

# Horses in Therapy Services: Updates to Terminology and Concepts in the United States

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Education, Research  
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Communities





## Lynn Thomas, LCSW

- Co-founded and led the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (Eagala) for 21 years through 2020.
- Founded Arenas for Change (ARCH) in 2021 providing training in applying a story mindset in mental health and coaching sessions incorporating animals and nature.
- Founded Horses for Mental Health (HMH) in 2021 as a nonprofit advocacy organization, collaborating with sector leaders, companies, celebrities, influencers, and programs to amplify awareness of the benefits of horses in mental health services.
- Member working group of terminology consensus-building process, co-author of published paper: Optimal terminology for services in the United States that incorporate horses to benefit people: A consensus document.

# Terminology and Concepts: What Are the Issues?

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- Confusion
- Inadequate protection of consumers
- Reimbursement obstacles
- Misinformed policies
- Barriers to scientific advancement

*Understanding and using healthcare-aligned, precise terminology and conceptualization of equine interactions is important for clinicians, researchers, funders, consumers and the general public.*



## Optimal Terminology for Services in the United States That Incorporate Horses to Benefit People: A Consensus Document

Wendy Wood, PhD,<sup>1</sup> Kathy Alm, BA,<sup>2</sup> Joann Benjamin, PT,<sup>3</sup> Lynn Thomas, LCSW,<sup>4</sup> Debbie Anderson, AS,<sup>5</sup> Lissa Pohl, MA,<sup>6,7</sup> and Michele Kane, MA, Major, USMC (Ret.)<sup>8,9</sup>

### Abstract

**Objectives:** To recommend (1) the adoption of optimal terminology for referring to services in the United States that incorporate horses and other equines to benefit people, and (2) the discontinuation of especially problematic terminology.

**Design:** A diverse multidisciplinary consortium of individuals, including representatives of relevant national organizations, participated in an inclusive, systematic, and comprehensive 2-year consensus-building process.

**Results:** Twelve specific types of services were identified that relate to one of three broad areas of professional

Research Article | 1 December 2021



## Conceptualization of Psychotherapy Incorporating Equine Interactions in the United States

Author: [Nina Ekholm Fry](#) | [AUTHORS INFO & AFFILIATIONS](#)

Publication: Human-Animal Interaction Bulletin • 2021 • <https://doi.org/10.1079/hai.2021.0036>



### Abstract

While several systematic and mapping reviews have been published in the last decade on the psychological effects of interacting with horses in therapy services, little has been written about how licensed mental health therapists in the United States should best understand, describe, and conceptually position interactions with horses within their clinical practice. To this end, a healthcare-aligned conceptualization of equine interactions in psychotherapy and counseling is presented. Drawing from competencies and statements published by the American Counseling Association and the Human-Animal Interaction section of the American Psychological Association, the proposed conceptualization describes



**Competencies for Counseling**  
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**Summary of Considerations for APA Ethical Standards  
Competencies in Animal-Assisted Interventions**  
**Submitted by the Human-Animal Interactions Ethics Workgroup**

## Animal-Assisted Therapy in Counseling Competencies

Developed in collaboration with the Animal-Assisted Therapy in Mental Health Interest Network of the American Counseling Association



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### Abstract

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**Design:** A diverse multidisciplinary consortium of individuals, including representatives of relevant national organizations, participated in an inclusive, systematic, and comprehensive 2-year consensus-building process.

**Results:** Twelve specific types of services were identified that relate to one of three broad areas of professional practice: education, organizational, and personal development. Related to the area of education, five distinct areas of professional practice were identified: equine-assisted learning, equine-assisted leadership, equine-assisted personal growth, equine-assisted learning, and equine-assisted leadership.

### Purpose

To provide recommended terminology when referring to services in the United States that incorporate horses. Presented by stakeholders representing various national groups and organizations 2018-2020.

### Key Points

- *Therapy-first language* should be used for therapy services. The therapy service is mentioned first, then the equine-related descriptor. Example: physical therapy using equine movement, psychotherapy including equine interactions.
- *Adaptive riding and therapeutic riding* are terms that can be used interchangeably.
- Learning services that incorporate horses fall in three broad areas: education, organizational, and personal development
- Recommend *discontinuation* of terms: *equine therapy, equine-assisted activities and therapies, equine-assisted therapy, equestrian therapy, hippotherapist, hippotherapy clinic or program, horse therapy, horseback riding therapy, and therapy riding.*
- The consensus building process *did not reach full agreement* between key groups.



# Therapy

Physical Therapy  
Occupational Therapy  
Speech-Language  
Pathology

Psychotherapy/  
Counseling  
(Mental Health)

# Learning

School-related  
learning/education:  
- Special Education  
- Academics

Organizational facilitation:  
- Team building  
- Executive coaching

Self-improvement/  
growth/wellness/  
supportive services:  
- Facilitation  
- Life coaching  
- Healing/spiritual

# Horsemanship

Adaptive / therapeutic:  
- Riding  
- Driving  
- Vaulting  
- General horsemanship



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# Physical Therapy Occupational Therapy Speech-Language Therapy



**Use of equine movement as a treatment tool within OT, PT, SLP (equine movement/hippotherapy is not a standalone therapy or treatment).**

**American Hippotherapy Association (AHA).**

**Statements of best practice exist.**

**Independent credentialing board.**

**Equine work role: carrying patients on their back, may also interact on the ground.**



# Psychotherapy and Mental Health Counseling

A photograph showing a woman with blonde hair, wearing a blue jacket over a pink shirt, petting a brown horse in a stable. Another person's head with long grey hair is visible in the foreground on the left. The background shows wooden stable walls and a metal fence.

**Equine interactions and the equine setting used as therapy technique in psychotherapy and counseling (it is not a separate therapy or standalone intervention).**

**National competencies and summary statements exist. Independent credentialing board (CBEIP).**

**Equine work role: interaction typically happens on the ground, may also carry the patient.**



# Why Does Terminology Matter in Healthcare?

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- Public trust
- Restrictions on how practice is done
- Extensive evaluation of and limitations on providers
- Alignment with existing healthcare systems



"Treatment with the help of the horse"

## AMERICAN HIPPO THERAPY ASSOCIATION, INC.

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### AHA, Inc. Terminology for Healthcare

As the professional organization for therapists who incorporate equine movement and equine interactions in treatment, the AHA, Inc. abides by the following list of terms to be used when describing human-horse interactions in healthcare. It is essential that terminology, as outlined, is used to promote clarity, consistency, and transparency in settings including clinical documentation, marketing, and research, resulting in improved quality of communication, better consumer protection and expanded professionalism. **Use of therapy-first language is recommended regardless of profession.** Therapy-first language clarifies the kind of therapy provided and describes the service appropriately in a healthcare setting (examples include physical therapy using equine movement or psychotherapy incorporating equine interactions).

**This document contains Recommended Terminology for both healthcare and non-therapy areas, as well as a list of Not Recommended Terminology, in alphabetical order.**

- The American Hippotherapy Association (AHA, Inc.) has provided the most comprehensive terminology guidance for healthcare services in the U.S. where horses are incorporated.
- The 2020 document encompasses the following clinical services:
  - Occupational therapy
  - Physical therapy
  - Speech-language pathology
  - Psychotherapy / Counseling

<https://www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org/assets/AHA-Terminology-Final-11-11-20-Phase%201%20Internal%20%20.pdf>



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1,742



## Abstract

While several systematic and mapping reviews have been published in the last decade on the psychological effects of interacting with horses in therapy services, little has been written about how licensed mental health therapists in the United States should best understand, describe, and conceptually position interactions with horses within their clinical practice. To this end, a healthcare-aligned conceptualization of equine interactions in psychotherapy and counseling is presented. Drawing from competencies and statements published by the American Counseling Association and the Human-Animal Interaction section of the American Psychological Association, the proposed conceptualization describes interactions with horses during psychotherapy as a technique and enhancement to existing treatment approaches, not as a

## Purpose

Establish a healthcare-aligned conceptualization of equine interactions in psychotherapy so that practitioners, researchers, and other stakeholders can appropriately understand, describe, and conceptually position interactions with horses within psychotherapy in the U.S.

## Key Points

- Builds on current terminology recommendations and concepts.
- Separates horses in recreation and sport from healthcare.
- Positions the *interaction* with the horse as a **therapy technique**.
- The horse or equine interaction is *not* an approach, modality, strategy, or intervention.
- Places use of therapy techniques in the context of 1) service (psychotherapy), 2) professional identity, 3) therapy approach or modality, 4) technique(s).
- The horse is not the technique, but the **interaction** can be skillfully applied by a competent and trained therapy provider, based on psychological theory and in service of the client's treatment goals.
- Promotes science-based understanding of horses in healthcare.

# Concept

*How to think about it*

# Terminology

*How to say it*





# Concept: Psychotherapy Incorporating Equine Interactions

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## 1. Professional Identity

E.g. Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor



## 2. Service

Psychotherapy / Clinical Counseling



## 3. Therapeutic Approach/Modality

E.g. Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy



## 4. Therapy Technique(s)

Equine Interaction

= Elements that arise from *interactions with horses*, skillfully provided by a trained and licensed MH practitioner



Ekholm Fry, 2021

# Terminology: Therapy Incorporating Equine Interactions

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Therapy-first language  
Profession-first language  
(not “equine-assisted...”)

Horses/equine interactions are incorporated *within*  
treatments or interventions  
(they are NOT a treatment or intervention)

## *Recommended optimal terminology for distinct services*

Therapy. Related to the broad area of therapy, licensed therapy professionals may incorporate horses in five distinct therapies: *counseling, occupational therapy, physical therapy, psychotherapy, and speech-language pathology* (Fig. 2). These licensed therapy professionals work within the scope of practice of their particular discipline. Best practice also dictates that these professionals obtain specialized training focused on incorporating interactions with horses, equine movement, or the equine environment into the individualized plans of care of those receiving therapy. These professionals incorporate horses within treatments or interventions to help address individualized goals, and improve overall function, health, and wellness. Depending on their particular therapy or approach, licensed therapy professionals may work with equine professionals or other assistants for risk management and other purposes.

Therapy-first language is recommended to refer to any one of the above-identified therapies. Such terminology always precisely identifies the exact therapy (e.g., *physical therapy, psychotherapy*). Equine-related descriptors that more precisely describe the therapy can then be added as appropriate in various contexts (e.g., *physical therapy using equine movement, psychotherapy incorporating horses, occupational therapy in an equine environment*).

Therapy-first language is recommended for several reasons. This language foregrounds the licensed therapy professionals who determine how best to implement particular therapies, while also acknowledging the potential of the horse to enhance therapeutic outcomes. After completing discipline-specific evaluations of patients or clients, these professionals develop optimal treatment plans for achieving established goals, and specify tools, strategies, or interventions that will be of greatest benefit, including how best to incorporate the horse. Therapy-first language accurately reflects that licensed therapy professionals have many different treatment options available to them given their respective disciplines, the incorporation of horses being just one.

Wood et al., 2021



# Terminology: Psychotherapy Incorporating Equine Interactions

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Examples:

Psychotherapy incorporating equine interactions  
(Therapy/service-first language)

A clinical psychologist who provides EMDR and includes  
interactions with horses  
(Profession-first language)

# Terminology: Psychotherapy Incorporating Equine Interactions

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Not updated:

We provide a number of services, including equine-assisted therapy.

Updated:

Our licensed clinicians are specialized in working with specific populations and client issues. They are all trained to also work outdoors and to include interactions with horses when appropriate during the process of psychotherapy.

# Terminology: Psychotherapy Incorporating Equine Interactions

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Example: How to respond

-Do you provide equine therapy? I have a teenager who needs it.

I provide psychotherapy and I am trained in a few different treatment approaches that have been helpful for teenagers with similar challenges. I am also trained in how to include horses in the therapy process, many find interacting with horses during treatment engaging and useful.

-I'm not looking for that, I'm looking for equine-assisted therapy, riding and such.

When interactions with horses are part of therapy, the treatment is provided by a licensed clinician who is following practice guidelines within their profession. Your teenager would receive psychotherapy, which is a healthcare service. There are also recreational activities with horses that can be helpful, or educational services that include horses, if that is something of interest?



# Summary

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- Healthcare providers are the most negatively impacted if terminology and concepts are not clear, accurate, and healthcare-aligned.
- Healthcare providers and the public do not benefit when recreational and non-clinical services are grouped together with treatment.
- Clear guidelines for understanding equine movement in OT/PT/SLP and equine interactions in psychotherapy/counseling exist: therapy technique or tool, therapy-first language (*not* “equine-assisted”).
- Label the equine role in accordance with the service provided (e.g., therapy horse **only** for therapy services, program horse for learning services, lesson horse for adaptive/therapeutic riding).
- Use the new terminology and conceptual guidelines in your professional communication, marketing, treatment planning and provision, and in engagement with healthcare processes, such as service coding and in health insurance reimbursement.