

# EAP in the Treatment of War Veterans

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ASCENT FROM HELL

**W**inston Churchill hit the nail on the head when he said “the outside of a horse is good for the inside of a man.” Brilliant and visionary, Churchill would be pleased with the current interest in equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP), and as a war denizen who understood the toll the Great War embedded in the psyches of millions, he would appreciate the addition of EAP in the treatment of psychologically injured combat veterans.

“The return from the killing fields is more than a debriefing...” said renowned Jungian psychologist, James Hillman, “it is a slow ascent from hell.” Having experienced the dehumanization of mankind in a war zone, how does one overcome the challenges of reintegrating into civilian life? What are the necessary psychological tasks associated with a transition from combat soldier to civilian life? What healing, if any, can EAP hope to achieve?

## **Survival Strategies in War:**

Work by Raymond Scurfield (2006) a combat veteran from Viet Nam and a clinical social worker delineates survival tactics

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## WAR SURVIVAL STRATEGIES:

- FIGHT
- FLIGHT
- DETACHMENT
- NUMBING
- DENIAL
- TUNNEL VISION

## Veterans can suffer from many psychological injuries which may include:

- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Depression
- Addictions
- Grief Issues
- Identity Problems
- Panic Attacks
- Sleep Disorders
- Religious or Spiritual Problems

in the following way:

*Fight or flight* involves engagement with the enemy or tactical retreat. In either instance veterans have to develop coping mechanisms that later can leave them with feelings of guilt, shame, grief and unremitting rage.

Others employ tactics of detachment, *numbing and denial* to avoid being overwhelmed. This can offer temporary essential emotional refuge but as a prolonged strategy can lead to emotional unavailability.

*Tunnel vision* allows the soldier to deal with the relentless challenges of a war. By maintaining an intense focus on a particular task, a soldier becomes impervious to what is going on around and oblivious to personal survival.

According to Scurfield, soldiers develop an imperative need for outlets for the inevitable build up of stress, frustration, fear and rage, and often “gallows” humor. Upon return home soldiers struggle to repress these emotions. Some choose to isolate themselves to avoid experiencing these feelings anew. Others suffer from violent outbreaks. In either instance, these reactions are extremely difficult either to share or to withhold from family and friends.

## Equine Assisted Psychotherapy:

Understanding the strategies for combat survival as well as what symptoms might be exhibited in post war veterans upon re-introduction to civilian life, I was convinced based on my

experience of EAP, that this type of therapy could prove beneficial. As a result I developed several veterans programs for individuals as well as for groups.

## Reactions to EAP:

Initially veterans shared their surprise that my goal was not to increase their medications. I was asking them, instead, to look at their problems in a radically different way to teach them ideally, to take responsibility, if they chose it, for their own healing and recovery.

## The process of EAP had the following results:

1. Nature induced a sense of well being and calm amongst the veterans.
2. Horses stimulated powerful thoughts and feelings from individual to individual, ranging from fear (often associated initially with the memory of being back in the front line), to a sense of connectivity with and acceptance by community.
3. Over the course of treatment, veterans went from being on the fringes of the herd initially, to joining it, to eventually catching a horse and leading it around the pasture. The “harnessing of fear” served different metaphors such as lessening the terror of recurrent nightmares, eradicating the trauma of appearing alien due to one’s war experience, and shedding emotional armor to bring intimacy back into one’s life.



*“The experience of being accepted by and incorporated into the herd opened floodgates of grief.”*

4. Leading a horse elicited many metaphors. For some it provided a new and distinctive look at how one might make the transition of being a leader in the military to becoming a leader in the family or community upon return home. A horse looks to a worthy leader, one who believes in himself first and foremost, and who commands clearly, firmly, yet with concern for those who follow.
5. The experience of being accepted by and incorporated into the herd opened floodgates of grief for the loss of fellow soldiers, innocence, parts of mind, body, and soul, tattered personal relationships, and more. Veterans talked repeatedly about the power of being accepted by the herd and how the healing effects of this experience rippled into areas of their lives well beyond the paddock. Interaction with horses created in many a desire to be more social and to connect again to the world at large.
6. *Detachment and numbing* tactics, so useful in war situations, are meaningless to a herd. If a person was detached, most horses were too. This in turn elicited mixed emotions and provided useful insights as to how other people in the veterans' lives reacted to deflection. Sometimes, however, a horse was an "extrovert" and would hound an individual for some kind of response. Here, too, whether the

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client was fearful, angry, grateful or anything else, the reaction was enlightening. As clients moved through the therapeutic process of EAP, they were often surprised how such introvert/extrovert behavior cycles elicited feelings (rage, grief, anxiety, guilt etc.) which they thought they had eradicated or forgotten or would never be able to feel again (like happiness).

7. EAP offered family members a useful and quick metaphor to use as a reminder for veterans when depression or anger arose. Veterans told me that family members would tell them to think what they have learned in the round pen, and doing so prompted them to recall more positive ways of dealing with surfacing emotions..
8. EAP proved to have a broadening effect on *tunnel vision* which had been so critical to survive combat but was restrictive in civilian life. As clients worked through an activity in each therapeutic session week after week, they found larger solutions as they learned to pay attention to more of what was going on. Using metaphors in the activity

## Equine Assisted Activity:

### Life's Obstacles

#### Addresses:

Teamwork, communication, problem-solving, relationships, leadership, overcoming challenges, boundaries, attitude, impulse control, definitions/expectations, and identification and healthy expression of emotions.

#### Set up:

Have poles and cones on hand prior to clients' arrival. One or more horses may be used.

#### Begin:

When session begins, ask veterans to set up obstacles in the arena and identify each obstacle as a meaningful personal metaphor for something they are suffering from (i.e. substance abuse, emotional detachment or overload, destructive memories, feeling different since returning from war, survivor guilt and unworthiness, etc.).

Have them figure out how to get the horse/s to traverse the obstacles without touching or bribing the horses.

#### Process:

All decisions, actions, and reactions afterwards.

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*Life's Obstacles* (see Equine Assisted Activity previous page) in which each obstacle had been identified as something recognizable within the client's life helped expand perceived limitations. Clients came to therapy typically having employed already the most adaptive solutions available to their conscious minds. Problems persisted, however, as a function of the limitations imposed by their conscious mind (Matthews, 1999). A major aspect of the therapeutic metaphor is the process of trans-derivational search to bypass the conscious mind in an effort to retrieve, organize, and associate to relevant contexts and

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resources of which the client may be unaware. Veterans having the opportunity to work on the same activity over several weeks allowed for the development of active coping styles. Active coping involves two forms: Figuring how to solve problems and accepting and dealing with emotions caused by trauma (Haglund, 2007). EAP requires immediate solutions

to problems at hand, which, when practiced on a regular basis nurtures an ability to adapt and the development of problem solving skills. This in turn results in a decrease of emotional intensity and fosters learning more effective ways to manage reactions to symptoms and distressing memories. In doing so in an EAP setting, combat veterans began to recognize their strengths and abilities for coping with trauma, acknowledging at last that if they had survived thus far, they could survive the transition home

too, and in time learn to thrive again. In this manner, partnership with horses encouraged their ascent from an inner hell.

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