

# Creating, Implementing and Executing an Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy Program

Leeanna Rice, MSW, LCSW

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## Leeanna Rice, MSW, LCSW

- Master's of Social Work from USC
  - Emphasis in Military Mental Health
- Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW)
  - Licensed in 2017
- PATH Certified:
  - Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning (ESMHL) certified in 2018
  - Certified Therapeutic Riding Instructor (CTRI) certified in 2021



  
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## The Shea Center

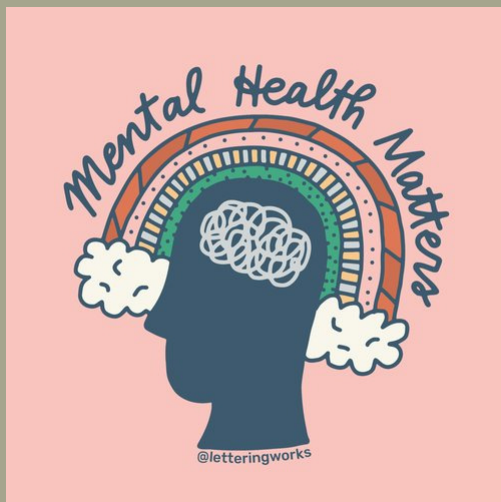
Established in 1978 in San Juan Capistrano

Equine Assisted Services provided:

- Therapeutic/Adaptive Riding- 1978
- Therapy (PT, OT, Speech)- 2000
- Military Riding Groups- 2010
- Equine Assisted Learning- 2021
- Equine Assisted Psychotherapy- 2023

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## A Need for Mental Health Treatment



- Why add this service now?
  - Identified a need in the community
- Timing—2020 pandemic
- Increased client inquiries for mental health
- Common diagnoses:
  - Anxiety
  - Depression
  - Adjustment Disorders
  - Emotional Dysregulation
  - PTSD



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## Now What?



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## Where Do We Start?



### Questions:

- Does this service fit our Mission?
- Do we have Resources?
  - Staff/Volunteers
  - Horses
  - Physical Space
  - Funding
- How will this affect current services and the community?
- How can we contribute to the current field?

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## Equine Assisted Psychotherapy- Defined

- Current definition per PATH: The therapist determines how equine interactions, movement or aspects of the equine environment may enhance the client's individualized treatment plan with the goals of improving the client's sensorimotor, cognitive, behavioral, emotional or psychological function for improved health and wellness. (PATH, 2022)
  - Best practice dictates that therapy professionals obtain specialized training focused on the safe inclusion of horses in treatment.
- Previous definitions have been problematic and vague.
- Role of the equine can often be unclear, experiential, or over-utilize anthropomorphism.



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## Current Research

- The majority of participants of this study generally reported improvements in quality of life and psychosocial functioning factors participating in EAT. Collins et. Al, (2023)
- They reported being more grounded, congruent, assertive, and empowered. They said that these relationships restored their power and their voices. They said that these relationships saved their lives. Akin, J. C. (2023)
- Manualized EAT-PTSD shows promise as a potential new intervention for veterans with PTSD. It appears safe, feasible, and clinically viable. Fisher PW, Lazarov A, Lowell A, et al, (2021)
- Equine-assisted activities help humans overcome stress, reduce anxiety, and promote healing. Gehrke, E.K., Noquez, A.E., Ranke, P.L., Myers, M.P., (2018)



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# PATH Intl. Standards

- Nine Mental Health Standards
  - Five Mandatory Standards
  - Standards: One, Two, Four, Six and Nine
- Three "Field Test Standards"
  - Two Mandatory
  - Standards: One, Three
- Areas of consideration:
  - Clinical training and supervision for staff, volunteers in EAP
  - Equine training
  - Correct documentation for clients, staff and volunteers




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## Timeline for EAP at Shea Center

<p>-Identify the need</p> <p>- Post-COVID saw Increased mental health diagnoses</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Fall 2020</b></p>	<p>Begin pilot program with select clients</p> <p>Review and reflect on outcomes and engagement</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Fall 2021- Fall 2022</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Launch the program to the public!</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Winter (January) 2023</b></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Spring-Fall 2021</b></p> <p>Begin program development</p> <p>Create structure within the current system</p> <p>Identify potential clientele</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Fall 2022-Winter 2023</b></p> <p>Share outcomes with donors, staff, community</p> <p>Prepare to launch the program to the public</p>	




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## Building and Piloting the Program

### Build

- Identify the need
  - Who will we serve?
- Explore resources
  - Internal and external
- Leadership support and authorization
- Program development and infrastructure

### Pilot

- Take the time to pilot the program
  - One year
- Gather data to support the program
  - Qualitative and Quantitative reports
- Client feedback
- Executive leadership reports and presentation



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## Evaluating and Launching the Program

### Evaluate

- Multiple points of evaluation
  - Program fit
  - Executive/board evaluation
  - Client evaluation
  - Clinician evaluation

### Launch

- Official launch January 2023
- Established protocol and procedures
- Executive and Board support
- Community relationships
- Plans for sustainability and growth



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## Client Parameters

- Who do we serve?
  - All clients must have some type of mental health impairment
  - Relationships at home, work, or school must be negatively affected by mental health-related troubles
  - All clients must be cognitively and age-appropriate for EAP services
- Precautions- potential risk factors
  - Mood disorders, conduct disorders
- Contraindications- not an appropriate fit for services
  - Active psychosis, active substance abuse, active suicidal or homicidal ideation



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## Psychotherapy Interventions

### Evidence-Based Practices

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
- Cognitive Processing Therapy
- Dialectical Behavioral Therapy
- Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing Therapy



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## Documentation

### Enrollment

- Shea Center Enrollment Packet
- Informed Consent to Evaluate & Treat

### Treatment

- Biopsychosocial Assessment
- Treatment plans
- Daily notes

### Referral and Discharge

- Release of Information
- Discharge paperwork



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## Individual Session Structure



- Session 1: Complete Biopsychosocial Assessment
  - Identify mental health issues, establish goals, build rapport
- Session 2: Choose a Horse
  - Client goals have an impact on horse choices
  - Making an informed decision WITHOUT anthropomorphizing
- Session 3-until Discharge:
  - Experiential sessions that correlate to clinical goals
  - Identifying "take-away" points
- Discharge
  - Client has met and maintained their goals



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## Group Session Structure

- Is your program capable of doing one or the other, or both?
- What does individual EAP look like vs. group EAP?
- Curriculum Development
- Considerations:
  - Larger space
  - Horses that can be turned out together
- Volunteer support
- Community referrals

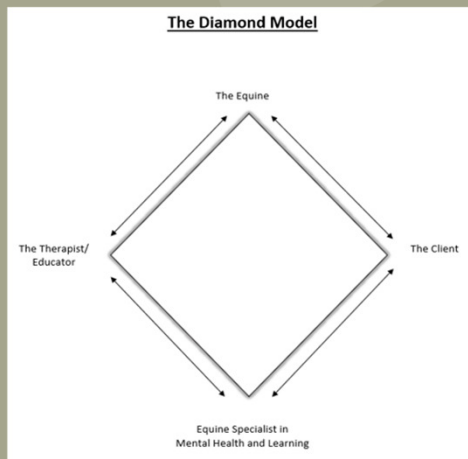


  
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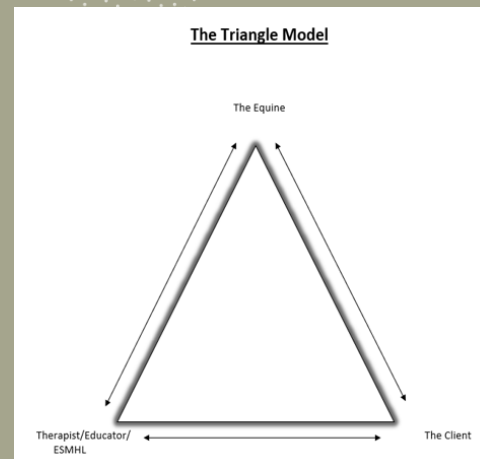


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**The Diamond Model**



**The Triangle Model**



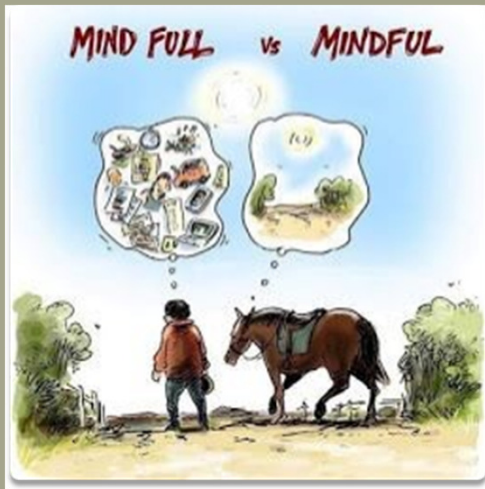
## PATH Models of EAP

  
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## Equines in Mental Health Treatment



- Anthropomorphism
- Biofeedback
- Herd Animal Mentality
- Fight/Flight vs. Rest/Digest
- Equine Psychology
- Verbal and Non-verbal Communication



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## Equines as Biofeedback

What is Biofeedback?

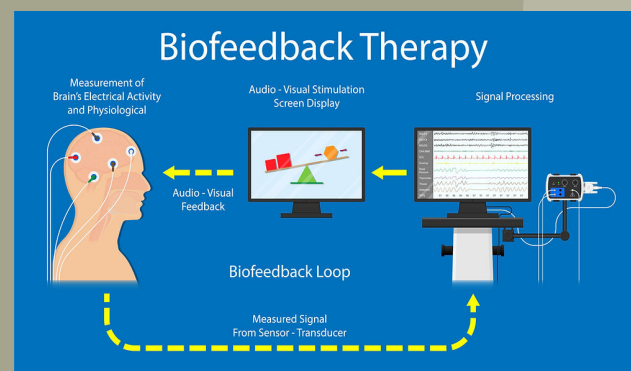
- Real-time reflection of internal emotional/physiological states

Biofeedback in Equines:

- Equines reflect human internal states through their behavior
  - Mechanisms:
    - Immediate behavioral response
    - Physiological synchrony
    - Sensitivity to subtle cues (breathing, tension)

Therapeutic Benefits:

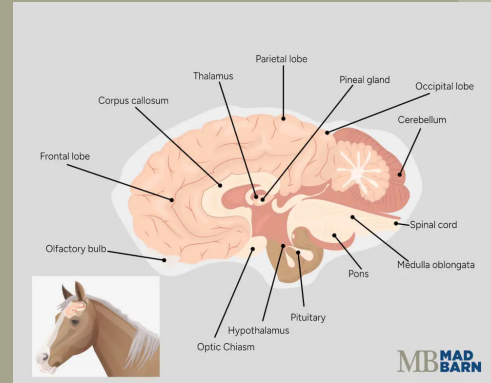
- Improves emotional awareness
- Enhances self-regulation
- Builds communication skills



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# Equine Neurobiology

- Equines are **prey animals** → brains wired for survival
- Key brain structures:
  - **Amygdala** → fear/threat detection
  - **Hippocampus** → memory & environment awareness
- Nervous system:
  - **Sympathetic** → fight/flight (arousal)
  - **Parasympathetic** → rest/calm
- Nervous System regulation measured through:
  - Heart rate
  - Heart rate variability (HRV)
  - Hormones (e.g., cortisol)



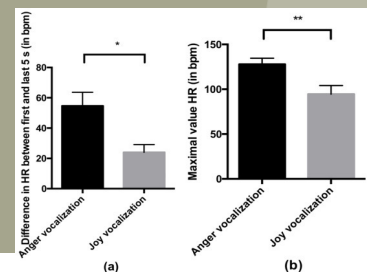
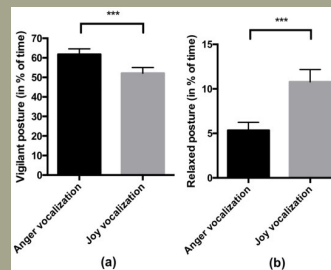
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# Do Equines Understand Human Emotions

- Equines are highly sensitive to:
  - Body language
  - Tone of voice
- Equines can "mirror" human emotional states
  - Known as emotional contagion
  - Examples:
    - Anxious human → equine becomes alert
    - Calm human → equine relaxes



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## Collecting Data



- Goals for future research:
- Qualitative and Quantitative measures
- Longitudinal studies of the effects EAP has on clients after services
- Utilizing measurement scales for progress
  - PCL, Beck's Inventory, PHQ, GAD

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## Sustainability and Growth



- Finding community partnerships
  - Growing referral sources
- Individual and group sessions
- Accepting internship opportunities
  - Setting standards for students
- Developing curriculum
- Adding staff and support
  - Clinical Staff/ESMHL
  - Volunteers
- Ongoing training and collaboration



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# Thank you! Questions?

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