

*“If you open Pandora’s box
and you can’t deal with what comes
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DAWN HOLMES

Rules of engagement

Equestrians know how good horses are for the soul – but is the proliferation of equine-assisted psychotherapists safe for both horses and humans? Catherine Welton finds out how experts are working towards a gold standard

A GROWING body of scientific research is proving what equestrians instinctively know: being around horses is good for our mental health. Equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) – where someone interacts with a horse as part of their therapeutic process – is being increasingly used to treat a wide range of mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, addiction and eating disorders.

Philip Johnson is a clinical and sports psychologist. He first used EAP 20 years ago at the Sporting Chance clinic set up by footballer Tony Adams.

“In the 28-day programme, we included four sessions of equine-assisted therapy,”

says Philip. “It was all males with severe addiction issues. The horses acted as a mirror for the humans’ behaviour, enabling the individual to connect in a very different way with the horse and with themselves.”

Recently, he’s seen EAP become increasingly popular.

“New facilities emerge on a regular basis now,” says Philip. “The equine industry has recognised its own potential.”

It’s a rise that’s also been noticed by the Equine Assisted Services Partnership (EASP), a membership body for the equine-assisted services sector.

Director Sarah Jane Williamson says: “The number of providers of all types of equine-assisted services has increased in recent years, as riding establishments

and individual practitioners seek to diversify. There also appears to be an increasing interest from the public and from qualified counsellors and psychotherapists who want to offer equine-assisted interactions to meet this increased public interest. And more research is being undertaken to validate EAP as a viable, sustainable service.”

It may be increasingly popular, but how can customers be sure it’s bona fide – and professional? As the industry has grown, so have concerns about the lack of standards and regulations.

While “clinical psychologist” is a legally protected term, other mental health titles such as “psychotherapist” and “counsellor” are not, meaning anyone can use them.



Main: EAP has become more popular in recent years. **Below:** a powerful connection, but a lack of regulation in the industry is causing concern

of practice," she says. "There are people purporting that the animals are providing therapy and taking on clients beyond what they are capable of working on."

Clare makes a clear distinction between the roles of the horse and the therapist: "Horses don't provide therapy, they provide an equine environment that can be therapeutic. It's the practitioners who provide the therapy."

IN the US, "therapist" is a legally protected title in most states. A minimum of a master's level of education and a qualification in that state are required to practise therapy. The American Psychological Association and the American Counselling Association both have wings that deal with animal-assisted therapy. Practitioners who don't meet the set of core competencies can lose their licence.

In the UK, qualifications in EAP vary hugely. Last year Hartpury University launched the UK's first MSc animal-assisted counselling and psychotherapy course, designed for those who have already qualified as psychologists or counsellors and are looking to add animal-assisted therapy to their practice.

The current intake of students, who will graduate in July, all had more than 10 years' professional experience prior to starting the course. At the opposite end of

DAWN HOLMES is the young person and family service manager at Turning Point, a social enterprise that supports people with drug and alcohol issues, mental health concerns and learning disabilities. She commissions EAP for some young people in her care.

"Youth workers need to be really eclectic in the way they interact with the young people," she says. "Often it works best if you don't sit in a room or on either side of a table – it helps to do something else at the same time and not tackle anything directly. Equine-assisted therapy is very non-direct. It's also a world that a lot of people we work with have never experienced; being in fields with horses, it's a different experience for them that they wouldn't normally have access to."

But Dawn has struggled to find suitably qualified providers of EAP.

"It's difficult to find a place where the people running those sessions have mental health and trauma expertise," says Dawn.



"They're more likely to be horse people who have trained in therapy on the side."

The lack of mental health training concerns her: "If you open Pandora's box and you can't deal with what comes out, that will have a significant impact on a young person. If you address something that has gone on in their past in the wrong way, that will have a detrimental effect."

Dr Clare Thomas-Pino, senior lecturer in human-animal interaction at Hartpury University, shares these concerns.

"Having seen the industry grow over the past 30 years, I do see some issues in that people are working outside their scope

the scale, there are online courses in EAP costing less than £100, with no experience of mental health or horses required.

The EASP has identified this as an issue in the industry: "There is a huge disparity in qualifications, which can be confusing for the public and for people who want to become practitioners," says Sarah Jane.

To try to bring some clarity, the EASP has tasked a specialist group of equine-assisted psychotherapists with looking at the various courses and training routes currently available.

Dawn has concerns about what happens after someone qualifies.

"There needs to be an expectation that the therapist has supervision, which they regularly engage with, and an expectation that someone comes and views their sessions," she says. "Regulation after qualification is just as important."

Clare cautions that practitioners need to be mindful of confidentiality: "Often people are disclosing really sensitive information during sessions. You might have volunteers working on-site and they need to understand that information doesn't go beyond these walls."

Practitioners must consider the welfare of the volunteers: "What comes up in these settings can be traumatising," she says.

Clare would like a specific law governing animal-assisted services. In the absence of that, the EAP industry in the UK has started to move towards self-regulation.

The EASP is one of two bodies now offering registers of EAP practitioners. To be accepted onto the EASP's UK Human Equine Interaction Register (HEIR), practitioners must meet five standards, including having a regulated psychology, psychotherapy or counselling qualification.

"By encouraging practitioners to be transparent about their level of qualification and to use correct professional titles, the EASP is committed to raising standards and ensures that members of the public can identify through HEIR those practitioners who are best qualified to meet their needs," says Sarah Jane.

The other UK register was established by the Athena Herd Foundation, which offers training in EAP. In January 2024, their register was accredited by the Professional Standards Authority. Criteria for inclusion include a level four (equivalent to first year of a bachelor's degree) or above qualification, relevant to



Horses engage with humans without judgement, mirroring their behaviour

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the service being offered.

Foundation director Graeme Green says: "It's about creating an increased state of buyer beware, about trying to extend awareness to those commissioning or seeking the services that there are standards of practitioner."

BOTH registers also require a commitment to equine welfare. At a time when questions are being asked about the involvement of horses in sport and leisure, their role in therapy is likely to come under scrutiny, too.

Clare points out that most research into EAP looks at the impact on humans, not animals. "Currently about 1% of research

papers into EAP look at how it affects the horse," she explains. "We want to ensure that horses' wellbeing and welfare is considered at the same time as people's."

She also wants practitioners to be mindful of the language they use.

"Don't talk about 'using' the horses," she says. "Talk about working and partnering with them; it's important they have a sense of agency in what they're doing."

The other sensitive topic around EAP is accessibility. Equine-assisted therapy is not currently available on the NHS, meaning individuals and organisations must find ways to fund it themselves.

Philip points out that, by its very nature, EAP is an expensive form of therapy.

"It should be a team-based approach, with the different disciplines represented," he says. "It's expensive to do it properly – so there's a danger it becomes exclusive."

"It is complex but I wouldn't want only clinical psychologists to be able to deliver equine-assisted therapy. For someone who is vulnerable and locked into their trauma, if this therapy could be the mechanism of unlocking that with life-changing effects, affordable access is key. Accessibility and affordability are crucial."

Dawn, who has seen first-hand how EAP benefits the people in her care, agrees.

"If you make it clinical psychologists only you will price everyone out unless it becomes social prescribing [connecting people with community-based activities and resources that improve their health and wellbeing]," she says. "Equally we need someone to be in safe hands. Many kids we work with have been rejected so when a horse engages with them without that judgement, the power of it is incredible."

"I've seen, when it's done well, how powerful that connection can be." **H&H**

How does equine-assisted psychotherapy work?



THERE are several ways in which horses may help the therapeutic process.

As prey animals, horses are skilled in reading non-verbal communication and are attuned to the environment around them. This makes them adept at picking up on the behaviours and emotions of those around them.

Horses mirror human behaviour. This allows the therapist to use the horse's reactions to discuss the reactions of other people, helping the person in therapy gain insight into their own relationships.

Horses are sensitive to touch, and this can be used to introduce "safe" touch to someone who struggles with intimacy or has experienced physical abuse.