

Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International

STORIES

Vol. 26, No. 4 • Fall 2020

Ensuring Excellence and
Changing Lives Through
Equine-Assisted Services®



PATH
INTERNATIONAL

INSTRUCTOR AND MENTOR ISSUE

Becoming a PATH Intl. CTRI®

Mentoring Mastery

Stepping Up the Fun

To Clip or Not to Clip



Collaborating ➡ ➡ With Researchers

*By Meghan Morrissey,
Mary Acri, Dana Seag, Lauren
Seibel, Robin Peth-Pierce and
Kimberly Hoagwood*

A Case Example of How, When & Why

Equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT) are finally gaining the attention of the research community. Studies of how interactions with horses can benefit humans are growing in number. Understanding what exactly it is that makes these equine interactions therapeutic can help promote the benefits of EAAT to more participants, validate EAAT to insurers and health agencies, elevate the importance of instructors and equines and build awareness of the welfare of human and non-human animals alike.

However, working with researchers can be challenging and, at times, frustrating for instructors and centers because of the increased time commitment, unfamiliar expectations and the logistics of implementing research procedures into service settings. For many instructors, their role may already encompass administration, volunteer education



Preliminary study results indicate that parents reported a decrease in anxiety symptoms in their children after completing the Reining in Anxiety™ protocol while anecdotal evidence from instructors drew the same conclusions.



and fundraising. Research can add an extra layer to an instructor's multi-tasking skills. To help facilitate participation in research, this overview explains how instructors and their centers can successfully collaborate with researchers to discover what is happening in equine interactions and how to discern in measurable ways what participants are feeling and when during these interactions. This can get tricky very quickly, so close coordination and careful organization between researchers and equine center leadership is essential.

Instructors, as the experts in the field, are a critical force in assisting researchers in gathering data systematically to move beyond the anecdotal evidence that equine interactions can ameliorate mental health and enhance wellness. It is important for centers and their instructors to collaborate with researchers to better understand how and why equine interactions work and for whom they work best.

GallopNYC and New York University Collaboration

Collaborating on a research project usually involves a significant time commitment for all collaborators, but the yield can be great for participants, instructors, programs and the EAAT field at large. What follows is a toolbox for interdisciplinary

collaboration, outlining roles and responsibilities. Using the example of a pilot research study of the protocol Reining in Anxiety™, a partnership with GallopNYC and New York University, this toolbox can help instructors and administrators better understand the expectations, challenges and value of participating in academic research.

Like most relationships, luck and timing came into play with the Reining in Anxiety™ collaboration. The NYU research team came together through a mutual love of horses realized during a water cooler conversation. From there, networking within New York City solidified a match for collaborating with GallopNYC, a PATH Intl. Member Center with four locations, serving hundreds of participants per week across New York City.

Over the course of two years the NYU research team developed the Reining in Anxiety™ protocol with input from PATH Intl. instructors and GallopNYC administrative leadership. Reining in Anxiety™ is a 10-session manualized cognitive behavioral equine interaction intervention for youth with anxiety designed to be delivered by PATH Intl. Certified Instructors. Initial meetings involved administrators and researchers, who organized a plan for collaboration, including funding, recruitment and logistics. Once the contracts were signed and the stage was set, instructors partnered with researchers,

administrators, participants, volunteers and equines to conduct the study.

Instructors

The GallopNYC instructors who participated in the Reining in Anxiety™ study were expected to attend trainings in the intervention, facilitate the protocol, collect data and attend consultation sessions. To begin, instructors attended a four-day in-person training with a master's level licensed mental health clinician who was also a PATH Intl. Certified Instructor and co-developer of the Reining in Anxiety™ protocol. Instructors were provided session props, checklists and implementation supports, a favorite of which was a fanny pack with rubber bands, markers, index cards and other session specific supplies. Once the study session commenced, instructors received supervision via weekly and ad hoc phone consultation and random in-person fidelity checks where researchers observed sessions, which instructors reported finding helpful. Because instructors involved in research wore many hats at GallopNYC—which sometimes competed with research priorities—they appreciated the dedicated training and supervision time.

Aside from actually providing the services and facilitating the protocol, instructors also collected data after each session. Since GallopNYC already had existing

documentation requirements via an easily accessible online platform, instructors reported the additional data collection as minimal. Also, data collection/overall research collaboration was rated as not burdensome by instructors.

During this pilot study, the instructors also suggested improvements, which were integrated into the next iteration of the protocol manual, demonstrating the close collaboration between instructors and researchers. For example, the manual originally provided suggestions for horsemanship skills to be taught concurrently with concrete mental health skills, but instructors encouraged horsemanship skill development to be manualized

as well. Instructors also preferred certain sessions and skills, such as more relaxation exercises, and requested online versions of the homework journal, which was only provided in hardcopy during the pilot study. Another improvement that instructors suggested and that the NYU research team plans to develop is a train-the-trainer module to assist instructors in facilitating volunteer support specific to the research protocol.

Because the study used randomization to test the effectiveness of the Reining in Anxiety™ intervention, some instructors were designated to provide “services as usual” (i.e. regular GallopNYC therapeutic riding sessions) and did not initially receive the training. These instructors provided an extremely

valuable control group, which is necessary for rigorous research. However, after the data collection was completed, these instructors were able to receive full training on the Reining in Anxiety™ intervention.

Instructors reported significant gains from participating in research, citing the overall joy of adding value to the field of equine interactions, as well as benefiting their lessons. “As a PATH Intl. Certified Instructor interested in cognitive behavioral therapy, I was thrilled to be asked to partake in the study,” said Jenna Payne, who applied these techniques under the guidance of Meghan Morrissey, a licensed clinical social worker. “The training was very informative and fascinating. It was not only beneficial in conducting sessions for the study but also for my other therapeutic riding classes. I am also

Cognitive Behavior Techniques and Therapeutic Riding

By Juli Mosoff

Julie Mosoff, a PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor with GallopNYC, who participated in the Reining in Anxiety™ study collaboration with NYU, said, “I still use many of the techniques I learned during the course of the study in my therapeutic riding lessons and even in my daily life, even though the study is now complete. For example, I like to teach box breathing to all of my participants as a way to connect with their horse and regulate their breathing, an important skill when riding that many people—even myself—sometimes forget. I’ll try some of the other relaxation techniques taught in the manual that I’ve found to be successful if I have a participant who’s particularly nervous or upset one day. I have continued to use the feelings thermometer* and other visual aids we had on hand in our trusty fanny packs, which I still use. There are even particular parts of lesson plans I find come in handy when teaching all participants, such as focusing warm-up exercises on the four natural aids and using a board-game like set-up to review concepts learned throughout the semester in a fun and different way.

“The anxiety triggers that occurred with the participants I worked with ranged in severity, with some riders seeming to struggle with mild anxiety and others going through much harder times. When a participant’s journal entry early during the study revealed content that made her parents and our team worried for her safety, we acted early, conferring with the experts at NYU and the participant’s own doctor. The participant’s family and doctor worked with her on creating a ‘safety

forever grateful to have soaked this all in and made it a part of my life, as well. During the pandemic, I struggled with my own anxiety due to the terrifying conditions in our state. One thing that got me through was box breathing, especially when I would almost forget to breathe.” (Box breathing involves breathing in through the nose while counting to four slowly, then holding that breath for four seconds, slowly exhaling for four seconds, holding the breath out for four seconds and repeating the breathing sequence until calm returns.)

Her colleague, PATH Intl. Certified Instructor Juli Mosoff, concurred. “It was a great experience to partner with experts in psychology and learn techniques to work with participants who have anxiety and beyond,” said Mosoff. “Working through the 10-week instructor manual and making sure to hit upon the important CBT-related components allowed us the freedom to incorporate our

knowledge of horse care and horse riding during each lesson, so it really did feel like a collaboration between GallopNYC and the NYU team. Being able to bounce ideas off the other trained instructor allowed us both to come up with creative approaches to lesson plans, and we were a good support system for each other.”

For more on how Mosoff uses cognitive behavioral techniques learned in the study to complement her lessons, see “Cognitive Behavior Techniques and Therapeutic Riding” on page 38.

Administrators

Expectations of administrators in the Reining in Anxiety™ partnership included reviewing contracts, providing letters of support toward grant applications, distributing recruitment information and scheduling. Administrative staff screened prospective research participants and scheduled research sessions/make-up sessions. Some administrators were also trained on conducting fidelity checks.

Free continuing education training for instructors and overall consultation with a mental health professional were significant added-value for the overall organization. Also, NYU provided a nominal, non-contingent financial contribution to offset hidden costs.

Scheduling a variety of arena lessons, sessions and groups is already a challenge for administrators, but randomizing participants who are eager to participate in the program was even more of a feat. In fact, due to participants wanting to participate as soon as possible, many chose to drop out of the study if they were randomly assigned to the waitlist control group so they could have access to lessons sooner. This meant that participants who were originally scheduled for a study session had to be rescheduled into the general therapeutic riding program. Regarding make-up sessions, the protocol was originally an eight-week curriculum, but two sessions were added in order to match the GallopNYC traditional program semester. Future studies may consider shortening protocol dosage to ensure completion of the

Continued on page 41



plan’ she could keep on hand with resources to call in case of an emergency, with a copy given to me and my site manager.

“By the end of the study, the participant was able to identify and verbalize her anxiety triggers, had learned techniques she could continue to use in daily life to help and was a much more confident rider, too. We never had to use the safety plan, and she enjoyed the program so much that she continued to come back and volunteer throughout the summer. When summer ended, she gave me a pendant necklace with a hanging angel for her ‘guardian angel.’ Having the chance to really connect with and help make a difference in someone’s life is the greatest gift for a therapeutic riding instructor, and this was one of the happiest moments of my career.”

*Feeling thermometers enable participants to express their attitudes about a person, group or issue by applying a numeric rating of their feelings on an imaginary scale. Using a feeling thermometer, participants express their emotions in terms of degrees, with their attitudes corresponding to temperatures.

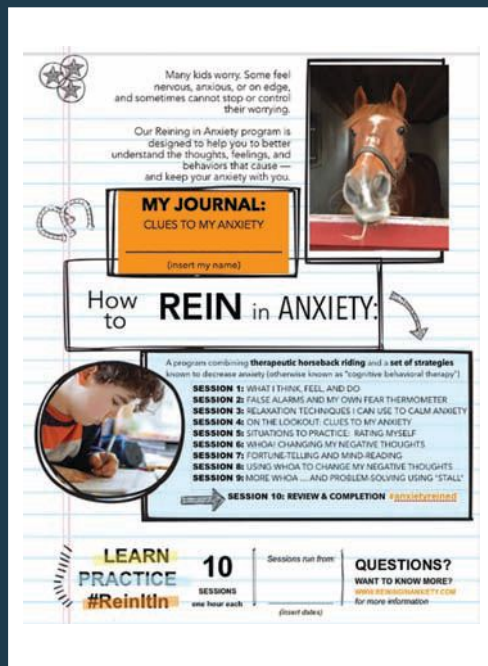
Reining In Anxiety™

Top: Instructors from GallopNYC worked with researchers to develop and then test the effectiveness of Reining in Anxiety™. Bottom: Instructors helped children who participated in Reining in Anxiety™ learn how to apply its cognitive behavioral concepts to alleviate anxiety over 10 sessions of equine-assisted learning.

Instructor Manual REINING IN ANXIETY™



A Cognitive-Behavioral,
Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy
Intervention for Anxiety in Youth



entire program or beginning the curriculum on a rolling basis as participants become available to attempt to reduce dropouts due to scheduling preferences.

Researchers

Researcher expectations began with writing grants to secure funding for the project, developing the methodology, recruitment, overseeing instructors' data collection procedures and collecting data directly from families. Additionally, the researcher needs to ensure that the protocol abides by research ethics and Institutional Review Board (IRB) standards. Finally, researchers analyze the data, write up the findings and publish results in order to contribute to the knowledge base and provide further guidance for future research.

In the Reining in Anxiety™ collaboration, administrators initially identified potential participants who met inclusion criteria. Researchers then contacted qualifying participants, described the study, obtained consent, enrolled them into the study and administered initial surveys to the parent/guardian. This collaboration unified the partnership, facilitated investment in the project and ensured that potential participants were appropriate for the study and recruitment goals were met.

Researchers also anticipated and addressed barriers to implementation of the study. In this study, GallopNYC faced the same challenges that all centers do, such as scheduling, inclement weather or lack of volunteers. In one example, an unexpected equine death led to rescheduling study sessions, and researchers, administrators and instructors worked together to remain flexible to the needs of participants in order to complete the curriculum.

Participants

Participants were expected to take part in the session, as randomly assigned, and complete all research forms or surveys. In the Reining in Anxiety™ collaboration, children ages 6-17 and their parents/guardians participated in sessions. The parents/guardians also completed requested surveys at the beginning and end of the 10-week session, for which they received nominal gift cards. The Reining in Anxiety™ collaboration did not collect data directly from the child. Challenges for participants included general access to facilities in an urban setting, scheduling and the financial burden of sessions. Participants paid the same amount for services as usual and research sessions, but neither were specifically subsidized. GallopNYC offers financial aid to all, so some research participants did end up receiving financial relief.

Volunteers

Expectations of volunteers included overall support during the sessions. Volunteers are the backbone of therapeutic equine interactions, offering physical and emotional support to humans and equines. While volunteers may not have specific training in mental health, many are very interested in being as helpful as possible and they provide critical support so instructors can focus on intervention delivery. Thus, volunteers once trained by instructors on the goals and objectives of each session can start to understand the therapeutic framework of cognitive behavioral therapy, which can benefit those inside and outside the arena.

Equines

Expectations for equines participating in the research

session included being experienced therapeutic riding horses, who naturally facilitated the horse-human bond. This collaborative study incorporated both PATH Intl. Center equine welfare standards and adhered to all federally mandated IRB ethical guidelines. Future research collaborations aim to track not only child and caregiver mental wellness goals, but also equine welfare objectives (e.g. the impact of the session on the equine).

The Benefits

As a low-cost, medium-effort, high-reward interdisciplinary collaboration, this type of research study offers a partnership model for centers and research facilities to share curiosity and scholarship while moving forward in the field of human-animal interaction. Preliminary results indicate that parents reported a decrease in anxiety symptoms in their children after completing the Reining in Anxiety™ protocol. While final results are still being tabulated, this anecdotal experience of one GallopNYC instructor's work with one little girl shows how participants may benefit.

"One session I found tremendously useful was session three, focusing on relaxation techniques which had a lasting effect on one little girl's everyday life," said Payne. "Initially, she was full of anxiety and extremely nervous while riding her horse. She needed a sidewalker to reassure her that everything would be fine. As she continued riding, she found comfort in using relaxation techniques to ground herself and lower her anxiety, both in and out of the arena. Each week, we would review journal entries pertaining to the prior week's session, and she would always state that box

breathing, or deep breathing, aided in calming her down when things got rough. By mid-session, she was riding with just a lead walker and trotting away, something she was terribly afraid of and refused to do in the beginning.

“Her mom was eternally grateful for the progress her daughter made and attributed it to her being a participant in the Reining in Anxiety™ sessions. As a single mother who often didn’t have the time and resources for her three children to partake in new activities, she was ecstatic she found an activity her daughter grew to love and wanted to continue afterwards. Her daughter was able to shine on her own, without her siblings, through the kind and gentle ways of the horses and the cognitive behavioral therapy used to enable her to cope with her anxiety.”

To learn more about Reining in Anxiety™ or if you have questions on networking with academia, feel free to contact Meghan Morrissey at Meghan.Morrissey@nyulangone.org.

Meghan Morrissey is a licensed clinical social worker, a licensed addiction counselor and a PATH Intl. Certified Riding Instructor working at Miracles Therapeutic Riding Center in Lafayette, CO. She is also a clinical instructor with the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at NYU Grossman School of Medicine, NYU Langone Health and co-creator of the Reining in Anxiety™ protocol. She completed her post-master’s certificate in equine-assisted mental health at the University of Denver. She was also recently elected to serve on the board of the Human-Animal Interaction section of American Psychological Association’s, IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access) committee. She has a background in working with children and adolescents, neurodiversity, forensics

and crisis work. She can be reached at Meghan.Morrissey@nyulangone.org or www.meghanmorrissey.com.

The NYU research team is led by principal investigator Kimberly

Hoagwood, PhD; co-investigators Sarah Horwitz, PhD; Mary Acri, PhD; trainer Meghan Morrissey, LCSW; and study coordinators Dana Seag and Lauren Seibel. For more information, go to <https://www.reininganxiety.com>.



Check out our new online courses for disability CEU’s!



Strides to Success

Offering professional development and training in Equine Assisted Learning and Therapy!



Professional Development

- Onsite workshops.
- Online CEU approved courses.
- Custom workshops at your site.





Professional Training

- Affordable week-long immersion experiences.
- An intensive competency based EAL Facilitator training program.



Evidence Based Resources and Consulting

- Evidence-based curricula for schools, literacy, activities and more!
- Consulting by professionals with over 10,000hrs of experience!
- HorseWork Institute to help evaluate and research equine assisted learning and therapy.



Visit our website for details
www.stridestosuccess.org