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HETI LIVE MONTHLY MEETING

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Equine assisted interventions for people with mental illness

Three different research projects are conducted at Halmstad University between 2018 – 2024.

1. Equine-assisted therapy for children and young people with mental illness
2. Equine-assisted rehabilitation for people with depression, anxiety and stress-related mental illness
3. An equine-assisted group intervention for people with schizophrenia and similar psychoses



Equine-assisted therapy for children and young people with mental illness

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The aim was to understand and describe what equine-assisted therapy means for children with mental illness, who have been referred by a psychologist and their parents and close relatives.

Each treatment session included picking up the horse in the pasture, brushing, saddling and riding the horse. Each session ended with unsaddling, brushing, and leading the horse back to the pasture.

Six children between the ages of 7-18 were interviewed using the "photovoice" methodology and the data was analyzed with qualitative content analysis.

Six parents or close relatives of the children were interviewed, and the interviews were analyzed according to Charmaz's Grounded Theory Constructivist methodology (GT).

The project was approved by the regional ethics review board at Lund University (no 2019-00008)



Results summary “Equine-assisted therapy for children and young people with mental illness”

The project comprise 2 published studies and showed:

That equine-assisted therapy contributed to achieving nursing goals, often difficult to achieve with traditional mental health care for children and young people with mental illness.

(Punzo et al., 2022).

That parents and close relatives of children who have participated in equine-assisted therapy experienced that their children were "built up bit by bit" with the building blocks

- increased harmony
- reinforced identity
- improved functioning in everyday life

resulting in reduced school absences and better performance at school.

(Carlsson et al., 2024)



Equine-assisted rehabilitation for people with depression, anxiety and stress-related illness



- The purpose of the project was to describe experiences of a therapeutic equine-assisted group intervention for people with long-term sick leave due to anxiety, depression and stress-related disorders.
- Ten participants with long-term sickness absence related to anxiety, depression or stress-related disorders were interviewed after participating in a 12-week equine-assisted group intervention and the data were analyzed using conventional content analysis.
- The study has received ethical approval from the regional ethics review board at Lund University (Dnr 2017/709).



Results summary “Equine-assisted rehabilitation for people with depression, anxiety and stress-related mental illness”

The project includes 1 published study until now and the result showed an overarching theme **"The equine-assisted group intervention facilitates recovery"**,

The overarching theme comprised the participants' descriptions in four categories:

- The horses' environment contributes to relaxation and an increased ability to be in the present
- The horses' presence facilitates supportive relationships in the group
- Emotional interactions with the horses reinforce one's own inner power
- The interaction with the horses means physical activity and improved physical health

Fridén, L., Hultsjö, S., Lydell, M., & Jormfeldt H. (2024). Experiences of a Therapeutic Equine-Assisted Group Intervention for People with Common Mental Disorders on Sick-Leave, Issues in Mental Health Nursing, DOI:10.1080/01612840.2023.2301611



An equine-assisted group intervention for people with schizophrenia and similar psychoses

The project includes 4 published studies:

- a literature review regarding equine-assisted interventions for people with schizophrenia
- a pilot questionnaire study regarding the participants' self-estimated effects of the intervention
- an interview study with participants about the horse's role in the intervention
- an interview study with the participants' relatives about their perspective on the intervention



Results summary "A equine-assisted group intervention for people with schizophrenia and similar psychoses"



The findings of the literature review consisting of six included articles indicate that equine assisted interventions could be beneficial for individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia or similar disorders as these groups are not sufficiently offered health promotion interventions.

(Jormfeldt & Carlsson, 2018)

The pilot study showed a statistically significant reduction in negative emotions and increase in subjective well-being after the equine-assisted intervention, even though only 6 participants (30%) were able to answer the questionnaires.

(Cappelen et al., 2023).

The horse's presence contributed to group togetherness and personal development within the participants that would not have happened without the horse's participation.

(Hultsjö & Jormfeldt, 2021)

Close relatives noticed increased motivation for physical activity and the relatives' perspective contributed with valuable knowledge that had not been revealed with other types of data sources.

(Fridén et al., 2022)



Conclusion from all three projects

The projects have so far resulted in 7 published articles in international scientific journals showing that:

- the *horse's environment* contributes to calmness and relieves anxiety
- the *relationship with the horse* build up identity and self-esteem
- the *activities together with the horse* involve quite a lot physical activity reinforcing physical health and confidence in one's own abilities.

Overall, the results show that equine-assisted interventions contribute to anxiety relief, well-being and increased level of functioning in both children and adults with mental illness and psychiatric diagnoses.

Anxiety relief, well-being and increased level of functioning are desired results in traditional mental health care, but these outcomes are often difficult to achieve with hospitalization, medication and verbal conversation alone.

In Sweden hospitalization, medication, and occasionally verbal conversation is sponsored by the state government in ordinary healthcare, but EAI are not. The client or the clients' relatives often need to pay for their treatment by themselves.



References



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Questions for discussion

What conditions exist for equine assisted services in different countries?

How could EAI be further implemented in health care systems globally?

What kind of research is needed to support further implementation?





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Thank you!

For more information:

[HUT-projektet. Hästunderstödd terapi och rehabilitering vid psykisk ohälsa: En longitudinell design - Högskolan i Halmstad \(hh.se\)](#)

[Equine-assisted therapy for children and young people at risk of developing permanent mental illness](#)

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