

# Understanding Equine-assisted Activities and Therapies



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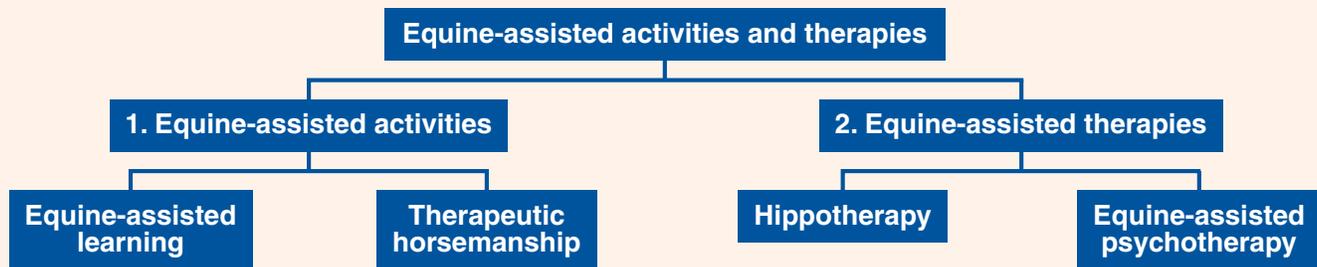
## **Equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT)**

is a broad term used to describe various activities and therapies that incorporate a horse and human in partnership. While the idea of partnering with horses for human therapy has been documented as early as 400 B.C., the EAAT industry has shown tremendous growth and received increased publicity in recent years.

The goal of this publication is to introduce the concepts of EAAT and help define some of the common terminology.

# Terminology

Professionals in the EAAT field can have heated debates about terminology. One example is the use of the word **assisted** versus **facilitated** with regard to the role horses are playing in the activity (for example, equine-assisted learning vs. equine-facilitated learning). For simplicity in this document, we use the word **assisted**. Please note that no matter which word is used, the basic descriptions of the activity listed below would not change.



## Equine-assisted Activities

Equine-assisted activities is the term for activities that involve partnering with horses in a learning or therapeutic manner but do not require a medical professional to be present during the activity.

**Equine-assisted learning (EAL)** – This may be referred to as equine-guided education and incorporates horses into activities in which the focus is on learning or educational goals. Also included in this category is equine-guided coaching, which has a focus on personal development, such as establishing life/career goals. Some topics that EAL addresses are bullying, leadership skills and personal development, but the topics are limitless.

**Therapeutic horsemanship** – This may include therapeutic or adaptive riding, therapeutic driving or interactive vaulting. The goal of therapeutic or adaptive riding is to teach a riding skill or skills. Tack and equipment, as well as delivery of material by the instructor, may need to be adapted to suit the participant.

- **In therapeutic driving**, the participant is paired with an instructor and gets the reward of interaction and control of a horse while driving from the cart or carriage.
- **Interactive vaulting** allows participants to perform movements in and around the horse while the horse moves on a lunge line.

These activities with horses contribute positively to the cognitive, physical, emotional and social well-being of individuals with disabilities. Therapeutic horsemanship activities may be appropriate for individuals with autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, amputations, developmental delay, learning disabilities, traumatic brain injury, spina bifida, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, emotional disabilities and spinal cord injury.

## Equine-assisted Therapies

Equine-assisted therapies are therapies partnering horses and clients under the direct supervision of a medical professional with the goal of achieving specific treatment outcomes. Examples of medical professionals are occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, psychologists, counselors or other mental health professionals.

**Hippotherapy** – This refers to using the movement of the horse as a treatment strategy that physical therapists, occupational therapists and speech-language pathologists use to address impairments, functional limitations and disabilities in patients with neuromotor and sensory dysfunction. The term is derived from the Greek word *hippos*, meaning horse. Participants often are more engaged in therapy because they see it as a novel experience in a natural environment versus a clinical setting.

**Equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP)** – This is an experiential model of therapy incorporating horses for mental and behavioral health treatment. A licensed mental health professional is present during the therapy session and works with an equine professional. The focus of EAP is not on riding or horsemanship, but rather self-discovery through work with horses. Processing with the therapist or oneself after experiences with horses aids clients in determining a solution that works best for them. EAP may be beneficial for individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, behavioral issues and personality disorders.



## Benefits of EAAT

The benefits for participants in EAAT are numerous. As the industry has grown, so has the amount of research being performed and data collected that validate the benefits and identify new ones.

### Some benefits for each of the activities include:

#### 1. Therapeutic horsemanship

- Exercise and improved wellness
- Equestrian skills
- A sense of independence
- Improved balance, muscle strength and coordination

#### 2. Hippotherapy

- Improved control of posture
- Improved gross and fine motor skills, planning and coordination
- Enhanced sensory experience because sessions provide vestibular, proprioceptive and visual input

#### 3. Equine-assisted learning and equine-assisted psychotherapy

- Communication skills (especially nonverbal)
- Increased participant engagement during sessions, which leads to goals being attained in less time
- Participants learn to find answers for themselves (solution focused)

## Industry Regulation

Establishing guidelines and regulations in any new and rapidly growing field takes time, and the EAAT industry is no different. There is not a single governing body for all providers and thus programs can vary widely.

As with any activity, you are encouraged to research potential EAAT programs thoroughly before enrolling in any type of session. Also, individuals with special needs should consult their medical professional before engaging in equine activities or therapies.

### Below are three organizations that can provide more information on EAAT, as well as help locate a program near you:

- Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.)  
*www.pathintl.org*
- Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA)  
*www.eagala.org*
- American Hippotherapy Association Inc. (AHA Inc.)  
*www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org*

Photos courtesy of Abby Tow, Robert Pieri, [www.holdyourhorses.org](http://www.holdyourhorses.org)

### For more information on this and other topics, see [www.ag.ndsu.edu](http://www.ag.ndsu.edu)

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