

Therapeutic riding programs help veterans cope with PTSD, study finds

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Rebecca Johnson and her team determined that veterans had a significant decrease in PTSD scores just weeks after THR. Results show that therapeutic horseback riding may be a clinically effective intervention for alleviating PTSD symptoms in military veterans. Credit: MU College of Veterinary Medicine

In the United States, military veterans diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) often are prescribed therapeutic horseback riding (THR) as a complementary therapy, but little is known about how these programs affect PTSD in military veterans. Now, a University of Missouri study has determined that veterans had a significant decrease in PTSD scores just weeks after THR. Results show that therapeutic horseback riding may be a clinically effective intervention for alleviating PTSD symptoms in military veterans.

"PTSD is an anxiety disorder that occurs after exposure to life-threatening events or injuries and is marked by flashbacks, avoidance, and changes in beliefs and feelings," said Rebecca Johnson, a professor in the MU College of Veterinary Medicine and the Millsap Professor of Gerontological Nursing in the Sinclair School of Nursing. "Estimates are that more than 23 million [military veterans](#) experience PTSD symptoms each year. While counseling and behavior therapies often are prescribed, sometimes clinicians will encourage complementary therapies, such as therapeutic horseback riding. We wanted to test whether THR could be a useful [complementary therapy](#) in the treatment of PTSD."

The interaction between horses and riders has been demonstrated to increase riders' confidence, self-esteem, sensory sensitivity and social motivation while decreasing stress. For the study, 29 military veterans were assessed for eligibility from a nearby Veterans Administration (VA) hospital. Those diagnosed with PTSD or PTSD with traumatic brain injury were invited to participate in a therapeutic horseback riding program once a week for six weeks.

PTSD symptoms then were measured both at three weeks and six weeks into the program using the PTSD Checklist-Military Version (PCL-M) assessment, a 20-item self-reporting survey that is used by clinicians to gauge PTSD symptoms. Additionally, other measurement instruments were used to assess improvements made in the treatment of the anxiety

disorders.

"Results showed that participants in the program experienced a significant decrease in PTSD scores, almost 67 percent, after just three weeks of THR," Johnson said. "After six weeks, participants experienced an 87 percent drop in PTSD scores. Interestingly, the veterans who self-identified for the study all were from the Vietnam War era meaning that some of these military veterans had been experiencing PTSD symptoms for 40 or 50 years. It may be important for health care systems to support THR as a viable complimentary therapy."

The article, "Effects of therapeutic horseback riding on [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) in military veterans," was published in *Military Medical Research*.

More information: Rebecca A. Johnson et al. Effects of therapeutic horseback riding on post-traumatic stress disorder in military veterans, *Military Medical Research* (2018). [DOI: 10.1186/s40779-018-0149-6](https://doi.org/10.1186/s40779-018-0149-6)

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