

The Equine Human Bond and Recovery from Trauma: A Qualitative Inquiry

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The nature and complexity of human-animal bond is significant to understanding the role it plays in recovery from illness, loss or trauma (Beck & Katcher, 1983; Regehr & Marziali, 1999). There is evidence that the 'partnership' formed between human and horse has unique qualities that would prove useful therapeutically (Wipper, 2000).

Utilizing two in-depth interviews and video-tapes, the researchers use a phenomenological and emotionalist perspective to explore a traumatic experience encountered by 6 riders and the role the relationship played in recovery. Video-tapes are used in the interviews as a catalyst for discussion, methodologically providing triangulation. Equine-human bonding and attachment is interpreted as playing a therapeutic role through proximity, trust, safety and mutuality, parallel to human-to-human therapeutic alliances (Frank, 1986; Hougaard, 1994; Weinberger, 1993).

The research results show that equine-human bonds, like other kinds of human-animal relationships, appear to mirror some of the fundamental elements significant to therapeutic alliances between professionals and clients. Four themes that constitute aspects of the equine-human relationship emerged from the data analysis: the intimacy or nurturing bond, the identity bond, the partnership bond and the utility bond. Themes pertinent to the therapeutic value of the equine-human bond included feelings, behaviours and touch/physical closeness relevant to healing. Themes related to understanding the trauma experience and other factors related to recovery also emerged. The results underline the significance of riders' bonds with their horses to trauma recovery. A discussion of the implications for both social work and veterinary medicine will be presented along with recommendations for future research.