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EQUINE ASSISTED THERAPY FOR PATIENTS WITH SEVERE CHRONIC PSYCHIATRIC DISORDERS

J.R. Nurenberg, S.J. Schleifer

Psychiatry, University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, Newark, NJ, USA

Animal assisted therapy (AAT) is being used increasingly for patients with syndromes not responding adequately to traditional therapies (severe stress/anxiety reactions, interpersonal deficits, limited verbal skills, trauma, and violence). Some have suggested that larger animals, such as horses, may be more effective therapy enhancers for some patients than commonly employed smaller animals. We have been developing an AAT protocol at a 500 bed state psychiatric hospital in NJ, supported by observations of dramatic functional improvement with equine facilitated therapy (EFT) in some highly regressed or violent patients. Logistic issues in establishing an equine program in a psychiatric hospital include site development, animal/therapist selection and training, safety and liability; scheduling, and hospital staff integration with the equine therapists. EFT technique modifications have addressed the needs and limitations of chronic, highly regressed or violent patients. A clinical research project comparing 10 weekly EFT and canine-facilitated (CFT) group sessions in >100 patients is nearing completion. The background, principles, and practices of EFT will be reviewed as will its relative benefits compared with AATs such as CFT. Research findings will compare AAT groups and standard therapies with respect to psychological, behavioral, and functional outcomes (e.g., violent and regressed behaviors, hospital discharge). Clinical value vs costs, including unique benefits associated with AAT subtypes, will be presented.