



Whispers with Horses

A Mindfulness and Self-Compassion-Based Pilot Study for Survivors of Trauma

By William Marchand

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WILLIAM MARCHAND

Whispers with Horses (WwH) is a psychotherapy incorporating equines intervention designed to facilitate the healing and long-term well-being of Veterans who have survived trauma through the synergistic benefits associated with mindfulness, self-compassion and the horse-human relationship. One of the developmental aims of WwH was to address known limitations of conventional mental health treatments for Veterans who survived trauma.

Promoting Veteran Engagement

A number of effective evidence-based psychotherapy and psychopharmacologic treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) exist.¹ However, many Veterans with PTSD either have difficulty with treatment engagement and/or experience an incomplete treatment response.¹ Further, these conventional interventions may not fully address trauma-related guilt, moral injury, disrupted attachment and the impacts of experiencing military sexual trauma.¹ Thus, WwH was developed to address both treatment engagement and symptoms associated with trauma exposure that may not fully respond to conventional treatments.

WwH was designed to facilitate treatment engagement by offering a potentially enjoyable mindfulness and self-compassion training experience in a casual and non-intimidating equine facility setting. Training in mindfulness and self-compassion was chosen to be the core component of WwH because of evidence of benefit for Veterans who are survivors of trauma in general,²⁻⁶ as well as early evidence that self-compassion may moderate the effects of moral injury.⁷ While there is evidence that conventional mindfulness-based interventions may be beneficial for Veterans with PTSD,² there is also evidence of limited treatment engagement.⁸

Therefore, WwH was also designed to enhance engagement with mindfulness training and serve as a bridge between training and practice in an individual's daily life by offering real-world practice experience in an arena with a horse. It was hypothesized that the development of a participant-equine relationship would support healthy attachment with other humans, as well as work synergistically with mindfulness and self-

compassion to facilitate healing. “Key Components of Whispers with Horses” on page 38, outlines how WwH aimed to address specific treatment challenges.

Evidence-based Treatment

Another developmental goal was that WwH be evidence-based to the extent possible in terms of both the mindfulness/self-compassion and horsemanship components. Thus, the existing literature of equine-assisted services (EAS) for Veterans was reviewed,¹ and existing programs were used to guide development. WwH is, in part, adapted from the Mindful Self-Compassion program developed by Germer and Neff.⁹ Additional influences include the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy intervention,¹⁰ PATH Intl.,¹¹ the Certified Horsemanship Association (www.cha.horse) and Parelli Natural Horsemanship (<https://shopus.parelli.com/>).



Equine-Assisted Services For Veterans With Substance Use Disorders

By William Marchand

Military Veterans experience high rates of substance use disorders.^{1,2} Effective conventional treatments exist, however, outcomes are limited by both treatment dropout and incomplete response.³ EAS has the potential to enhance treatment engagement and/or response among this population. However, research is needed to demonstrate potential benefits and explain the mechanisms of action. To further explore this potential, Horses Helping Veterans, an EAS program located at the VA Salt Lake City Health System in Salt Lake City, Utah, collaborated with Utah State University to conduct two studies of a novel EAS intervention for Veterans enrolled in a residential substance treatment program.^{4,5}

The first study aimed to assess the safety, feasibility, preliminary outcomes and predictors of participant response as a result of implementing an equine-assisted intervention within a residential substance abuse treatment program at a large Veterans Administration medical center.⁴ Participants were 33 Veterans, 29 males and 4 females, who participated in one four-hour EAS intervention that provided both equine-assisted learning and psychotherapy incorporating equines. Results indicated that the intervention was safe and feasible to utilize. Furthermore, there were findings of significant pre-intervention to post-intervention short-term decreases in anxiety, negative affect and craving, as well as increased positive affect.

The second study aimed to replicate the previous study and to examine the effect of participants attending multiple intervention sessions.⁵ Participants included 94 Veterans who participated in one to six sessions of the intervention. Results confirmed that the intervention was safe and feasible to utilize. There were statistically significant pre- to post-session improvements with medium-to-large effect sizes for a decrease in negative affect, anxiety and craving and an increase in positive affect for some sessions. Lastly, there was no additional benefit from attendance at more than two intervention sessions.

While results from both studies must be considered preliminary, taken together, they suggest that EAS interventions may have the potential to benefit Veterans with substance use disorders. Additional more rigorous studies are warranted.

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The field of EAS for Veterans is in the early stage of scientific development.¹ This is because of a lack of rigorous randomized controlled trials demonstrating benefit.¹ A related challenge is a lack of standardized EAS interventions that can be rigorously evaluated in multi-site studies. Thus, WwH was developed to be a manualized intervention that can be utilized across multiple sites with high fidelity. This will facilitate high-quality investigations of potential benefits. If WwH is shown to be an effective intervention, then manualization will support dissemination of WwH to the EAS field.

Lastly, WwH was developed to facilitate ease of implementation at EAS centers, as well as meet the needs of various programs and populations. Thus, it can be provided in a group or individual format.

Pilot Study Aims

Whispers with Horses was developed and implemented as a pilot study¹² as part of a larger EAS program, Horses Helping Veterans, located at the VA Salt Lake City Health System in Salt Lake City, UT. Horses Helping Veterans is a collaboration between the VA and community equine facility partners. Besides providing clinical services to Veterans, its staff conduct research, including literature reviews,^{1,13} aimed at moving the EAS field forward. In addition to evaluating WwH,¹² investigations have focused on other EAS interventions for Veterans with substance use disorders¹⁴⁻¹⁶ and PTSD,¹⁷ as well as resiliency training for medical center staff.^{18,19}

While it is still in the development and evaluation stage, WwH has been offered as a pilot clinical program as

a six-session intervention at the Salt Lake VA for the past three years. Each session follows a similar structure and builds upon the one before (See “Whispers With Horses Curriculum” on page 40). Additional details about the intervention have previously been published and may be freely downloaded at bit.ly/13C57TzK

An initial pilot study of WwH was conducted from August 2021 through March 2022, and the results were published in *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*.¹² The overarching aim of this study was to perform the preliminary work necessary to facilitate conducting future rigorous controlled trials of this intervention. Each session was facilitated by a licensed mental health clinician trained to provide mindfulness and self-compassion interventions, and all equine activities were co-facilitated and closely monitored by a PATH Intl. Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning (ESMHL).

The primary study aims were to assess the feasibility, acceptability and safety of using the intervention for Veterans with trauma histories.¹² Secondary aims were to evaluate preliminary outcomes.¹² The PTSD Checklist for DSM IV, military (PCL-M), the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) and the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire II (AAQ II) were used to assess for changes in PTSD symptoms, depressive symptoms, affect and psychological flexibility, respectively. Lastly, the Physical Activity Enjoyment Scale (PACES) measured enjoyment of activities.

Subjects were 33 Veterans, 16 females and 17 males with a mean age of 46.¹² All participants had a history of military and/or civilian trauma. The most common psychiatric

Key components of Whispers with Horses

Treatment challenges	Addressed by component of WwH
Veterans may not fully engage in conventional PTSD treatments and/or mindfulness-based interventions.	Intervention provided to be an enjoyable experience for participants in a casual and low-stress environment to encourage treatment engagement.
Conventional treatments may not fully address the impacts of experiencing military sexual trauma, trauma-related guilt and moral injury resulting in incomplete treatment response.	The practice of mindfulness and self-compassion facilitates acceptance of human imperfections and fosters self-forgiveness and working through emotions of guilt and shame.
Conventional treatments may not fully address disrupted attachment often experienced by trauma survivors.	The development of a horse-human relationship can allow the experience of attachment in a low-risk setting, which can serve as a bridge to reattachment with other humans.
The potential benefits of practicing mindfulness and self-compassion can be limited by inadequate practice, as well as challenges implementing them in one’s day-to-day life.	Mindfulness and self-compassion practice in a real-world setting (an arena with horses) facilitates effective practice sessions and serves as a bridge to using these skills in day-to-day life.



diagnoses were PTSD (73%) and major depressive disorder (67%). Thirty-three percent had a history of military sexual trauma. Of the 33 participants, 61% enrolled in group therapy and 39% in individual therapy.

Pilot Study Results

Results indicated that the intervention was relatively well-attended. On average, participants attended 3.8 of the six possible sessions and 24% attended all sessions. The mean PACES score for all timepoints together was 110.44, indicating a high level of enjoyment by participants. There were no injuries or close calls for participants, staff or equines, and there were no pre- to post-session changes on psychological instruments suggestive of emotional distress.

Preliminary findings from the psychological instruments were administered pre- to post-session.¹² They revealed statistically significant increased psychological flexibility as measured by the AAQ II for session one ($p=0.015$). The PANAS revealed increased positive affect for sessions one ($p = 0.009$) and three ($p = 0.010$), as well as decreased negative affect for sessions one ($p = 0.001$)

and three ($p = 0.009$). Pre- to post-intervention outcomes indicated significant improvements in depression ($p = .003$) and psychological flexibility ($p = .005$). There were no significant changes in PTSD symptoms. (A p-value measures the probability of obtaining the observed results. The lower the p-value, the greater the statistical significance of the observed difference. A p-value of 0.05 or lower is generally considered statistically significant.)

The results of this initial study suggest that WwH is safe, feasible and acceptable to use with this population.¹² The preliminary outcomes indicate that participation in this intervention may be associated with improved mood, affect and psychological flexibility. Thus, more rigorous studies, such as randomized controlled trials, are warranted.

Participant Responses

In addition to research, participant comments are valuable indicators of the potential benefits of EAS interventions. For example, one WwH participant, Bonnie, said, “This program was a calm, safe and trusted space where I could explore my insecurities.”

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Whispers with Horses Curriculum

Session	Location	Activity
1	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindfulness/self-compassion opening meditation • Introductions and orientation to class • Psychological safety discussion (groups only) • Overview of mindfulness and self-compassion • Equine safety discussion • Equine body language and pressure-and-release discussion • Practicing mindfulness while working with horses discussion
	Arena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participant(s) paired with equine(s) • Haltering and quick-release knot • Introduction to mindful grooming • Introduction to mindful leading (optional)
	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Session review and homework assignment • Mindfulness/self-compassion closing meditation
2	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindfulness/self-compassion opening meditation • Review of participant's mindfulness and self-compassion homework practice • "How would I treat a friend?" exercise and discussion • Equine behavior and communication discussion • Review of equine body language and pressure-and-release. • Practicing mindfulness while working with horses review
	Arena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindful haltering, tying and grooming • Introduction to (or review of) mindful leading • Mindful leading practice (obstacles optional)
	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Session review and homework assignment • Mindfulness/self-compassion closing meditation
3	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindfulness/self-compassion opening meditation • Review of participant's mindfulness and self-compassion homework practice • Self-compassion discussion • Body awareness and energy discussion • Body scan meditation • Practicing mindfulness while working with horses review
	Arena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindful haltering, tying and grooming • Friendly game with stick and string • Leading through the obstacle course at a walk using correct pressure-and-release and verbal commands
	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Session review and homework assignment • Mindfulness/self-compassion closing meditation

Adapted from the original table published in *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*¹²

Session	Location	Activity
4	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindfulness/self-compassion opening meditation • Review of participant's mindfulness and self-compassion homework practice • Psychological resistance discussion • Loving-kindness meditation and inquiry • Practicing mindfulness while working with horses, including body awareness and energy review
	Arena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindful haltering, tying and grooming • Brief friendly game with stick and string • Leading through the obstacle course with a stick and string • Leading in a 10-meter circle at least twice around a cone using a stick and string • Porcupine game
	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Session review and homework assignment • Mindfulness/self-compassion closing meditation
5	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindfulness/self-compassion opening meditation • Review of participant's mindfulness and self-compassion homework practice • Approaches to difficult emotions discussion • Being present with a difficult emotion meditation and inquiry • Practicing mindfulness while working with horses, including body awareness and energy review
	Arena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindful haltering, tying and grooming • Lead in a figure-eight around two cones • Yo-yo game
	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Session review and homework assignment • Mindfulness/self-compassion closing meditation
6	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindfulness/self-compassion opening meditation • Approaches to guilt, shame and self-forgiveness discussion • Review of key concepts from the class and continuing practice discussion • End of class discussion
	Arena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindful haltering, tying and grooming. • Lead in a figure-eight and obstacles • Driving game
	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Session review and homework assignment • Mindfulness/self-compassion closing meditation • Goodbyes

Heather, a participant's partner, said, "It's given me my husband back."

Her husband, Kevin said, "A lot of the normal therapies, anger management and all that really weren't panning out for me very well."

Heather added, "The tools that he got from this program...gave him the tools (so) that he could handle the demons from active duty."

Finally, another participant, Oz, said, "I find myself trying to avoid the present. And so, with the horse, you have to be present."

Moving forward, the aim is to continue to refine and evaluate WwH. Complete drafts of the facilitator manual and participant workbook are currently being edited and refined. A level two pilot program, consisting of a second six sessions, is under development. Several additional studies are underway to better elucidate the benefits, utilization and mechanisms of action. If additional and more rigorous research indicates benefits, then a final version of the WwH intervention can be disseminated to the EAS field.

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Captions

1. According to the Whispers with Horses pilot program, the practice of mindfulness and self-compassion facilitates acceptance of human imperfections and fosters self-forgiveness and working through emotions of guilt and shame.
2. Each session of Whispers with Horses was facilitated by a licensed mental health clinician trained to provide mindfulness and self-compassion interventions and monitored by a PATH Intl. ESMHL.
3. Mindful leading was an optional component in the program.
4. Whispers with Horses has been offered as a pilot clinical program as a six-session intervention at the Salt Lake VA for the past three years.



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