EFFECTS OF EQUINE-FACILITATED PSYCHOTHERAPY ON MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES: META AND CONTENT ANALYSES

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Equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) is widely used as an alternative or adjunctive treatment for individuals with mental health difficulties. However, research supporting the efficacy of EFP for mental health outcomes lacks both quantity and rigor. Therefore, we conducted meta and content analyses to systematically examine the relationships between EFP and mental health outcomes and to assess the features of EFP intervention studies. We included quantitative-based EFP intervention studies dated between 2006-2017 focusing on neurotypical participants with DSM-5 recognized psychological symptoms. The meta-analysis (Study 1) was based on 27 study samples and 984 participants. The results indicated a positive relationship between the use of EFP and mental health outcomes, with a moderate effect size of .27. Based on the subsequent moderator analysis, three study characteristics were found to moderate the effectiveness of EFP: age, target outcome, and program duration. Specifically, interventions targeted at mood disorders (e.g., anxiety and depression) or children/adolescents produced stronger EFP effect than other modalities or populations. Considering the cost of interventions, brief, standardized, and unmounted interventions were also preferable as both produced similar effects to longer and mounted interventions. The content analysis (Study 2) was based on 33 study samples and 1,197 participants. We systematically examined the features of EFP intervention studies in terms of reporting standards, research design, and program design and delivery to identify sound practices and to detect areas where improvements can be made in order to benefit future research and practices. Noteworthy strengths as well as features that warrant growth in terms of reporting, program procedure, and research design are discussed.