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Equine Welfare in Therapy and Learning Services: an Overview

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Abstract

The importance of the welfare and well-being of horses that are part of human health and learning services is receiving ongoing attention through research studies, scientific summaries, and practice guidelines. This chapter addresses these issues by first providing a brief overview of horses involved in human services, followed by a discussion of practitioner attitudes pertaining to horses, and the needs of horses in terms of their living environment and handling practices. Finally, there is an explanation of five key areas of responsibility for practitioners during human-horse interactions proposed by the author with the intention of improving horse welfare.

Introduction

Thoughtful people who are involved in animal-assisted interventions recognize that human welfare matters, animal welfare matters, and the two are closely connected.

(Fraser, 2021, p. viii)

The importance of the welfare and well-being of horses who are part of human health and learning services is receiving ongoing attention through research studies (e.g. Merckies *et al.*, 2018), scientific summaries (e.g. Ekholm Fry, 2021), and practice guidelines (e.g. IAHAIO, 2021). It may feel particularly salient to focus on the well-being of horses when they are part of human healthcare and learning services as human care ethics are already involved in the service delivery. However, the context of human services does not automatically offer protection against the lack of recognition and mitigation of equine welfare issues. It is up to each person involved to allow new learning and welfare-enhancing practices to become part of the everyday handling of the horses we care so much about.

Horses in Human Services and Adjacent Areas: a Brief Overview

When referring to horses in human services, it can be useful to recognize that there are different human service and activity areas where horses are involved. There are common welfare issues across these areas, which I will discuss briefly in this introductory chapter, and also issues specific to the service or activity provided as the tasks the horse is expected to perform vary.

When referring to treatment or therapy that includes interactions with horses or the movement of the horse, the human profession defines the service, not the fact that a horse is present. Examples include physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy where equine movement is used as a treatment tool as part of the larger treatment plan. Similarly, equine interactions can be incorporated into the process of psychotherapy and clinical mental health counseling as a therapy technique within the therapy approaches the

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licensed therapist employs. Horses can also be part of learning services that are based on educational constructs and focused on goals related to, for instance, life skills or academic achievement. Adjacent areas that do not constitute a human service but may be relevant in this context are adaptive/therapeutic riding and volunteer visits to hospitals and schools. Adaptive riding and horsemanship lessons, also known as therapeutic riding, provides access to horses and riding activities for those who experience physical, cognitive, or mental health-related barriers for recreating with horses in typical equestrian settings without accommodations. Visits to hospitals and schools are typically conducted by a volunteer with the purpose of providing a pleasant social encounter. In the USA, a miniature horse can function as a service animal but welfare concerns for this role falls outside the scope of this discussion.

Practitioner Attitudes and “Horse Culture”

How we think, talk, and act around horses, which defines our personal *horse culture*, greatly affect whether we regularly encounter new, science-based information about horses, and if so, what we do with it. There are many reasons why a person may not actively mitigate equine welfare issues: (i) they may not perceive that there is a problem; (ii) they may misinterpret communication from the horse; (iii) they may follow incorrect advice from someone who they believe is an expert; or (iv) they may be exposed to situations that create compromised equine welfare so often that the issues are not recognized due to being common occurrences. In addition, I would argue that there exists a so-called toughness culture in the horse world for both people and horses due to the size of the horse and the working conditions in the horse industry overall. There seems to be an expectation of high physical impact, such as an occurrence of biting and striking from horses, and an overall expectation to “suck it up” for both people and horses. This may negatively influence the pursuit of recognizing nuanced communication from horses and changing existing management practices that have welfare consequences when horses are part of human services. Care is not welfare—our well-meaning care for horses does not necessarily correlate with good welfare for them.

It can be a bit awkward to realize that we as humans have inherent cognitive barriers to considering the perspective of horses in our interactions with them, despite our best intentions. One of these cognitive tendencies is thinking primarily about human benefits and values. An example is, “this is so good for humans so it can’t be bad for horses—they enjoy it too”. Another cognitive tendency is to emphasize how different the horse is from us, using labels such as “prey animal” and “unpredictable”, while making statements that imply that the horse understands human-specific concepts such as healthcare (“the horse is a therapist and I let them take care of themselves”). These examples create situations where the horse’s vulnerable position is underestimated and sufficient action is not being taken to change the circumstances that lead to reduced welfare, whether the horse is standing in cross-ties with little option to move away, being led by someone who is not paying attention to lead-rope pressure, or being sat on without appropriately fitted equipment that distributes weight across their back.

Asking ourselves the question, “Just because we can, does it mean we should?” is a good start for exploring our equine interactions in a systematic way and questioning long-standing traditions. Otherwise, we may inadvertently hinder ourselves from recognizing an issue and seeking out new information about it. In many instances, science-based guidance for how to improve welfare of horses within our human pursuits is available but because it does not fully fit with what we already know, we come up with reasons to reject it.

Living Environment and Handling Practices

Much is known about the needs of horses in their living environment in general and the potential for positive and negative impacts from our direct handling of them. Still, management practices that go directly against the needs of horses despite knowledge of other options are prevalent in the horse industry overall. The most basic needs of horses include free movement, forage, social housing, and choice in their everyday life. These examples arise from scientific study of equine behavior and health. For instance, we may be able to calculate the exact calories a horse needs on a given day but we must also understand the

equine welfare needs for feeding behaviors, which include near-constant access to fiber in the form of hay or grass to facilitate time spent chewing, a low head position, and slow movement while eating.

Attitudes such as, “horses need to come in at night” to a small box stall and run (horses will, of course, appear to eagerly want to go into their stalls if this is the place they are fed grain), practices such as blanketing horses with unaltered coats at 40 °F (4.4°C), or only providing small portions of hay at “breakfast, lunch, and dinner” if no other fiber is available, all constitute considerable equine welfare violations and we need to be honest about that. Some providers may feel that benefits for participants in human services are so great that they are willing to overlook mental or physical discomfort in the horse, even if they recognize it. An example of this is to continuously include a horse in human services who regularly nips or threatens to bite during interactions. When I am told about this, which I consider a serious welfare issue for all involved, the most common explanation provided is that it is a problem with a particular horse and not related to possible welfare deficits in how horses are made to live their lives each day, also outside of the direct human interaction.

There has been some research interest in whether the human’s emotional state has welfare consequences for the horse in therapy or learning sessions (see e.g. Merckies *et al.*, 2018). It is likely that horses, similar to humans, have different tolerance thresholds for tension and other states in humans due to a variety of factors, including their prior experiences with humans and aspects of their personality and temperament. Skilled selection of horses comfortable with interactions is therefore particularly important. In addition, experiences of human emotionality as part of therapy or education services does not seem to be *more* significant than what the human does to the horse during the interaction. This requires us to pay particular attention to how horses are handled by participants and carefully assess practices that we may assume are preferred by horses, such as grooming (Schroeder *et al.*, 2023). Practitioners who include horses in human therapy and learning services should base their handling and training practices on the physical, mental, and sensory capacities of horses, and on the science of how horses learn and communicate. This includes attention to the individual horse’s

sensory load and a focus on reinforcement in training protocols.

Finally, conversations about agency and choice for horses in their interactions with humans are becoming more prevalent. It may be valuable to look to concepts like the Lundy (2007) model of participation (space, voice, audience, and influence) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) principles of a trauma-informed approach for guidance in our interactions with horses as we hold structural power over them.

Practitioner Responsibilities During Human–Horse Interactions

I have previously proposed five areas of responsibilities that a practitioner providing a therapy or learning service has during direct interactions between a service participant and the horse with the intention of positively impacting welfare (Ekholm Fry, 2021). They are summarized below.

1. Monitor interactions and track affective states

When a participant is interacting with the horse, you must watch the interaction at all times so that you can track the emotional states of both the horse and the person without interruption.

2. Assess and address handling and touch

When a participant is touching the horse or otherwise handling their body or using equipment like a lead rope, you must assess the interaction continuously and address anything that exceeds minimal pressure without delay.

3. Communicate accurately about the horse and the interaction

When you are describing ways to have relationally appropriate interactions with the horses or even the horse’s role in the service you are providing, it is imperative that you do not mislead the client with scientifically incorrect statements such as, “the horse mirrors your feelings”.

4. Assess stress

When you are planning for or monitoring interactions, you must watch for levels of undue stress in the horse, noting their individual preferences and capacities, and modify without delay.

5. Promote positive states

As much as possible during any given interaction or session, you should strive to promote positive states in the horses, such as relaxation, and providing them with hay if they are expected to stand still for prolonged periods of time.

Conclusions

I have no doubt that you, the reader, are one of those thoughtful people David Fraser refers to in the opening quote of this chapter, and that you want to prevent harmful situations when including horses in therapy and education services. However, the time has come to understand the difference between our good intentions and the impact of our actions. This includes asking ourselves whether it is reasonable to have horses part of human services who are not able to move freely during the day or night, who are fasting for longer than 3–4 hours at a time, and who are not housed together with other horses due to lack of space. It takes courage to advocate for and to make change against the backdrop of a horse industry that is not always treating horses well. Change is hard, cultural shifts

even harder, but it is the direction we must take toward a more just future for horses and people alike.

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