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SK study on “horse therapy” programs shows promising results

In recognition of Global One Health Day today, researchers Darlene Chalmers of the University of Regina and Colleen Dell of the University of Saskatchewan are releasing study results showing that people who participated in mental health and addictions treatment programs involving interactions with horses reported therapeutic benefits in their healing.

In the 2014 pilot study, 60 clients provided feedback on 287 encounters (sessions with horses) in programs at four addiction and mental health treatment sites in Saskatchewan. Program facilitators and treatment site staff reported their observations as well.

One of the programs involved learning self-development skills through interactions with horses. Two focused on therapeutic horsemanship (riding and care of horses) for children and youth in residential care. The fourth involved a collaborative approach to psychotherapy involving a licensed therapist and a horse professional in addressing client treatment goals.

“It is interesting to see the similarity in outcomes from the four different sites,” said Chalmers. “The clients participating in all the programs felt love and support from the horses, which is an important and often overlooked element of human healing.”

Chalmers notes that a strong bond can develop between horses and humans, engendering mutual respect and trust and paving the way for improved relationships with other people. Previous studies of equine-assisted therapy have reported an increase in feelings of unconditional love and acceptance among participants, she said.

“This bond with horses can be really important in therapy because there are a lot of things that people can’t readily do for one another in a treatment facility such as touch one another. Horses offer physical affection through touch,” Dell said.

Dell said the vast majority of clients felt calm, supported, and in control of their feelings following the horse interactions. Some were more willing to co-operate in treatment programs following the sessions. A teacher noted that students were more likely to be focused and motivated afterwards.

The research project was funded from Dell’s U of S Centennial Enhancement Chair in One Health and Wellness, and was undertaken in partnership with organizations that run the horse programs:- Cartier Farms, Twisted Wire Ranch, Eagle’s Nest Youth Ranch, and the Saskatoon Health Region’s Adult Mental Health & Addictions program in partnership with Nutana Collegiate.

Next steps would be to undertake future research with a larger sample and to conduct a randomized control trial, said Dell. She noted that the horse and First Nations culture are historically linked, and that there is a need to more fully understand this connection.

“It is so important that we gain as much understanding as we can about the interventions that we offer,” said Dawn Rain, clinical social worker in Adult Mental Health & Addictions Services at the Saskatoon Health Region. “This project has confirmed what we felt we already knew from offering the equine program, but also raised questions to push us further. It also provided us with greater understanding for

evaluating equine-assisted interventions in the future.”

The latest work builds on the team’s research findings released last year on canine-assisted therapy, said Dell.

“Sharing these findings on Global One Health Day is a fantastic opportunity to add to the conversation in an important way about the interface of animals, humans and the environment to the well-being of everyone,” she said.

Fact sheets on the research are available at: <http://www.colleendell.ca/fact-sheets/>.

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