



Hope 4 All



MAN O'WAR PROJECT

Architectural rendering of the upcoming Grand Prairie Equine Center

A Case Study Supporting The Need For The Grand Prairie Equine Center

Horses Helping Horses

An average of 17 military personnel or veterans commit suicide a day, more than from enemy combatants and reflecting a 52-percent higher rate than among non-veterans, according to government statistics. Earle I. Mack — Army veteran, prominent Thoroughbred racehorse owner and breeder, businessman, philanthropist and former ambassador to Finland — believes America needs to do more to help our active military and veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He saw retired racehorses as a means to that end.

But Mack wanted to establish the science to back up anecdotal evidence that equine-assisted therapy (EAT) is an effective way to treat PTSD and other debilitating mental and trauma-related disorders. He teamed with Columbia University Irving Medical Center and provided the initial funding to launch the Man O' War Project to examine equine therapy's effectiveness in treating veterans with PTSD.

The Man O' War Project has conducted groundbreaking research to determine the effectiveness of equine therapy in the treatment of veterans with PTSD. It also is working to provide standardized protocol, methodology and curriculum that can be implemented across the country to best aid the treatment of veterans and others. The project also has employed state-of-the-art Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) to validate and strengthen the clinical data.

Veterans with PTSD have historically poor treatment outcomes and high attrition. Equine therapy shows promise in reducing two major obstacles: Getting veterans to participate in the first place, and then keeping them for the treatment's duration.



Why Horses?

As the Man o' War Project explains: horses are prey animals and naturally skittish, presenting an opportunity for veterans to recognize and understand fear responses. Unlike dogs with their unconditional love, relationships with horses must be earned by building trust. Equine-assisted therapy helps veterans re-learn how to build trust and how to trust themselves again – valuable tools to help veterans succeed with family, work and social relationships. Horses are naturally sensitive to verbal and nonverbal cues, and thus provide good feedback to the veterans about how they are communicating. Bottom line: EAT isn't simply about making veterans "feel better," it's about helping them increase emotional awareness and the ability to regulate their emotions.

The Research Team

As described on mowproject.com: The focus of the project is to search and discover effective treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in wartime veterans. The Man O' War Project team is comprised of researchers from the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia University/New York State Psychiatric Institute (Columbia University Irving Medical Center) with expertise in PTSD, assessment, development and testing of psychotherapeutic treatments, namely Equine-Assisted Therapy (EAT), which is a widely used alternative treatment for many people struggling with mental health and life problems, including veterans.

Leading the project are Columbia researchers Prudence Fisher PhD and Yuval Neria PhD.

Dr. Fisher is an associate professor of Clinical Psychiatric Social Work in the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons and a research scientist at the New York State Psychiatric Institute. She is an expert in PTSD in youth. Dr. Neria is a decorated Israeli army veteran who was severely injured while serving as a company commander in the Yom Kippur War of 1973. He serves as a Columbia professor and director of the PTSD Research and Treatment Program and the Military Family Wellness Center at the New York State Psychiatric Institute. Neria and Fisher collaborated on a project with PATH International (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International) to develop a training curriculum for the Man O' War Project protocol based on their research that other EAT providers can implement.

What the Research Says

The promising clinical and MRI results have been published in three highly regarded medical journals, including the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry. The Man O' War Center at Columbia University continues to build on the success of the studies, with the mission of training others in the equine-assisted therapy field in the Man O' War protocol, expanding access to the therapy for veterans and adapting the protocol for children and adolescents.



Military Medicine, February 2020: “Equine-Assisted Therapy for Veterans with PTSD: Manual Development and Preliminary Findings”

The Columbia researchers developed an eight-session group EAT treatment protocol for PTSD and administered it to two pilot groups of four military veterans apiece to assess initial effects, including protocol safety, feasibility and acceptability by participants. Sessions were weekly and lasted 90 minutes, with no riding exercises.

Treatment sessions were led by certified treatment teams: a licensed mental health professional (clinical social worker or professional counselor) and a trained horse expert, with a horse “wrangler” assisting to enhance safety. Two horses - the same ones for all sessions — completed the team. Sessions were conducted in a round pen, with exercises designed to help patients connect and communicate with horses.

Preliminary data on PTSD, depressive and anxiety symptoms and quality of life were collected pretreatment, midpoint, post-treatment and at a three-month follow-up. No adverse events were recorded, the researchers said, with all patients completing treatment and reporting high satisfaction. Preliminary data showed decreases in clinician-assessed PTSD and depressive symptoms from pre- to post-treatment and follow-up.

While treatment response and remission varied, the researchers reported that all patients showed some benefit post-treatment, but gains did not persist at follow-up assessments. The article presented the first standardized EAT protocol, with the researchers writing that the “highly preliminary” results suggest the treatment’s methodology appears safe, well-regarded and well-attended, yielding short-term benefits if an unclear length of the effect. The researchers said this alternative treatment for PTSD should be tested more rigorously.

Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, Sept.-Oct. 2021: “Equine Assisted Therapy for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Among Military Veterans: An Open Trial”

If the first research indicated the treatment was safe and acceptable to participants, the next step was to test in an open trial the developed procedures and assess their preliminary feasibility, acceptability and outcomes for military veterans. The study was conducted from July 2016 until July 2019, with 63 veterans with PTSD volunteering for the trial. There again were eight 90-minute sessions, with three to five veterans in each group.

Only five of the participants withdrew: four before mid-treatment and one before the follow-up.

The findings were highly encouraging, with post-treatment assessment showing marked decreases in both the clinician-rated and self-reported PTSD and depression symptoms, including at the three-month follow-up evaluation. As the researchers wrote, manualized equine-assisted therapy “shows promise as a potential new intervention for veterans with PTSD. It appears safe, feasible and clinically viable” and that the results encourage examination in “larger, randomized controlled trials.”



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Human Brain Mapping, April 15, 2021: “Neural Changes Following Equine-Assisted Therapy For Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: A Longitudinal Multimodal Imaging Study”

The Man O' War team described their third published research project as an “exploratory study that was the first to demonstrate that equine-assisted therapy can spark functional and structural changes in the brains of PTSD patients.”

Nineteen veterans with PTSD completed eight weekly group sessions of equine-assisted therapy while undergoing various state-of-the-art MRI assessments before and after treatment, with clinical assessments conducted at the beginning, post-treatment and three months later. The researchers' findings included seeing physical changes associated with clinical improvement seen post-treatment and at the three-month follow-up as well as change measured post-treatment that was associated with greater PTSD symptom reduction.

Source: mowproject.org