

EAT IN MANAGING SIMPTOMS OF ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

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TERAPIA ASISTATĂ DE CAI ÎN GESTIONAREA SIMPTOMELOR DE ANXIETATE ȘI DEPRESIE

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***Rezumat.** Terapia asistată de cai, cunoscută și sub denumirea de hipoterapie, este o formă de terapie care utilizează caii pentru a ajuta indivizii să gestioneze simptomele de anxietate și depresie. Această formă de terapie poate fi un instrument puternic pentru cei care se confruntă cu probleme de sănătate mentală, deoarece oferă o oportunitate unică pentru indivizi de a se conecta cu animalele și natura într-un mediu de susținere și nediscriminatoriu. În timpul ședințelor de terapie asistată de cai, indivizii lucrează cu terapeuți și cai instruiți pentru a participa în diferite activități concepute pentru a promova reglarea emoțională și atenția plină de prezență. Aceste activități pot include îngrijirea și perierea cailor, conducerea lor prin trasee cu obstacole sau petrecerea timpului în prezența lor.*

Cercetările au arătat că terapia asistată de cai poate fi un tratament eficient pentru anxietate și depresie. Prezența cailor poate avea un efect calmant asupra indivizilor, în timp ce activitatea fizică și implicarea în terapie pot ajuta la îmbunătățirea stării de spirit și la reducerea nivelului de stres. În plus, procesul de construire a unei relații cu un cal poate ajuta indivizii să dezvolte un sentiment de încredere și încredere în sine, ceea ce poate fi benefic în gestionarea simptomelor de anxietate și depresie.

Terapia asistată de cai este o abordare holistică a tratamentului pentru sănătatea mentală, care poate fi o adăugare valoroasă la metodele tradiționale de terapie. Prin încorporarea animalelor și a naturii în procesul de terapie, indivizii pot obține o mai mare conexiune cu lumea din jurul lor și pot găsi.

***Cuvinte-cheie:** hipoterapie, anxietate, depresie, terapie asistată de cai.*

Introduction. Defining EAT as a type of therapy

EAT is one of the branches of animal-assisted therapy, where horses are used to aid in managing symptoms of anxiety and depression [3, p. 801]. This type of therapy can be a powerful tool for those who suffer from psychological problems, as it provides a unique opportunity to interact with animals and nature in a supportive and non-judgmental environment.

EAT is a type of therapy that involves interaction between humans and horses in a therapeutic setting. The main goal of EAT is to create and strengthen emotional and psychological well-being through the unique properties of horses, such as their size, strength, docility, trainability, and nonverbal communication skills [3, p.798]. EAT can take many forms, including horseback riding, ground-based sessions, basic vaulting skills etc. EAT is often considered as an adjunct or alternative therapy, meaning it is used in combination with other forms of therapy such as medication and traditional psychotherapy. EAT can be used to treat a wide range of disorders, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and various types of addiction. EAT can also be used to promote personal growth and increase mindfulness [2, p.3]. Currently, EAT is a popular approach because it incorporates holistic principles as well as principles of sustainable development. This article will examine the definition and principles of EAT, as well as its benefits in managing symptoms of anxiety and depression.

II. How EAT helps manage symptoms of anxiety and depression

This is partially related to the unique properties of horses, which, due to their size, power, human-oriented nature, and the fact that they are herd animals and therefore highly social, can help create feelings of calm, trust, and emotional stability [4, p.20] that are essential for patients with PTSD and anxiety disorders. Communication, activities with horses, and caring for them can also provide a sense of purpose and meaning [1, p.105], which is especially beneficial for people suffering from depression.

Both of these pathological conditions have physiological manifestations. In the case of anxiety disorders, they occur after a strong sense of anxiety, while in depression, they are almost constant [3, p.798].

The most typical manifestations of anxiety disorder are:

- Tension in the body and muscles
- Tachycardia
- Excessive sweating
- Chills
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Tremors
- Pain in the abdomen, head, and other parts of the body
- Difficulty breathing

The main physical manifestations of depression are:

- Apathy
- Constant fatigue
- Sleep and appetite disturbances
- Lack of energy
- Sluggishness

In practice, the problem often lies in the fact that these disorders can accompany each other, and the symptoms can alternate. Therefore, for a practical specialist in hippotherapy, the question is not about clarifying the diagnosis, but about providing concrete assistance to the patient who complains of such symptoms and, as a result, a significant deterioration in the quality of life [8, p.19].

Fortunately, the horse can satisfy some basic human needs, such as the need for emotional closeness and safety, the possibility of caring for the horse and looking after it, as well as a feeling of unity with another living creature [8, p.78]. The horse is unambiguous in its behavior and responds to feelings expressed by body language, thereby directly responding to the emotional state of the person [4, p.78].

As a result, this leads to a feeling of closeness, which is part of the experience of social support. A connection with a horse can be important for the perception and understanding of social support [1, p.109] that is important (and urgent!) for patients suffering from symptoms of anxiety, depression and PTSD. Note that in this context, social support is not necessarily support from a rational being, but rather what the patient perceives as natural, accessible, and desirable, meaning that the perceived experience of interaction with the horse is important, rather than the actual behavior of the animal, which can then be successfully transferred to a model of social relationships [2, p. 9].

In related fields, research confirms that acquiring skills or abilities through new physical activities for the patient is associated with the development of a positive self-perception [1, p.107]. Mastery of skills related to handling and interacting with a large animal can give a sense of accomplishment and competence, important for self-esteem.

Studies on the influence of Equine-Assisted Therapy (EAT) on professional qualities have reported increased belief in success and awareness of one's own mastery, which has been inter-

preted as an indication that mastery of skills related to horses has influenced beliefs in one's own effectiveness and self-confidence [4, p.124].

Research shows that EAT can be an effective tool for managing symptoms of anxiety and depression. This is partially due to the unique properties of horses, which can help individuals feel calm, trusting, and emotionally regulated. Communication with horses can also provide a sense of purpose and meaning, which is especially useful for people suffering from depression [2, p.16].

The effects of therapy can be described as follows:

Tension in the body and muscles is relieved due to the fact that simply being near a very large living object, warm, human-oriented, and most importantly, non-judgmental, acts as a combination of physio- and psychotherapy.

Neurogenic tachycardia is neutralized or episodes become significantly less frequent during EAT. Excessive sweating, chills, dizziness, nausea, tremors, abdominal and head pains, and other bodily discomforts, as well as difficulty breathing, disappear within three months to a year depending on the patient's sex, age, and other characteristics and diagnosis, with a properly selected medication therapy combined with EAT.

After EAT sessions, patients usually „note a strong pleasant fatigue throughout the body after each session, followed by an influx of energy and a boost of energy for the next two to three days” [5, p. 38]. Apathy, constant fatigue, sleep and appetite disturbances, lack of energy, and sluggishness give way to a surge of energy in the morning hours, a regular daily routine (as a result of regular classes), and as a result, an improvement in sleep quality and the patient's ability to recognize, verbalize, accept, and ultimately resolve their problems [4, p.89].

It is particularly noteworthy that stable positive changes in patient functioning are shown not only by psychological tests but also by biometrics: electrocardiogram readings, X-rays, biochemical and clinical blood tests, blood pressure measurements, and heart rate confirm documentary improvement in overall health status as a result of EAT therapy [1].

III. The Mechanism of Action of EAT

EAT, like other forms of animal-assisted therapy, provides opportunities to improve quality of life, patient effectiveness, social behavior skills, and more. One of the main ways in which EAT helps manage symptoms of anxiety and depression is by encouraging physical activity and social interaction [2, p.12]. Riding and working with horses require some form of activity, which helps reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. Working with a horse on the ground forces the patient to be clear in expressing their emotions [1, p.105], which helps them learn this practice in human-to-human role structures such as subordinate-supervisor relationships and so on.

In addition, communicating with horses and a therapist-trainer provides a sense of social support and belonging, helping to alleviate feelings of isolation and loneliness. For example, a study published in the *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* [1, p. 108] found that EAT was associated with a significant reduction in symptoms of anxiety and depression in people with psychological problems. Another study found that EAT was associated with improved mood and self-esteem in teenagers with depression [2, p.8].

Although EAT has been shown to effectively manage symptoms of anxiety and depression, it is not a replacement for other forms of treatment. EAT should be used in combination with traditional therapy and medication as needed. In addition, the effectiveness of EAT may vary depending on individual characteristics and the severity of their condition [5, p.46].

IV. Practical Aspects of EAT

An EAT specialist conducts sessions with a horse and a patient, in which various methods aimed at managing symptoms of anxiety and depression may be used. These methods may include ground exercises, horseback riding, horse care, controlled riding, and other activities aimed at improving emotional and mental well-being.

EAT can be helpful for people suffering from anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, autism spectrum disorders, and other conditions. Therapy can also assist those who have difficulties accessing, processing, verbalizing, and expressing their emotions adequately. It is important to choose licensed specialists who have received appropriate training and have experience working with horses and patients with depression and anxiety. Additionally, to ensure a positive experience during EAT, the welfare of the horse must be taken into account. Social interaction with other horses and the ability to move freely are crucial factors for this and can impact the interaction between the horse and the human, as horses in group housing whose basic needs are fully met are more likely to readily and willingly engage with humans [7, p.74].

V. Conclusion

EAT is a holistic approach to treating mental disorders that is a valuable addition to traditional therapy methods. By integrating animals and nature into the therapy process, patients develop a greater sense of connection to the world and their own desires and needs [5, p.32].

Today, there is a wealth of evidence that EAT works. For example, horseback riding increases self-confidence and promotes emotional stability, while caring for horses ultimately leads to emotional normalization and reduced stress. Communicating with horses on the ground leads to increased mindfulness, as horses are very sensitive to nonverbal communication, which prompts patients to analyze their own physicality and its connection to psychological aspects. The main goal of EAT is emotional and psychological well-being, achieved through the unique properties of horses, such as their size, strength, submissiveness, trainability, and nonverbal communication skills.

This type of therapy can be a powerful tool for those suffering from psychological problems, as it provides a unique opportunity to communicate with animals and nature in a supportive and non-judgmental environment.

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