Benefits of a therapeutic horseback riding program to veterans suffering from PTSD or traumatic brain injury

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INTRODUCTION:
Frequently, veterans return from combat and suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and/or a traumatic brain injury. These disorders result in symptoms that prevent veterans from a normal life post-combat. One potential complementary intervention is Therapeutic Horseback Riding (THR).

RESEARCH QUESTION:
• What are the veterans’ perceptions of a 6-week THR program?

HYPOTHESIS:
• Veterans will find a sense of psychological well-being, healthy interaction and emotional connections.

RESEARCH METHODS:
• Collaboration with Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH) accredited THR centers
• Randomized controlled trial consisting of a Riding Group and wait-list Control Group
• A one hour weekly intervention for 6 weeks
• Each veteran matched with a horse suitable for them
• Each session built upon skill sets learned in previous sessions
• Participants were given a riding diary to write in
  • Included in these were: date of the riding session, name of horse and comments about the session
  • Completed after each session
  • These allowed the veterans to freely describe emotions and ways THR did or didn’t help them
  • Using Colaizzi’s method, a qualitative analysis was performed on the riding diary data

COLAIZZI’S METHOD:

PARTICIPANT COMMENTS:
• “I looked into her eyes, I felt like she understood and empathized with me.”
• “Reborn!! So alive— almost like horse-yoga.”
• “Latte is sort of a part of me while we ride.”
• “Last night, I watched Full Metal Jacket and therefore had terrible nightmares. The ride today was good stress relief.”
• “Working with the horse for this hour puts things in perspective and is very calming.”

ANTICIPATED THEMES:
• Analysis still in progress
• Anticipated themes include: bonding with the horse, a sense of control, a calming or relaxing feeling, and wishing for a longer program

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