



GALLIPOLI  
MEDICAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Remembrance through research

# BACKING THE RIGHT HORSE

**NEW EVIDENCE BEHIND EQUINE-ASSISTED  
THERAPY FOR VETERANS**



## New research undertaken by the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation has put equine-assisted therapy for veterans under the microscope.

**AS** understanding of the psychological toll of military service has increased, so too has the range of support services on offer for veterans and their families.

Recovery can come in many forms. Animals such as dogs and horses are now playing an important role in the healing process for many veterans.

Equine-assisted interventions have steadily gained popularity in recent years, with now more than 600 programs worldwide for people with a broad range of psychological and physical health conditions.

However, research is limited when it comes to evidence on the effectiveness of these programs. Past research on equine-assisted therapy has predominantly focused on children and adolescents. Investigation into the outcomes of equine-assisted therapy for military veterans is extremely limited.

The Veteran Mental Health Initiative (VMHI) team at Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation (GMRF) identified this gap in knowledge and has taken steps to rectify it. Thanks to the support of RSL Queensland, in 2016 Dr Madeline Romaniuk and her team conducted an evaluation study into the equine-assisted therapy program (developed by Equine Encounters Australia) offered to veterans via Mates4Mates.

“Evaluation of support programs is extremely important,” Dr Romaniuk says. “It gives veterans and their families confidence that the services they’re participating in are actually going to be beneficial in aiding recovery.”

### EQUINE-ASSISTED THERAPY EXPLAINED

Equine-assisted therapy isn’t about going for a ride on a horse, in fact the

program involves no horse riding at all. It is a structured intervention that incorporates and links the experience of activities with horses, such as grooming and handling, within a clinical therapy framework.

Horses are sensitive to human emotion and responses and – like many other animals – are accepting of human behaviours, offering non-judgmental interactions. The interactions between a person and a horse can elicit thoughts, emotions and behavioural responses in both the person and the horse.

For example, a horse will often behave differently with a stressed person than with a calm person. These animal/human interactions can

be explored and discussed in group sessions with trained facilitators during the program.

### THE PROGRAMS REVIEWED

The equine-assisted therapy programs reviewed by GMRF researchers were run in 2016 over a five-day period. Both individual and couples programs were evaluated.

“A key element of GMRF’s evaluation was to compare outcomes of the programs in which the veteran participated alone with those that involved partners, as there is no data globally on this,” Dr Romaniuk says.

The couples program included the same therapeutic activities as the individual program, with additional couples dates and couples counselling to improve communication skills, build trust and respect, and develop shared and individual future goals.

### WHAT WE ALREADY KNEW

There is growing evidence on the benefit of equine programs. Previous

**“HORSES ARE SENSITIVE TO HUMAN EMOTION AND RESPONSES AND – LIKE MANY OTHER ANIMALS – ARE ACCEPTING OF HUMAN BEHAVIOURS, OFFERING NON-JUDGMENTAL INTERACTIONS.”**



research on these programs in non-veteran populations reported findings such as:

- Reduced anxiety and depression symptoms
- Reduced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms
- Elevated self-esteem and self-awareness
- Improved communication and trust
- Increased overall wellbeing

#### WHAT WE LEARNT

GMRF researchers assessed people in the veterans-only and the veteran-plus-partner groups before the program, immediately after completion, and three months after completing the program.

As well as including partners, this study also sought to address another gap in the current literature. That is, whether the progress made during an equine therapy course maintains over an extended period of time. While benefits have been reported immediately after a program, it remained to be seen if this benefit was lasting. Our results were significant.

There was a significant decrease in depression, anxiety, stress and PTSD symptoms for veterans who participated in the veteran-only program. There was also a significant increase in their self-reported quality of life and happiness.

**“OUR RESULTS INDICATE PARTNER INVOLVEMENT IS A VITAL ELEMENT IN DELIVERING MEANINGFUL BENEFITS FOR EQUINE-ASSISTED THERAPY IN TERMS OF THE REDUCTION OF DEPRESSION, STRESS AND PTSD SYMPTOMS.”**





In the three-month follow-up evaluations, all measures, except anxiety, returned to the levels reported before the start of the program, demonstrating the benefits had not lasted.

For the couples participating in the program, the symptoms of depression, stress and PTSD significantly reduced by the conclusion of the program, and this reduction remained three months later. There was also a gradual reduction in anxiety symptoms from pre-intervention, resulting in a significant reduction by the three-month follow-up.

“As the couples program includes involvement from the veteran’s partner, this provides the opportunity to practise and reinforce the coping strategies developed during the program after it ends,” Dr Romaniuk says.

### WHAT THIS RESEARCH MEANS FOR VETERANS

The results of our researchers’ findings have recently been published and highlighted some important considerations for equine-assisted therapy programs with veterans.

Our results indicate partner involvement is a vital element in delivering meaningful benefits for

equine-assisted therapy in terms of the reduction of depression, stress and PTSD symptoms.

“While this is not to say there is no benefit in veterans participating in these programs alone, it is clear the value can be more profound and lasting with the partner involved,” Dr Romaniuk says.

“This tells us it is important for those veterans who complete the program alone to seek out ongoing therapy after the program ends so they have the opportunity to practise and reinforce the coping strategies they learned.”

These findings reinforce our understanding that psychological assistance isn’t limited to traditional avenues. Adjunct therapies such as equine-assisted therapies have a legitimate place in offering needed help.

While more research in this space is required, the results from GMRF’s evaluations of veteran support programs, such as equine-assisted therapy, indicates an encouraging trend. There is an increasing range of evidence-based avenues available to help our veterans heal from the psychological toll of their service.

### RESEARCH THAT TRANSLATES TO BETTER OUTCOMES

This study is part of GMRF’s commitment to further understanding the issues facing veterans and enhancing the impact of current and future treatment options.

The purpose of GMRF’s research has always been the translational benefits for our veterans and their families, and this will never change. We strongly believe medical research is vital to understanding and improving current practices. We want veterans and their families to get the support they deserve. You can find out more about our range of research projects at [www.gallipoliresearch.com.au](http://www.gallipoliresearch.com.au).

*This study was made possible by the support of RSL Queensland.* ←



## ABOUT EQUINE ENCOUNTERS AUSTRALIA

The Veteran Mental Health Initiative’s evaluation of equine-assisted therapy was conducted on programs run by Equine Encounters Australia, offered to veterans through Mates4Mates. Managing Director Brenda Tanner founded Equine Encounters Australia to support people through challenging periods of their lives and share her love of horses.

Equine Encounters Australia Trauma Support Programs have been specifically designed to support military and first responder personnel who have experienced trauma during their careers and are now struggling with day-to-day life. It offers programs for individuals, couples and family members, as PTSD doesn’t just affect the individual.

The programs have been designed to gradually move participants outside the psychological boundaries that have been created by PTSD, anxiety and depression. Through carefully facilitated interactions with the horses, participants learn to recognise their destructive thought patterns and behaviours and then, with the support of highly qualified facilitators, they learn to develop new and more positive approaches. Helping participants to slow down, learn to be in the moment (leaving their story in the past) and recognise subtle cues allows them to make better choices in the challenges of everyday life.

Much positive feedback on the life-changing impact of the program has been received. For example, a participant recently said: “Through working with the horses, I became aware that I am able to calm myself and be in the moment – my horse helped me to learn how to do this.”

