts the autopilot cycle
- Standing beside the river rather than being swept away
- Brain rewiring through neural plasticity
- Reduced emotional reactivity
Mindfulness and sports performance

- Reduced rumination and regulation of negative emotion likely contribute to enhanced sports performance


Mindfulness and horsemanship

- Reduced rumination and regulation of negative emotion can be expected to help us have better and more satisfying relationships with our equine partners, coworkers, and clients
Mindfulness and horsemanship

- Mindfulness can help us be more attuned to subtle horse body language

- Mindfulness enhances our body awareness so that we can communicate more effectively to our horse during both ground and mounted work
Mindfulness cycle

- Mindful acceptance
- Mindful decision-making
- Continued pain but less suffering
- Less avoidance of emotional discomfort
- Less attachment to story/self
- Continued pain but less suffering
- Mindful decision-making

Using mindfulness for ourselves and in EAS work

- Self-care
- Mindfulness-informed EAS
- Prevention of burnout
Using mindfulness for self-care

- Practicing mindfulness can help us:
  - Manage situations that are stressful and emotionally or physically uncomfortable
  - This particularly includes dealing with disturbing EAS situations

Using mindfulness for self-care

- Practicing mindfulness can help us by:
  - Recognizing when others are on autopilot
  - Avoiding making our own stress worse by falling into our habitual thinking, emotional and behavior patterns
  - Enhancing our ability to let situations arise and pass
Using mindfulness for self-care

- Habitual autopilot thinking patterns that are often unhelpful:
  - Wanting things to be different
  - Resistance to the emotional discomfort
  - Self-criticism
  - Need to fix things or achieve a specific outcome
  - Ruminating after the situation is over

Using mindfulness for self-care

- By being mindfully aware, we are often able to:
  - Avoid being carried away by our thoughts and emotions
  - Allow situations to arise and pass
  - Accept reality as it is
  - Avoid burnout and lead happier and more satisfying lives
Developing a personal mindfulness practice

- In-person or virtual courses:
  - Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

- Books
  - Anything by Jon Kabat-Zinn

- Guided meditation podcasts - https://www.va.gov/PATIENTCENTEREDCARE/resources/multimedia/index.asp#downloadable-audio-files--podcasts

- Meditation apps

Practice is the key

We need to practice when we don’t need it to be able to use it when we do need it.
Developing a personal mindfulness practice

- Ways to practice
  - Dedicated meditation sessions
  - Short practices to use when stressed or upset
  - Mindfulness in life

Developing a personal mindfulness practice

- Dedicated meditation sessions (guided or unguided)
  - Set aside time and space to practice
  - Guided is usually best in the beginning
  - Focusing on the breath is a great option
  - Five minutes per day is a good starting goal
Developing a personal mindfulness practice

- Brief practices when needed
  - Short practices to use when stressed or upset
  - Check-in meditation is a good option
    - Focus on the physical sensations of breathing
    - Check in with the body, mind and emotions
    - End the meditation

Check-in meditation
Developing a personal mindfulness practice

- Mindfulness in life
- We can do anything mindfully...
Contact information

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