EVALUATING ENCOUNTERS WITH HORSES

IMPACT REPORT 2019

By Dr Donna Poade and Valeria Malinen,
University of Exeter
‘Being with the horse fills my mind - it fills everything’

Military Participant
Foreword

It’s a huge pleasure to be able to share the research findings of our collaborative project between Horsemanship for Health, a social enterprise based in Newton Abbot, Devon and the University of Exeter.

The last year has seen our partnership take a meaningful step forward towards providing evidence of the therapeutic benefits of equine assisted education.

This project would not have been possible without the funding from Recovery Devon, a Community Interest Company (CIC) who are committed to supporting people in recovery from mental health challenges.

Dr Donna Poade, Researcher, University of Exeter

Demonstrating Impact

Participants in the study consisted of four different groups: patients from Langdon Hospital, a secure unit in Dawlish, Royal Navy and Royal Marines from the Recovery Centre Hasler at HMS Drake, Plymouth and two Devon Recovery Learning Community Groups including women affected by domestic abuse. All the participants were working towards recovery from mental health challenges.

The project involved gathering qualitative data in the form of interviews from participants and their support workers and observations of equine assisted education sessions over a 9-month period throughout 2019.

As the lead researcher on this project, what is most exciting to me is to be able to gather blocks of evidence towards a portfolio of community based mental health initiatives, to offer both alternatives and complement existing treatment options to improve well-being for our communities.

The Challenge

We are all acutely aware of the increase and prevalence of mental health issues, akin to a global crisis and existing models of treatment are often sought which are more cost-effective and demonstrate an impact towards well-being. Therefore, this evaluation is a timely project to explore the benefits and challenges associated with equine assisted learning.

Previous research has highlighted the transformative benefits of how horses can offer insights into our own lives and improve well-being (Earles et al., 2015; Cantin & Marshall-Lucette, 2011; Trotter et al., 2008.) However, little is known on the specific effects and outcomes that this form of experiential education may offer. Therefore, this project was born from a desire to explore and understand the effectiveness of such programmes for people with differing needs alongside the desire to evidence the experiences and outcomes as a bone fide option in the social prescribing toolbox.

The results showcase the vast array of benefits that equine assisted education can offer and it gives me great pleasure to share these with you in this report.
Belinda Seaward  
Director: Horsemanship for Health UK CIC

‘There is something that takes places between a person and a horse which is profoundly healing’

Our social enterprise has been inspired by the way horses communicate with each other and with us. Our horses and ponies each have their own unique personalities and different styles of relating to people, which means that every encounter with a horse offers each person something new to explore. Over more than 15 years of building our horsemanship practice, we have learned so much from horses that is valuable for our complex human lives and we have been privileged to share our knowledge and wisdom so that others may benefit.

Many people wish to better understand who they are and wonder what they can do to improve their mental health. Ancient philosophies exploring the art of human flourishing begin with the idea that self-knowledge acts as a catalyst for change. Horsemanship starts with the principle that you must know yourself first. We have connected the two disciplines and have woven into our curriculum insights and teachings from the fields of philosophy, psychology, ethology, neuroscience, inside-out coaching and research around well-being. We are committed to an educational approach that is accessible to all and as we grow and develop, we will continue to synthesise and innovate new ideas. Our collaboration with the University of Exeter is an exciting opportunity to take a deeper look at what takes place in encounters between social species.

The word ‘health’ comes from a root word meaning wholeness. Our approach is to look to the horse to remind us that living a healthy life includes knowing that we do not need fixing. We can learn to live with the parts of our lives that we do not wish to show. The horse clearly accepts us as we are and is often delighted to meet us! Through non-judgemental connection with horses, we have an opportunity to explore a rich language without words. Our participants have imagined what it is like to experience life from the point of view of another highly intelligent emotional species. Through reflection and enquiry, they have come to view themselves in a different light, and the insights gained along the way have been life changing for some.

Throughout this study, we have witnessed much pain, struggle and suffering and much love, laughter and joy. It has been an extraordinary and humbling shared experience, during which we have all come to understand ourselves more deeply. The horses remind us every day to be open, curious and aware that true health and happiness may be found in the beauty of being alive.
‘Connecting as a heart’

Devon Recovery Learning Community Participant
Before it begins...

How did people perceive equine assisted education?

The majority of individuals within the three groups were unsure precisely of what to expect from the courses specifically in terms of horse-related activities including ‘whether the course would include riding’. A small number of responses primarily from the military personnel and psychiatric patients referred to ‘anxieties about if I have to talk’ and ‘I worried about the unknown’, highlighting their anxieties prior to the course.

A small number of individuals perceived equine-facilitated learning as ‘a bit fluffy’, ‘a joke at first but I was curious to find out’. These comments are perhaps unsurprising given some participants had little to no experience of this unique and innovative approach offering therapeutic benefits, away from traditional methods and techniques of addressing mental health challenges. Moreover, these perceptions did not deter participation in the course resulting in a change in perceptions and indeed, transformative and meaningful experiences.

What did people want from equine assisted education?

Although expectations were unclear for some participants, all participants had a strong desire for positive outcomes towards recovery. In particular, those who had self-referred through the Devon Recovery Learning Community particularly women who had experiences domestic abuse, had a clear idea of what they wanted to achieve from the courses. The principal goal as illustrated below, was to improve their well-being through **connection** in three main ways: with horses; their inner-self; and connecting with other people. The theme of connection is a primary outcome, re-occurring throughout the study, and beyond, as the findings demonstrate in this report. However, many participants also wanted to engage in an experience which had elements of fun and laughter.
Who were the Participants in this Study?

In total, four groups of participants were chosen for inclusion in the study to explore the effectiveness of the courses for people with differing needs. Two groups were selected from the Devon Recovery Learning Community, one group of Royal Navy and Royal Marines based in Plymouth and psychiatric patients from Langdon Hospital, a regional secure unit in Dawlish, Devon.

Participants were selected on the following criteria:

- ✓ Current mental health challenges (low to medium severity)
- ✓ Suitability to course dependent on risk assessment
- ✓ Diversity of characteristics (gender, age, occupation, prior experience of horses, treatment options)
- ✓ Referral routes – self referral or gateway referral (e.g. Occupational Therapy)

All participants self-reported current and/or previously experienced mental health challenges. The most commonly reported conditions were: PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), anxiety (in particular, social anxiety) and depression.

* For reasons of confidentiality, participants’ medical records were not accessed for this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Devon Recovery Learning Community Course:</th>
<th>Devon Recovery Learning Community Course:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Wise Lessons from the Horse’</td>
<td>‘Wise Lessons from the Horse Especially for Women Affected by Domestic Abuse’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-referred and booked through DRLC</td>
<td>Self-referred and booked through DRLC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participants: 6 females</td>
<td>Participants: 6 females</td>
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<td>HMS Drake, Plymouth</td>
<td>Langdon Hospital, Dawlish, Devon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Royal Navy and Royal Marine Personnel</td>
<td>Regional Secure Unit.</td>
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<td>Referred through Occupational Therapy</td>
<td>Psychiatric Patients</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participants: 4 males</td>
<td>Referred through Occupational Therapy</td>
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<td>Participants: 4 males</td>
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Study Methodology

To explore in-depth emotions, opinions, thoughts and feelings, a qualitative approach was utilised to capture a) real-time experiences of participants via observation data and b) data from focus groups and interviews with participants and their support workers, at the end of their 6-week course. Qualitative approaches provide a richness which cannot be fully captured by other, more quantitative measure, such as survey design.

Observation data was collected at two out of the six sessions of each course together with focus groups conducted with each group at the end of the course and one interview with a support worker. Although no benchmarking data was available, the data generated was detailed and comprehensive to allow experiences to be reported as an exploratory study of the therapeutic benefits of equine facilitated learning. Two methods of analysis were used first, a computer assisted data analysis (CAQDAS) package (NVivo version 12) was utilised to organise and code large amounts of unstructured data followed by thematic analysis to explore themes emerging from the data to unearth nuances and reveal patterns.

To gather such rich data on individual experiences, feelings and thoughts is important for there to be a participatory element to the research design. Therefore, the researcher was embedded within the experience as both participant and observer to be part of the unfolding of experiences. This type of methodological approach bears its roots in anthropological and sociological studies and enables the researcher to learn about the activities of study participants in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities (Kidd & Kral, 2005).

It is paramount to identify all ethical issues involved within any research study and to provide measures to minimise risk to all individuals connected to the study whether participants, facilitators and the research team. Written informed consent was obtained from participants to participate in the study which had a clear statement of withdrawal from the study at any point, alongside an information brief on the study.

This study forms a contribution to existing literature (Kersten & Thomas, 2003; Earles et al., 2015; Cantin & Marshall-Lucette, 2011) which is sparse and under-explored and offers a guidance for practitioners of the effectiveness of equine facilitated learning as a credible facilitator for long term recovery from mental health difficulties and starts the conversation on nature-based therapeutic interventions as a social prescribing option.
Participant Experiences

Each course is made up of six sessions usually between 2-4 hours depending on the needs of the group. The sessions are purposefully non-prescriptive in structure to acknowledge the group as individuals on unique journeys to recovery. Therefore, sharing experiences and reflection time to accompany horsemanship plus a shared lunch aims to offer a holistic experience at each person’s pace. A unique theme is woven into a group session to facilitate discussion for each individual group. The table below illustrates themes covered for a domestic abuse group, themes informed by clinical practice. Intrapersonal processes such as; embracing freedom and power, social support, spirituality, positive self-regard and perception of control are linked to heightened self-awareness and the promotion of well-being (Flasch et al., 2017, Young 2007, Anderson et al., 2012).

Emotions

Overwhelmingly, all participants reported that the sessions generated an array of intense emotions, related to different moments and experiences all connected to revelations about how they were feeling. The table below illustrates three main emotional insights: self-identity, mindful and sharing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Identity</th>
<th>Mindful</th>
<th>Shared Experiences</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DRLC</strong></td>
<td><strong>DV</strong></td>
<td><strong>MILITARY</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>I just forgot what joy was, and I’ve just found it again.</td>
<td>Brought a lot up for me which I didn’t realise.</td>
<td>I didn’t know I could feel like this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m more in tune with my feelings.</td>
<td>No stress whilst I’m here.</td>
<td>I’ve developed different coping strategies, being in the here and now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve been overwhelmed with the support from everyone.</td>
<td>We will all remember these times together.</td>
<td>We laughed together about getting the ponies around the cones.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
What did participants say?

The words used by participants to express their thoughts about their experiences of the courses is a good indicator of the important factors of an effective programme.

As this word cloud illustrates* participants spoke about their experiences in terms of 'people' 'horses' 'feel' and 'well' determining their importance and prominence in their experiences.

These words represent the impact and insights revealed by their experiences and are detailed in the following sections.

*The larger the word, the higher the frequency of that response (NVivo 12)
‘This is a safe, supportive space where I can be accepted for who I am’

Domestic Abuse Survivor
Six key themes were identifying from the data when participants talked about the courses they attended.

1. ‘No Judgement’
2. ‘Power’
3. ‘Energy’
4. ‘Safe Space’
5. ‘Support’
6. ‘Sharing’

Core Themes
(Order of Importance)

All of these themes are inter-connected as an accepting, safe space which offers support encouraging sharing environment which allows healing to take place. The presence of animals within a therapeutic space can promote social facilitation (Wood et al., 2005), creating a space in which participants feel a sense of support and connection to other humans. In addition, the presence of an animal has been shown to facilitate a safe space as it can encourage a non-judgemental, mindful experience. It can also serve as an important reminder that danger is no longer present (O’haire et al., 2015.) This is especially important, but not exclusive to, participants experiencing the symptoms of trauma.

Woven throughout these key themes is the emotional component attached to these experiences. Animals have been shown to elicit a positive emotional response from participants counteracting the emotional numbness that is often associated with trauma and mental health difficulties (O’Haire et al., 2013.) Literature suggests that emotions and behaviours elicited by working with horses can be used as a motivator for personal growth and awareness (Zugich et al., 2002.) It has been suggested that horses mirror both physical and emotional states (Bivens et al., 2007) enabling participants to better interpret the meaning of the tasks.

Participants of observed courses outlined themes of power and energy as one of the key aspects of the therapy process. It has been suggested by literature that increased perception of personal control and positive acceptance of growth has been linked to heightened resilience (Pietrzak et al., 2009). As seen from above identified key themes have been explored in previous literature and have been identified as contributing factors for improved well-being.
Course Experiences

The primary theme experienced by all participants on the courses was the feeling of no judgement, where throughout the whole experience they believed that they were not being judged. This feeling can be powerful and revelatory for many people in recovery (Young 2007) particularly participants who had experience of the criminal justice system and military personnel where performance issues can be challenging (Cooper et al., 2018.)

The acceptance was recognised through different aspects of their experiences; acceptance from other participants; no ‘judgement’ from facilitators; acceptance from the horses; and self-acceptance as illustrated below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acceptance by Horses</th>
<th>Acceptance by Facilitators</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘...they don’t care what car you drive. They don’t care what house you live in. They don’t care if you’re rich or you’re poor. Yeah, they’re interested in your intent and how you come across.’</td>
<td>‘...but they don’t mind if you don’t talk and if you say you don’t want to talk, and if they say I don’t mind if you do talk...’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Participant</td>
<td>DRLC Participant</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘You don’t need to say but you know everyone’s story and we’re all here to support each other, regardless of what we’ve been through, we’re here for each other and not judging, that’s so detrimental.’</td>
<td>‘You can relax and just be yourself, everyone accepts you for who you are and the horses see all through that other stuff so it doesn’t matter.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRLV Domestic Abuse Survivor</td>
<td>Psychiatric Patient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance by Other Participants</td>
<td>Self-Acceptance</td>
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</table>
Course Experiences

Power was the second theme identified from the data and was mentioned by all participants. Nevertheless, this theme was referred to most frequently by domestic abuse survivors, which is perhaps unsurprising given that this a key issue for people who have been subjected to domestic abuse and abuse and noted in key studies (Sev'er 1997; Flasch et al., 2017).

In particular, through guided activities, discussion and time spent with the horses, participants were able to identify and reflect on aspects of power and control identified in horses, which then enabled them to relate to their own power, for example:

‘só actually, discussing power and the way that you can express power in like healthy ways and how horses express power in healthy ways was interesting because it was something that hadn’t come up before.’

Importantly, when participants identified their own power and control, this empowered them to reflect on their behaviour to make positive changes, for example:

‘I can ask what I want from the horse and don’t have to force it because that would be controlling, something I’m still finding out about, but it’s really helped me to learn I don’t have to control things - there are gentler ways to do things.’
Course Experiences

The energetic aspects of their experiences was the next key finding in terms of energy. This was felt by all groups during the session and there were also reports of energy levels and physical manifestations after the sessions.

For example, one military participant reported:

‘...better sleep - I slept like a baby, not slept like that for a long time.’

This may be due to processing of trauma and releasing energy as this military participant explains:

‘It was sort of a reset and it just offloaded - then it was gone.’

Physical manifestations were reported by two participants on the DRLC course reported:

‘I had a headache, like I had processed a lot and I was worn out’ and similarly, ‘I felt pretty wiped out, but in a good way.’
Course Experiences

The fourth theme revealed from the study was a **safe space**.

This was viewed as an important factor by all participants and demonstrates how the approach to recovery is taken where space is created by facilitators primarily and complemented by the natural surroundings to make people feel at ease and able to discuss openly, as little or as much as they wish to share as these examples demonstrate:

- **‘The space of being able to feel.’**
  DRLC

- **‘Peace and quiet, not even being outside per se.’**
  DRLC

- **‘This space is a heart led, holistic approach.’**
  Domestic Violence Survivor

- **‘I think most people were able to open out.’**
  Domestic Violence Survivor

- **‘Safe to be able to talk about mental health.’**
  Psychiatric Patient

- **‘That atmosphere is important to make us relax.’**
  Psychiatric Patient

- **‘It gave them time to think things through.’**
  Military Support Worker

- **‘I wasn’t that comfortable at first but the people were so friendly, I found I could reflect and think and talk openly after a while.’**
  Military Participant
Course Experiences

Supportive was the fifth finding identified as a key theme in the data.

As previously highlighted in their emotional responses, support generated intense feelings. This was split into two sub-categories: support from others and support from the facilitators, viewed as crucial and connected to feelings of acceptance, the primary theme identified.

Support was identified throughout the sessions as epitomised by the following quote:

‘Sharing stories of our past, we don’t need the details as we all support each other.’

Domestic Abuse Survivor

Notably, support went beyond the sessions to create group bonds outside of the program as demonstrated in the section relating to impact.
Course Experiences

The final theme revealed from the data is **shared experiences**. This was evidence from all participants and highlighted aspects such as the shared lunch, the shared horsemanship related activities and being with the group and able to share experiences.

‘I was curious, and it led me into that curiosity - also a sense... it’s nice to do things with people.’ DRLC Participant

‘...because I have been there so many times myself. And like you can see...you can see exactly, you know, what’s happening.’ Domestic abuse Survivor
The following section demonstrates the impact that equine facilitated education provided by Horsemanship for Health has on participants’ well-being within their lives throughout the course and beyond the course, highlighting the long-term effects that this type of intervention can provide.

This section illustrates two case studies, one from an Occupational Therapist working with Navy and Marine Personnel and another from a participant on the DRLC domestic abuse course. These case studies highlight the array of insights and wisdom revealed from the courses, which when applied, can impact upon an individual’s well-being.
Case Study: John’s* Experience as Perceived by his Occupational Therapist

Prior to attending the Horsemanship for Health course, military participant John was supported by two years of regular sessions provided by his specialist occupational therapist and mental health nurse. His treatment up to date concentrated on improving motivation and becoming more involved with family routines. John’s occupational therapist felt that his previous therapy better engaged him in daily activities, however, he struggled to enforce the changes on his own initiative. Due to John’s struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) it was important to address the military memorabilia in his house, which appeared to act as a connection to Afghanistan. This has been a challenge John’s occupational therapist has been trying to address unsuccessfully for six months. In an attempt to overcome the barrier in therapeutic progress John was signed up for the courses offered by Horsemanship for Health.

“All the guys that came [to the course] thought it would be a bit of fluffy nonsense... Because they're in the military we can tell them they're going and they turn up. If it was turn up on your own volition they probably wouldn’t have come.”

Despite this initial apprehension, curiosity ensured that John and the other participants engaged in the sessions.

“Once they started working with the horses, I think they felt freedom. Because they were working simultaneously, the eyes weren’t on them as such and they could start to connect and enjoy. On the way back in the car they were saying how fantastic it was. It wasn’t at all what they thought. That the connection with the horse was great and they just couldn’t describe it.”

John’s occupational therapist started to notice changes within two to three weeks of starting the course. She speculates that having a non-judgemental space provided John with an opportunity to move forward. He was able to pack up his military memorabilia which he reported to be freeing. He also reported being more connected to his family members and other people and is more willing to engage with the work done with his occupational therapist.

“He's much more animated, his mood is lifted completely. He’s really quite happy. I never would use that word to describe him before. We set some goals around going out socially with his wife which he's done as well. And he's got some new friends that are non-military, which is really significant. Because he joined the military when he was 16, all of his connections are military. So he's got nothing outside of that, whereas now he has.”

“And his wife said she's noticed a big difference in him since he's been on the course and she says ‘There is another lady in my life’ [in reference to a horse]”

Although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how the course helped John make these changes, his occupational therapist believes that it played an important role in creating the momentum for continued change. Since completing the course John has been interviewing for jobs and has been able to successfully deal with challenges this has brought. She feels that he has created a new identity for himself, helping him to adapt to civilian life and leaving his military persona behind.

*Name changed for confidentiality reasons
Diane’s Story – Domestic Abuse Survivor

The first encounter with Diane was at the first ‘taster’ session of this course, where participants sat in a group to share thoughts and feelings, a typical opening scenario at each beginning session of a course. Diane shared her powerful story of her experience of growing up in a dysfunctional family which as she says, ‘destroyed her self-esteem’. She also shared deeply personal experiences of sexual trauma, which she never told anyone about and blamed herself for this horrific incident happening to her. She then went on to document her experience with an abusive partner where she ‘married a violent and abusive man’. She shared poignant details of how she felt she deserved this treatment in some way but drew the line when she started to see the effects of this abuse in her son, who attempted suicide at the age of 9. She relayed feelings of ‘guilt that I did not get out of this marriage earlier’. She then shared how she had not considered the effects of these experiences were having on her manifest in ‘depression, a breakdown, feelings of being a burden’. Her treatment included many years of on and off counselling and then after a particularly dark suicidal period psychotherapy, along with medication including antidepressants and antianxiety drugs.

The tone and energy of the conversation changes when Diane talks about her involvement with the Devon Recovery Learning Community where she was directed to during her struggles. She details how she has recently become a co-tutor and ‘how being involved with DRLC courses has helped me enormously, by helping others’. She adds with a sad note that ‘even with letters after my name and all I have done, I still struggle, where I just switch to being back there’. With a low voice and with her head down she continues ‘…my heart is full of pride for my son but I still feel that I’m not good enough, I’m undermined easily and I want to improve’. These experiences were the reasons that she decided to participate on the DRLC course for women affected by domestic abuse. When asked further about why she was here she stated ‘I feel happy in animal company and would like to have better relationships’. Diane actively engaged with the group as a bubbly and articulate lady, a popular lady often laughing and smiling. She talked about one her encounters with ‘Dragonfly – the gentleman of the two horses’. Despite initial apprehensions of whether Dragonfly would ‘accept her’ she overcame this barrier with support from the group to end up leading him around the field for a walk. ‘I feel elated’ she remarks, ‘he lifted his head and off we went, so lovely’ she adds with a huge smile. During space for reflection at the end of the session she says, this is such a calm and accepting space, leaving the group session after hugs with the other ladies in the group and the facilitators ‘I actually felt very powerful today’. Diane comments after the sessions how they ‘lifted my mood’ and talks about how the responses of Dragonfly and ‘how he just asks for what he wants is something I could maybe relate to?’

On interviewing Diane at the end of course, she talks about the close relationships she has formed within the group, it is clear that she is popular and loved. She often uses humour when sharing her stories and has an infectious laugh. She talks about her whole experiences at Horsemanship for health: ‘I know what I need now, I am the best for me. I’ve let go of my fears. I’ve learnt that when I’m over analysing horses can hear you when you’re overthinking’. She offers to help distribute the brochures which advertise the course adding:

‘This course is so brilliant for mental health and domestic violence as it’s so easy to lose trust. By coming out and making connections…it’s good to come to a safe place and be able to open up that trust again. It’s especially important to have that trust and closeness and connection with others.’

Since the course Diane has stayed connected with participants and the facilitators, appearing in a video and doing talks about her experiences as someone who is, and always has been, good enough.

*Name changed for confidentiality reasons
Impact on Participants

Participants spoke about impact in two ways: through connection and self-development.

Relationship with Horses

Connection was identified across four key areas:
- Relationship with Horses
- Building Relationships
- Group Bonds
- Connection with Nature

This finding elicited the largest number of responses where participants spoke passionately about their experiences with the horses throughout the courses. These expressions were profound and meaningful, regardless of any prior experience with horses. Indeed, participants who no prior experience of horses reported the most intense impact, notably in responses from the horses reflecting their own emotional states, as shown below:

‘The connection with the horse was great they said - and they just couldn't describe it’ – Military Occupational Therapist

‘They were calm, so I was calm’ – Military Participant

‘We have a real honesty around them - very powerful’ – DRLC Participant
‘...Just being with the horses and seeing that they are relaxed around me and able to walk around the field with me and stand still, whilst I was grooming them was amazing, like they really wanted to be with me’.

Psychiatric Patient
Personal Relationships

Impact was demonstrated across all groups through changes in personal relationships both with people and animals, by building new relationships and strengthening existing personal relationships beyond the course viewed by participants as a long term impact and facilitated via confidence and self-reflection, established indicators of well-being for mental health challenges (Schroeder & Stroud, 2015.)

"...and he's got some new friends that are non-military...because all of his life, he joined the military when he was 16, all of his connections are military. So, he'd got nothing outside of that. Whereas now he has'.

Occupational Therapist – Military Personnel

Developing a wider circle of friends for support can be critical for military personnel, particularly those who are transitioning in civilian life (Cooper et al., 2018.)

‘My interaction with my own dog... different ways of interacting with animals and with people as well.’

Navy Personnel

‘I’ve definitely seen an improvement because I’m talking more with the patients on the ward and I do think that Horsemanship for Health helped’.

Psychiatric Patient

Improving relationships for psychiatric patients has also been shown to benefit well-being (Kiecolt-Glaser & Greenberg, 1984).
Group Bonds

This finding relates to connection with the group, seen as a significant impactful factor in aiding recovery for all participants and linked with personal relationships. Domestic abuse survivors related strongly to this factor: connection was found where friendships flourished, cultivated by the safe space created, for example:

‘Connected by a united energy’

‘It’s especially important to have closeness and trust and connection with others’

‘I was nervous about opening up but I hope I’ve inspired others’

Friendships were formed within the groups and for many, continued beyond the course which enabled continued peer support which has been shown to aid recovery (Pfeiffer et al., 2011), for example:

‘and so now we…we messenger each other. Not all the time… But when needed’

‘So, we will stay in touch’

‘I am sure we will stay in touch, our paths will cross a lot’

There were some differences between groups as to whether knowing someone beforehand made a difference, for the psychiatric patients many who suffered from extreme social anxiety, the findings suggest that knowing someone else from the unit is helpful to ease that anxiety somewhat, especially at the beginning of the course. As the sessions progressed, however, and participants were immersed in the experience, this became less important.
Connection to Nature

Connection to nature is a strong factor associated with positive well-being outcomes (Bratman et al., 2012). The course takes place in beautiful countryside, in the Devon rural landscape. For psychiatric patients who spent the majority of time on a ward, this was a significant impact to aid recovery. However, all participants strongly resonated with this theme.

‘…and just to go back into nature I think, it really does give you that feeling of normality’
Domestic abuse survivor

‘This place here is a total opposite to being on a ward’
Psychiatric Patient

‘I like being outside, but I didn’t especially feel like we have to be connected to nature to feel it’
DRLC

‘Not clinical it’s nature, it’s insight’
Military Personnel
Self-Development

Four aspects under self-development were revealed as positive outcomes of participating in the courses, in order of significance:

- **Self-Awareness** As horses are reactive to attitudinal and affective changes in humans (McGreevy & McLean, 2010), working with horses offers opportunities to practice self-monitoring. Being aware of emotional and physiological changes provides participants with an opportunity to experiment with behavioural changes (Shambo et al., 2010.)

- **Self-Reflection** has been shown to build a sense of community, facilitate interactions and activate personal beliefs in relation to topics discussed (Stroud et al., 2012.) In session experiential learning was followed by a facilitated discussion that promoted personal reflection and enabled participants to translate this into their day-to-day life.

- **Mindfulness** has been linked to a better psychological adjustment following exposure to trauma. Mindfulness skills can be used to foster emotional regulation and help view difficult thoughts and feelings from a non-judgemental perspective which is believed to promote resilience (Thompson, 2011.)

- **Confidence** As horses are responsive to body-language and emotions (McGreevy & McLean, 2010), they offer a unique opportunity to improve one’s confidence. Leading exercises enabled participants to practice enforcing boundaries and assertiveness as without them, horses are unlikely to follow (Schroeder & Stroud, 2015.)
Self-Awareness

This aspect was a significant factor reported by all participants as the main benefit of equine facilitated learning. Participation led to profound insights about self and others offering them space and support to nurture their relationships and lives. The mindful aspect of Horsemanship for Health acted as a catalyst to foster both self-awareness and self-reflection. Mindfulness is an accepted technique to aid recovery from mental health issues (Thompson et al., 2011)

For some participants a new mind-set was offered which can gave a transformative effect on individuals in recovery as reported by these participants from DRLC:

‘It’s provided a new perspective’ (DRLC)

‘Yes I would agree about the new perspective. It bought up a few things up for me over the weeks which I want to take further now and explore, about how I relate to others and how I feel about myself’ (DRLC)

For other participants learning to accept who they are offers significant benefits:

‘I think coming up here as part of my journey, has come true that this is my true self and I don’t have to cover up anymore’ (Domestic Violence Survivor)

For the following military participant, internal insights led to reflections on behaviour:

‘…and these sessions have helped him, kind of, understand who he is and that he can make that connection without shouting and bullying at people’. (Occupational Therapist Military Personnel)

For this psychiatric patient, this insight of himself was a new avenue and which was ‘felt’ directly:

‘I felt it, I understood, I can see myself more clearly and that’s OK, I get it now, right on, it’s so amazing’. (Psychiatric Patient)
Self-Reflection

For many participants, again reported across all groups was the facilitated learning which came from equine related activities. How the horses interacted with them offered opportunities for reflection which could then provide avenues for positive change and is related to self-awareness.

‘It’s really nice to like have the horses there and to see aspects of your own behaviour reflected in the horses, tells me a lot about how I can be more assertive.’ (DLRC)

‘A lot of it is reaffirming things that I probably already know, but choose to forget or neglect.’ (DRLC)

‘It’s made me look more at that sort of side of it, the way I present myself.’ (Military Personnel)

‘I always feel threatened when I’m in a social situation and being around them [horses] and how friendly they were just helped.’ (Psychiatric Patient)

‘It’s helped me to find out who I am – and that’s who you are – joyful.’ (Domestic Abuse Survivor)
Mindfulness

Woven throughout the program is a mindful approach, for those who had not experienced mindfulness, this was a first opportunity to experience a technique which can have transformative effects and is used as a therapeutic technique to reduce stress and allow emotions to pass through without judgment (Langer & Ngoumen, 2017). As a practice, mindful techniques can be embedded in individual’s lives.

Interestingly, for participants who had practiced mindfulness either on a regular basis or more ad-hoc experiences, reported that mindfulness taking place within a safe, supportive space and in a natural setting, enhanced their experiences as this psychiatric patient reflects upon:

‘I’d done it [mindfulness] on the ward before and it was OK, but it was different here, being with the horses naturally and also feeling safe in this friendly group, when the horse came into the circle I felt that he could really feel our connection together, it was magic’.

The dedicated space for mindfulness enabled this DRLC participant to have important reflective time:

‘There is a real mix of meditative time and confronting your feelings time which has allowed me to just have time out and just be which makes me calm.’

For this military participant, being in the present moment offered respite where time was irrelevant:

‘Because that relief of, for that hour and half we’re in the field, or two hours - whatever it is, I never look at my watch.’

This final quote from a domestic abuse survivor emphasizes the connection between self-awareness and reflection, using a mindful approach:

‘I found it hard to be assertive and confident at first but it made me look at myself, my movement and my focus. I’ve been in a bubble here and the world has not existed, I’ve not given a thought to anything else.’
Confidence

Confidence was reported most frequently by DRLC closely followed equally by military personnel and domestic abuse survivors. An increase in confidence has been shown in studies to be beneficial on a wide variety of aspects related to well-being (Schroeder & Stroud, 2015.)

Confidence was felt by participants across the whole courses, from guided activities with the horses to group reflections:

‘Which is, you know, it: I’m not good enough. Whereas there’s no sign of: I’m not good enough now.’
Occupational Therapist Military Personnel

‘Instead of being very in command… I sort of use more body language and signals now instead of saying stuff.’
Military Personnel

‘The more I sort of answered questions in the group and didn’t make a fool of myself my confidence increased as the time went on.’
Psychiatric Patient

‘I think it was the, it was the confidence of feeling, yeah I could do this’.
Domestic Abuse Survivor

‘The horses will just come up to you and say scratch us please, or get me food and that leaves me to think about it’s expressing about what I want as well, because the horses don’t care – they just ask for what they want.’
DRLC
In conclusion this report demonstrates the significant impact that equine assisted education and Horsemanship for Health has had, and continues to have, on the participants that took part in this research study.

The data reveals that participant experiences overall were aligned with their initial expectations: of fun and laughter, better relations and reflection time and indeed, exceeded those expectations by providing a number of therapeutic benefits as an emotive and revelatory journey towards recovery. Specifically, six key themes were identified as specific therapeutic factors aligned with the literature: no judgement, power, energy, safe space, support and sharing. In particular, some groups felt a strong connection to specific themes such as power, which particularly resonated with domestic abuse survivors. The data also revealed that these themes were experienced as inter-related aspects.

In terms of impacts – two major themes were identified, impact through connection and self-discovery. The holistic approach that Horsemanship for Health offers enables participants to benefit from enhanced connection to animals and people. The courses offer participants opportunities for self-discovery, insight and profound experiences. These are facilitated through mindful practices, building trust in a safe, supportive and nourishing environment, to improve confidence, improve relationships and reveal the true self, a critical factor to cultivating well-being.

These insights offer an opportunity for treatment options moving forward and based on this evidence, the suitability of equine facilitated learning offered by Horsemanship for Health for social prescription as an effective, highly impactful beneficial treatment option to be offered at primary care level. This evidence naturally adds to the ongoing debate between medication-based treatment options against models of treatment such as animal or nature-based models. This data supports the view that equine facilitated learning can be used to complement the path to well-being to cater for the individual needs towards recovery.

I hope you can share my enthusiasm for equine facilitated learning as a bone fide example of benefitting our communities and please share amongst your peers and colleagues.

Dr Donna Poade November 2019
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References


