The Use of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy in Youth Chemical Dependency: A New Modality for Nurse Practitioners

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To the faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the clinical project of BARBARA JAYNE BEEBE find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Abstract

Substance abuse among adolescents continues to be a serious public health concern and challenge in the medical field. Although no specific treatment modality is effective in all settings, Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is emerging as a positive intervention for working with adolescents. EAP is designed to address many different behaviors and emotions including: trust, self-esteem, communication, boundaries, and at-risk behaviors in adolescents through the use of a horse as a therapeutic tool. This new modality offers new ideas and interventions for nurse practitioners to become involved in the treatment and prevention of chemical dependency.
Introduction

Chemical dependency prevents thousands from leading productive and healthy lives (DiClemente, 1999). It is an encumbrance that inhibits one's capacity to make decisions and control personal actions and behaviors (DiClemente, 1999). Many different chemical dependency interventions and treatments exist with sufficient evidence that chemical dependency treatments lead to significant reductions in use, improve mental and physical health, and increase social efficiency (Foote, Deluca, Magura, Warner, Grand, Rosenblum, & Stahl, 1999).

There continues to be a large gap between the number of individuals who complete treatment and the success rate of participants (www.dasis.samhsa.gov. 2006; Ralph & McMenamy (1996). The treatment field continues to contend with the problems of poor patient retention and relapse. According to Pekarik, Manno, and Wickizer (as cited in Foote et al., 1999), an average of only approximately one third of people who start an outpatient chemical dependency program will complete it. Several population-based studies suggest that there continue to be high rates of mental health disorders and substance abuse among adolescents or young adults (Kessler & Magee, 1994; Kessler, Nelson, McGonage, Liu, Swartz, Blazer, 1996; Lewinsoh, Rohde, Seeley, & Fischer, 1993; as cited in French et al, 2008). Prevalence of DSM-IV disorders among adolescents entering substance abuse treatment is 82% for single diagnosis and 74% with comorbid diagnoses (Shane, P., Jasiukaitis, P., & Green, R., (2003).

Researchers continue to explore the efficacy and effectiveness of substance abuse therapies for adolescents (French et al., 2008). One such therapy which is not widely acknowledged and rarely used as a mean of addressing chemical dependency is Equine Assisted
Psychotherapy. The purpose of this article is to discuss the concept of EAP and describe how it can be used by psychiatric nurse practitioners as a beneficial form of rehabilitation for those with chemical dependency.

Psychotherapy Models Currently Being Used

Different types of psychotherapy models, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Experiential Psychotherapy, Functional Family Therapy, and integrative treatment combining individual and family therapy (French, Zavala, McColister, Waldron, Turner, Ozechowski, 2008; Curry 2001) have been found to be viable methods of working with youth in the field of chemical dependency. CBT and Experiential Psychotherapy will be discussed because of their influence on EAP as much of EAP’s frameworks evolve around the use of these two models (Klontz, Bivens, Leinart, & Klontz, 2007; Krall & Sapir, 2008).

Cognitive Behavior Therapy

“Cognitive therapy is based on a theory of personality which maintains that how one thinks largely determines how one feels and behaves” (Beck & Weishaar, 1995, p. 229). Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is an approach that is goal-oriented and provides an individualized focus and structure on the immediate problem. According to Corey (2005), CBT is “a psychoeducational model, which emphasizes therapy as a learning process, including acquiring and practicing new skills, learning new ways of thinking, and acquiring more effective ways of coping with problems” (p. 470). CBT provides the pathway for individuals to minimize their emotional disturbances and self-defeating behaviors by adapting a more realistic and practical philosophy of life (Corey, 2001).
Experiential Therapy

According to the Association for Experiential Education (2008), experiential therapy is defined as a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to develop skills, increase knowledge, and clarify values. Experiential therapy is structured so that the client can learn to make decisions, take initiative, and be held accountable for their actions (Association for Experiential Education, 2008). This type of therapy is based on the premise that one can learn from natural consequences, mistakes, and successes (Association for Experiential Education, 2008; Klontz, et. al., 2007).

Experiential therapy is a vehicle to help develop an atmosphere of acceptance in which clients are willing and encouraged to take risks, share, discuss, and problem solve together with their therapist and others (Forgan & Jones, 2002). By participating in experiential learning, clients can improve their behavior and self-concept while learning valuable skills that promote success within societal boundaries (Forgan & Jones, 2002). Throughout the experiential learning process, individuals are actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, problem solving, being curious, assuming responsibility, being creative and constructing meaning (Association for Experiential Education, 2008).

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy

EAP as a Modality

Seen as an eclectic form of counseling, EAP combines many different approaches from major counseling techniques that utilize well-developed theories and similar types of therapy
EAP employs the highly sensitive responses of the horse as a therapy tool. When working within the EAP framework, the client experiences emotions and behaviors relating to their situation within a different atmosphere than the traditional talk-therapy setting (Kimberl, 2002). It is a solution-focused, brief therapy that is useful with a wide variety of diagnoses and can be used with any age group or gender (Tyler, 1994; Tetreault, 2006). EAP can be utilized to address mental health and human development needs including substance abuse, chemical dependency, eating disorders, emotional disorders, behavioral issues, attention deficit disorders, abuse issues, depression, anxiety, and relationship and communication problems (Kersten & Thomas, 2005a; Kersten & Thomas, 2005b; Tetreault, 2006; Shultz, 2005).

During therapy, therapists can assist clients in becoming aware of any incongruence between their behaviors, beliefs, and values in an effort to help them understand negative behavioral patterns within their lives that may inhibit their aim for sobriety (DeHoff, Head, & Garza, 2007; Kersten & Thomas, 2005a, Tetreault, 2006). Clients use in-the-moment experiences to learn how to handle issues and manage future problems while focusing on their own personal resources and strengths (Knapp, 2007). Through the use of EAP, therapists are able to identify and structure treatment goals, objectives, and interventions to relate to current issues at home, at school or work, and in relationships (Krall & Sapir, 2008).

Origins of EAP

EAP is based on the use of metaphors and is closely related to Gestalt therapy in that a basic tool is the use of body language (Schultz, Remick-Barlow, & Robbins, 2007; Kersten-Thomas, 2005a). Within Gestalt therapy, the quality of contact and present awareness between the individual and the environment is stressed with the major focus being on assisting the client
to become aware of how behaviors that are part of their past environment may be interfering with effective functioning and living in the present (Corey, 2001).

**Metaphors**

In working with a horse metaphors emerge, the metaphors can then be used to raise the awareness of a client to situations occurring within the client’s life, providing a catalyst for personal growth (Schultz, 2007; Zugich, M., Klontz, T., Leinart, D., 2002). Client-related metaphors occur more frequently in EAP than in a traditional therapy setting due to the unique way in which a horse acts as a powerful symbol of communication and relationship issues (Klontz, B., et al., 2007; Zugich, et al., 2002; Shultz, B., 2005). All of EAP activities are performed in a setting such as an outdoor arena, pasture, or covered arena, which stimulates the individual’s awareness and senses while allowing them to build a relationship with their therapeutic team in a natural environment (Schultz, 2007). In this type of therapy setting, each individual responds to the horse in a different manner and their emotions and behaviors regarding the horse can be related to experiences within their own life. EAP is an innovative technique which allows the therapist to help participants address their mental, emotional, and behavioral issues while learning how to alter maladaptive coping behaviors and implement strategies in all areas of their lives (Mandrell, 2006; Kersten & Thomas, 2005; Shultz, 2005).

The focus of EAP is not riding or horsemanship. This method of therapy focuses on emotional healing and relies mainly on setting up activities with the horse that use ground work verses actual riding (Kersten & Thomas, 2005a). The horse is given the freedom to be ‘a horse’ with no expectations to act or respond in any certain way. Because EAP is experiential in nature, participants learn about themselves and others by engaging with the horse, then processing their
feelings, behaviors, and patterns that transpire during the session. This approach has been
compared to the ropes courses used by therapists, but EAP has the added advantage of utilizing
horses, dynamic and powerful living beings. (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005).

One popular group activity is called Life’s Little Obstacles. This activity involves asking
the group members to get the horse of their choice over a jump placed in the arena. The jump
represents any challenge that the group is facing both as individuals and in the group as a whole.
Rules of the activity are given: no touching the horse, no use of halters, ropes, belts, or string, no
bribing, and no talking among group members are allowed. In addition, the group is asked to
come up with a consequence for any rules that are broken. Each horse has its own personality;
he or she may or may not cooperate in following the direction that is asked. In working through
this exercise, the group is presented with many of the same obstacles that they face outside of the
arena. The process of trying to accomplish this activity provides for great group discussions and
insight for individual members (Kersten & Thomas, 2005a; Thomas, 2002).

Horses as a Therapeutic Tool

Horses are social animals with defined roles within their herd and like humans, they have
their own distinct personalities, moods, and attitudes without separating how they feel from how
they act (Klontz et al., 2007; Irwin, 2001). Horses are animals that have the ability to mirror
body language exhibited by the client and are sensitive to non-verbal stimuli. Horses can
provide valuable lessons regarding nonverbal communication and body language by responding
to the immediacy of the client’s intent and behavior. (Kersten & Thomas, 2005a; Schultz, 2005;
Kontz et al., 2007).
Horses have been used to teach problem-solving skills to adolescent groups with the emphasis on strengthening sobriety, providing the tools and motivation to think creatively, taking risks, breaking tasks down into manageable steps and to working as a team (Myers, 2004). In addition, horses have been shown to have an enormous impact on young individuals battling chemical dependency (DeHoff, et al., 2007). EAP increases the individual’s self-discovery, self-confidence, and leadership through experiencing new attitudes, choices, and consequences when working with a horse (DeHoff, et al., 2007).

Therapist and Equine Specialist

In EAP, the therapist and equine specialist work together to model open communication, respect, and cooperation for the client in order to understand and develop a relationship with the horse (Taylor, 2001). During the sessions, both individuals observe, comment, and instruct the client in effective development of verbal and non-verbal communication skills. They work to encourage the exploration of interpretations and actions which the client can use to relate to their personal situation (Taylor, 2001). Both professionals are required at the sessions so that a solution-oriented focus can be reached while emphasizing safety, support, and collaboration with the client (Kersten & Thomas, 2005a; Sokolof & Stuart, 2000; Taylor, 2001). Prior to the initial therapy session, the equine specialist screens the horses for the best ‘fit’ for the client. Equine specialists formulate activities that are appropriately related to the present issues to be explored and understood by the client while providing proper instruction for interacting with horses (Klontz et al., 2007).

Client Role
During an EAP session, the client’s role is to be authentic while participating in activities with horses. McCormick and McCormick (1997) found that the hostile and defiant behavior of adolescent gang youth erode quickly in the presence of an assumed adversary (the horse) that the youth is unequipped to control or overthrow. Such adolescents are invariably shocked as they begin to understand that openness and vulnerability are more likely to elicit positive behavior from the horse than displays of defiance and aggression (Frewin & Gardiner, 2005).

_Evidence Based Outcomes_

The core aim of EAP is to facilitate the process by which individuals find answers to their problems by analyzing their behaviors while exploring experiences that enhance trust, communication, and guidance (Schultz, 2007). EAP has been a successful method of therapy for different groups, such as at-risk youth, violent offenders, and people seeking personal growth experiences. In-patient psychiatric and substance abuse programs that have integrated an equine experience have been successful in teaching clients effective use of both verbal and non-verbal communication (Rector, 1992). According to Rector, 1992, “The importance of congruent messages that are consciously aligned with the mind, body and spirit of inner feelings is practiced. The significance of nonverbal influence and its powerful role in contributing to the quality of communication within relationships is demonstrated to the patient through his own work effort. The patient produces his own insight”. (p. 8)

In evaluating EAP, Mann and Williams (2002), found clinically significant improvement in 82% of youth taking part in Equine-Assisted Family Therapy. These youth had previously failed to make progress through the use of conventional methods (Mann, 2001). At Stone Fox Farms in Geauga County, Ohio, adolescents learned to think creatively, take risks, break tasks
down into manageable steps and to work as a team with the aim of strengthening sobriety through the use of the horse (Myers, 2002).

The 12-Step Process and EAP

The 12-step model is based on the experience of Alcoholics Anonymous' earliest members who recorded the principles and practices that they developed to maintain sobriety (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2008). The 12-steps are suggested as the program of recovery as each member is permitted to use the steps in their own individual way. The combination of the 12-Step process and EAP provides individuals with the opportunity to achieve abstinence from drugs and alcohol by the increased understanding of cognitive patterns that interfere with the individual’s sobriety. While many clients can be resistant and guarded when beginning treatment with the 12-Step program, the combination of the therapy program with EAP is effective in breaking down barriers and unlocking emotions within the client. With the use of this type of therapy program, individuals can identify the problem and take personal responsibility for their addiction while aiding in the process of self-recovery (DeHoff, et al., 2007).

In the first step of the 12-step process, clients acknowledge their need for help in their struggle with addiction. This also includes recognizing the client’s actions and behaviors that have contributed to the state of unmanageability and powerlessness in their lives. After accepting the need for help, the client continues with the 12-step process which goes through various stages: believing that there is something more powerful than themselves which can help them stop their addiction, recognizing how their previous actions may have affected their relationships with colleagues and loved ones, and learning how to step back and assess their
present situation, and make appropriate decisions which will better their life (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2008). Finally, the client goes through the process of recognizing their spiritual and mental awakening and helping others in various stages of their battle with addiction (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2008).

The integration of EAP and the 12-Step process focuses on relationships and how the client’s problem has impacted others. This type of therapy centers solely on the afflicted individual and encourages the person to take full ownership of their mistakes and take responsibility to make amends to those they have harmed. These actions in themselves reflect the idea of respect towards others, learning from their surroundings, and assessing personal beliefs and actions that define relationships with others (DeHoff, et al., 2007).

**Exemplar Programs**

Located in Wickenburg, Arizona, Gatehouse Academy is an extended care treatment center for men and women ages 17-25 that are in need of long term drug or alcohol rehab. Within the facility’s established framework, professionals at Gatehouse stress the importance of unlocking each individual’s potential through using the 12-step drug rehab and alcohol recovery program in collaboration with EAP. It is their belief that incorporating EAP with the 12-step program creates a strong foundation for a successful drug abuse treatment program.

Therapists at Gatehouse believe that the greatest impact EAP has upon the participants is that awareness is increased much more quickly than in any other type of therapy (D. Golden, personal communication, January 2, 2008). Therapists at Gatehouse Academy found that by using EAP allowed them quicker access into the mental turmoil that their clients were
experiencing than traditional therapy. They found that involvement with the horse became a powerful catalyst for healing that started the clients on their path to sobriety and recovery.

Horse Sense of the Carolinas is an out-patient facility in Marshall, North Carolina, outside of Asheville. Horse Sense provides different types of therapy services for afflicted individuals (at-risk youth, chemical dependency, depression), all within the framework of EAP. Use of the 12-step process with out-patient clients involves working through each one of the steps during their 12-week session. At the beginning of each session, the client is asked to check in to see where they are in relation to their treatment (which step they are currently working on) and to state intentions for the coming session. At the conclusion of each weekly session, a closing discussion is conducted and a specific range of questions is asked to the client to help them gain insight into their addiction and/or healing process. At that time, the client is able to share one thing that they were able to learn about themselves and how it would apply to their life in the upcoming week (Anthony, Cramer, & Knapp, 2000).

The staff at Horse Sense believes that through working with professionals and horses the clients can discover a solution-focused approach to solving current problems, experience resilience, and develop the ability to provide answers to life's questions while connecting with the beauty, power, and integrity of horses. Clients at Horse Sense are encouraged to discover the importance of trust while practicing in asking for help from others.

Conclusion

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy is a relatively new field, but one that has support for its role in helping individuals in all phases of their lives. It provides the opportunity for growth,
personal understanding, and the opportunity for rebirth. Individuals seeking change from old dysfunctional patterns based on unconscious motivations can find assistance through interacting with a horse in a natural environment (K. Ingram, personal communication, December 20, 2007). Psychiatric nurse practitioners have the capacity to use this type of psychotherapy due to their connection with their clients as both a nurse and as a mental health provider. Psychiatric nurse practitioners are well-suited to develop interventions and provide programs to initiate drug and alcohol programs to reduce harm and manage the consequences of chemical dependency and to assist in the process of cessation needed for recovery from addiction. EAP would be a useful modality in working with individuals with co-occurring disorders and has been proven successful in working with at-risk youth in correctional facilities. Full acceptance of EAP in the chemical dependency field will be assisted through further research, especially as a form of therapy for those suffering from other mental or social disorders.
References


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