

Awareness on Equine Therapy amongst Horse Riders

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ABSTRACT

Equine therapy refers to the use of equine-assisted activities to improve mental and physical well-being and therefore help individuals manage mental and/or physical disorders. Past literature explores the use of equine therapy in improving overall prosocial behaviour, mood, awareness, and self-esteem, especially in treating disorders including stress disorders, eating disorders, substance-use disorders, autism spectrum disorder, and cerebral palsy. However, there is a lack of research on awareness regarding equine therapy. Therefore, the present study aims to understand the awareness of equine therapy amongst professional and amateur horse riders in India. A self-constructed survey was carried out amongst 26 respondents of an age group of primarily 8 to 16-year-olds, whose horse riding experience ranges from approximately less than 1 year to around 4 years. Survey responses showed a mean awareness score of 28.92 (wherein maximum possible score = 40), showing that participants were aware of the term. However, it was seen that 38.46 percent of respondents reported that they had not heard of equine therapy prior to the survey, and follow-up questions showed inaccuracy in their belief of what equine therapy is, even if they had heard the term before. Therefore, despite the sample's association with equine-related activity, they remain unaware of what exactly equine therapy is. Understanding the variety of benefits associated with equine therapy can allow individuals to better understand its importance and relevance, improving awareness for this effective line of treatment and giving reason to bolster attempts to make equine therapy more accessible/viable to all who may benefit.

Keywords: *Equine Therapy, Equine-Assisted Therapy, Equine-Assisted Services, Mental Health, Equitation, Horse Riders*

Patients worldwide suffer from particular mental and physical conditions and greatly affect their day-to-day functioning. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that the load of issues of mental health in individuals in India is 2443 disability-adjusted life years per 10,000 population. WHO states that the age-adjusted suicide rate per 1,00,000 of the Indian population is 21.1. Economic loss as a result of mental health conditions is approximated at around 1.03 trillion United States Dollars (USD). It is evident that mental health conditions can cause difficulties in every aspect of an individual's life and their social relationships, and greatly impact their quality of life, leading to issues in work/school life (*Mental Health*, n.d.). These conditions have their own distinct methods of treatment, in the form of certain medications or mental or physical forms of therapy.

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Psychotherapy refers to treatments used to help individuals identify troubling emotions, thoughts, and behaviours, and alter these behaviours positively. (*Psychotherapies*, n.d.). Equine therapy is one form of doing so, and is therefore a form of animal-assisted psychotherapy. Equine therapy is the use of equine-assisted activities and equine contact in order to improve mental and/or physical well-being and to treat mental and/or physical disorders in human beings. Equine therapy and animal-assisted therapies have become a sound field in recent decades as more evidence is revealed that confirms its positive effects on human health (Fine et al., 2019), as well as studies that make clear the neurological effects of animal assisted activity and its benefits, such as Pendry et al. This study provides further evidence on the same.

Equine therapy can help improve overall prosocial behaviour, mood, awareness, self-esteem, etc., as well as in treating disorders including stress disorders, eating disorders, substance-use disorders, autism spectrum disorder, and cerebral palsy (Pelyva et al. (2020), White-Lewis (2019), Fennig et al. (2022), Souilm (2023), Sissons et al. (2022), Ahn et al. (2021)). Further psychological and social effects on patients have shown improvements in patient confidence in themselves, feelings of presence, feelings of independence, and feelings of competence — as described in Tan and Simmonds (2017) — helping settle patients through equine-human interactions that been shown in studies such as Pendry et al. (2018). to show higher reports of positive emotion as a result of interaction with horses in controlled settings provided that the practitioner is well-trained (Pendry et al., 2018). At the same time, individual equine therapy may cost approximately USD 60 per hour and group sessions may go up to approximately USD 30–40 for one participant per hour (*Equine Facilitated Awareness Programs Offered at Motion for Life*, n.d.). In addition, equine therapy practitioners have been seen to be currently or previously involved in additional equitation-related professions. However, practitioners have not always been found to necessarily have formal equine-related education, despite their background, especially in terms of training horses and acclimatising them to their new role in equine-assisted therapy (Seery & Wells, 2024), which is a shortcoming of the process. It is therefore true that more work needs to be done in terms of making equine assisted therapy more available and accessible to the general public as well as providing effective forms of formal training to potential practitioners in order for it to be a viable form of treatment.

Prior research, including the work of Pelyva et al. (2020), Fennig et al. (2022), and further studies, has provided insight into prior use of equine therapy and its benefits. Using this work, a more comprehensive understanding of equine therapy and its effects on individuals can be gained, along with an understanding of their particular traits and disorders. Understanding the benefits of equine therapy can improve awareness for this effective line of treatment and encourage the process of making it more accessible. However, in India, there are not many studies exploring this form of treatment. Thus, this research aims to understand the awareness of equine therapy amongst professional and amateur horse riders in India.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

The aim of the study is to understand the awareness of equine therapy amongst professional and amateur horse riders in India.

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Research Design and Sample

This study involved a quantitative survey approach used amongst 26 respondents of an age group of primarily 8 to 16-year-olds from middle to upper-class families, who's horse riding experience ranges from approximately less than 1 year to around 4 years. Participants were acquired through purposive and snowball sampling. The participants were mostly from the cities Mumbai and Pune in India. However, participants were also from other parts of India or abroad (e.g. Singapore).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Gender	
Male	13
Female	13
Highest educational qualification?	
?	5
Elementary	3
Middle school	7
Highschool	4
Undergraduate	6
Post-graduate/Masters	1
Occupation/Job	
NA	2
Student	17
Self-employed	2
Equestrian	2
Service	1
Airline	1
Pilot	1
Age range	
Below the age of 8 years	0
08–12 years	9
13–16 years	9
17–20 years	1
21–30 years	2
31–40 years	2
41–50 years	3
Above the age of 50 years	0
For how many years have you been riding?	
Less than 1 year	7
1–2 years	7
3–4 years	6
5–6 years	2
7–8 years	1
9–10 years	0
11–15 years	1
15–20 years	1
More than 20 years	1

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Ethical considerations

Informed consent was taken from the participants prior to the study, personal information of the participants was removed during data processing, and anonymity and confidentiality for all participants was maintained. Participants were not deceived in any way, nor placed under any undue stress or harm. Participants were permitted to withdraw themselves and their data with no repercussions at any point during the study, and were informed accordingly.

Tools Used

Data was collected through an online self-constructed survey of 24 questions and processed using spreadsheet and graphing software. Demographic questions including the participants' gender, highest educational qualification, occupation/job, age range (beginning at lower than 8 years old, in intervals, ending at over 50 years old), and the number of years they had been riding (beginning at less than 1 year, in intervals, ending at over 20 years). Participants were asked whether or not they knew the term 'equine therapy' and if yes, to explain what they thought the term meant. If they didn't know the term, they were given a free response space to say what they thought the term could mean. Participants were also asked to rate their confidence in their understanding of the term 'equine therapy' on a 5-point scale (1 – Least confident, 5 – Most confident). A brief was provided to inform participants about equine therapy. Certain questions were reverse scored, such that the mean of these scores would represent understanding of equine therapy. Finally, two qualitative, free-response questions were asked about how participants personally feel when in contact with horses.

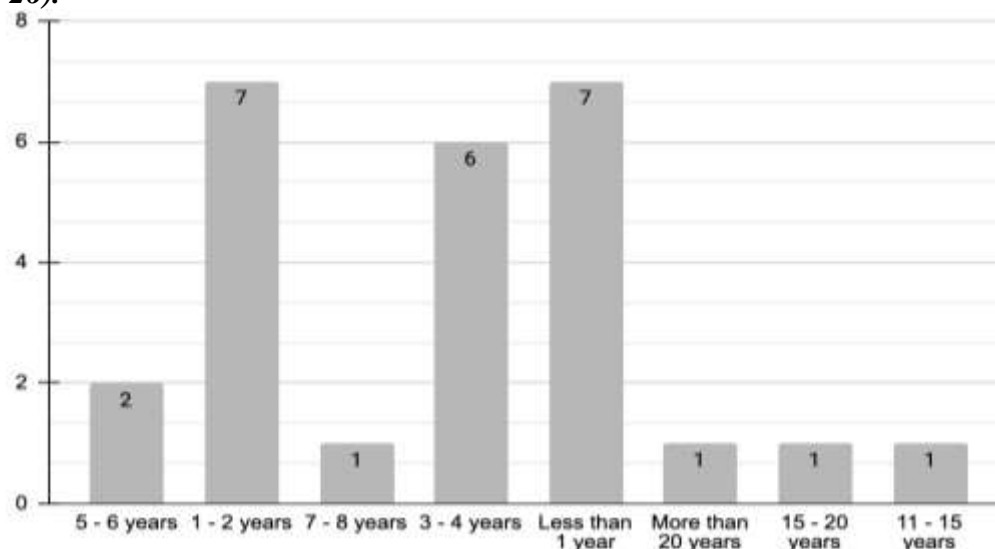
Data Collection Procedure

The initial sample was obtained by reaching out to Japaloupe Equestrian Centre, a youth riding school. Data collection consisted of an online questionnaire that participants were free to complete in their own time. Participants filled the survey only once. Some participants recruited others by sending them the online survey.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The section includes graphical representations of collected data, and statistical analysis of the participants' responses. Furthermore, it consists of inferences and interpretation derived from the data.

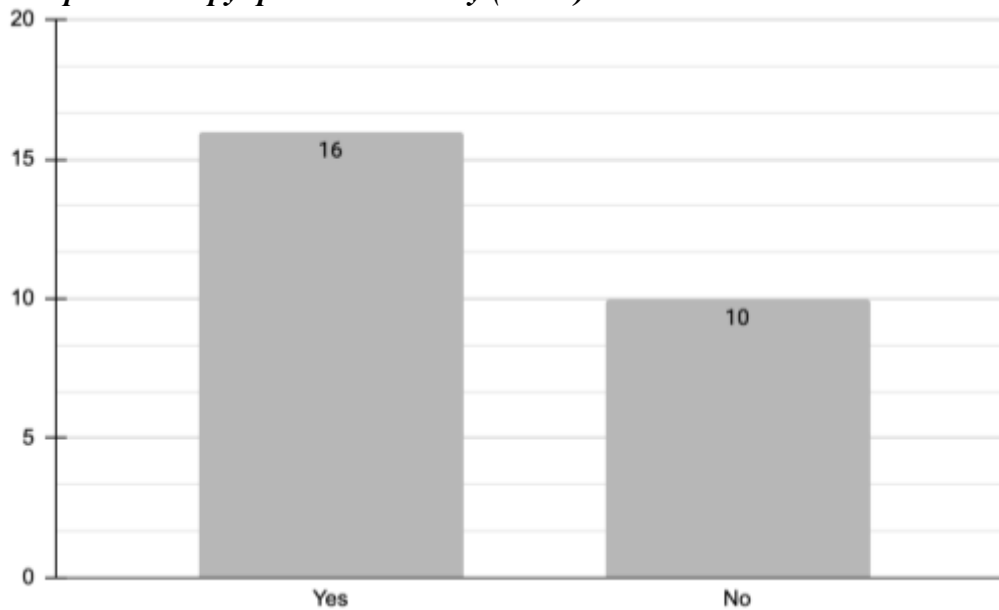
Figure 1: Graphical representation of participants' self-reported horse riding experience (N=26).



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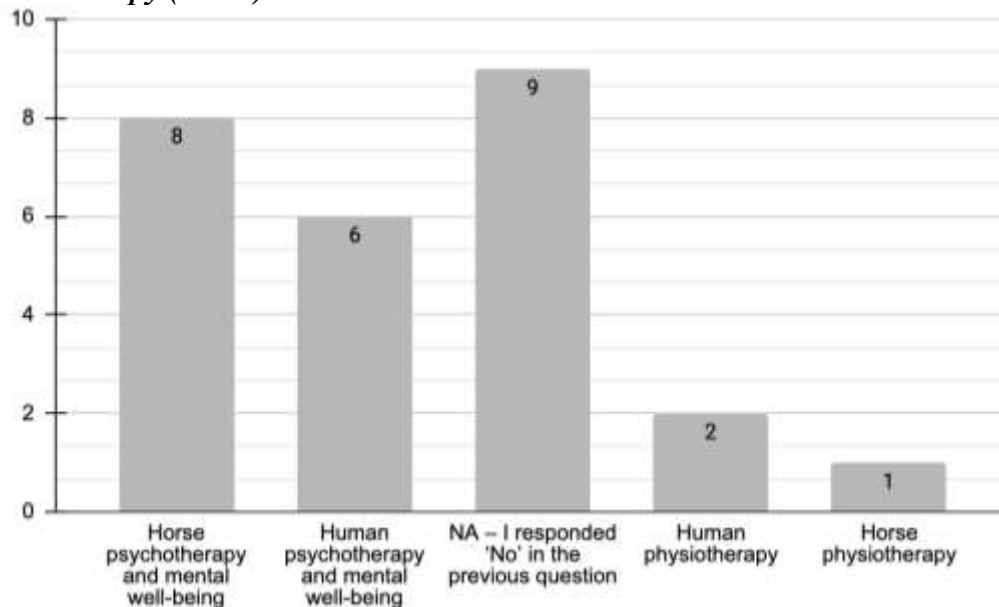
In Figure 1, 26.9% (7) participants have less than 1 year of riding experience, and 26.9% (7) participants have 1–2 years of riding experience. 23.1% (6) participants have 3–4 years of experience. 23.1% (6) participants have over 5 years of experience.

Figure 2: Graphical representation of the number of participants who had heard of the term ‘equine therapy’ prior to the study (N=26).



In Figure 2, approximately 61.5% (16) participants had heard of the term, and ~38.5% (10) participants had not heard of the term.

Figure 3: Graphical representation of what participants believed to be the purpose of equine therapy (N=26).



This question was precluded by the question “Have you heard of equine therapy before?”, to which if participants responded “No”, they asked to select “NA – I responded ‘No’ in the previous question”. This was done in order to gauge the understanding of the term ‘equine therapy’ of participants who had heard of equine therapy prior to the study. Figure 3 depicts

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that 30.8% (8) believed that the purpose of equine therapy was horse psychotherapy and mental well-being, 23.1% (6) participants believed that the purpose of equine therapy was human psychotherapy and mental well-being, 7.69% (2) participants believed that the purpose of equine therapy was human physiotherapy, and 3.85% (1) participant believed that the purpose of equine therapy was horse physiotherapy. 34.% (9) participants responded with “NA – I responded ‘No’ in the previous question”.

Table 2: Independent t-test analysis among male and female horse riders on their awareness towards equine therapy (N=26)

	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	p
Female	13	28.1	5.0	-0.9	0.36
Male	13	29.7	4.5		

Table 2 depicts an independent t-test analysis among males and females. No significant differences found among female horse riders (M=28.1, SD=5.0) and male horse riders (M=29.7, SD= 4.5), $t(26) = -0.9$, $p > 0.05$.

Table 3: Kruskal-Wallis analysis amongst respondents based on respondent horse riding experience (N=26)

Groups	n	Median	Mean Rank	X²	p
Less than 1 year	7	30	15.86	4.22	.239
1 - 2 years	7	25	10		
3 - 4 years	6	32	17.25		
More than 4 years	6	28.5	11.08		
Total	26	30			

Table 3 depicts a Kuskal-Wallis analysis indicating that there is no significant difference across 4 groups based on horse riding experience, $X^2(26) = 4.22$, $p > 0.05$.

Table 4: Post-HOC comparisons in the responses based on respondent horse riding experience (N=26).

	Test Statistic	Std. Error	p
Less than 1 year - 1 - 2 years	5.86	4.07	.15
Less than 1 year - 3 - 4 years	-1.39	4.23	.742
Less than 1 year - more than 4 years	4.77	4.23	.259
1 - 2 years - 3 - 4 years	-7.25	4.23	.087
1 - 2 years - more than 4 years	-1.08	4.23	.798
3 - 4 years - more than 4 years	6.17	4.39	.16

Adj. p: Values adjusted with Bonferroni correction.

Post-HOC comparisons using Bonferroni correction indicated that participants with 3–4 years of horse riding experience showed a higher median of 32 as compared to participants with 1–2 years of experience. However, no significant difference was found between other participant groups ($p > 0.5$). (Table 4)

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Table 5: Qualitative Analysis of the Responses (N=26)

Codes	Sample Response(s)
Feelings of calmness, happiness, ease	<i>yes because i feel it adds meaning to my life and also gives me a reason to wake up everyday. i find friends in the horses and i think i benefit from their love and silent affection and it eases me mentally and emotionally as a person</i>
	<i>When contact with horses I feel calm. I love being with horses because I feel they understand and feel with me. The horses reduce my stress.</i>
Mental and emotional ease and physical fitness	<i>It creates an emotional bond with another creature other than human while also providing exercise to possibly increase dopamine release</i>
	<i>It improves well being by reducing stress, improving fitness, etc.</i>
Connecting with animals	<i>Yes it does. Because there is a connection with the horses specially and animals in general. It makes me want to go again and again because horses are lovely animals.</i>
	<i>I enjoy being around horses as they are very beautiful animals that can become very loyal companions as long as a rider-horse relationship is established</i>
Enjoys being around animals	<i>I feel happy around a friendly horse as I feel animals in general make me feel relaxed and happy.</i>
	<i>I always enjoy being around not only horses but all animals . I have always been a huge animal lover at a very young age</i>
Long-term impact on personality	<i>Yes, it has helped me to get the sense for responsibility while also allowing me to understand how different horses can react.</i>
	<i>I've lived my life with horses, they have taught me everything I know</i>
	<i>I love being around horses because I feel they have changed me for the better.</i>
“Humanising” horses	<i>I enjoy the feeling because horses also have feelings and emotions just like us and sometimes being around them makes u happy</i>
	<i>I love being around with horses that give positive vibes</i>
Sense of adventure	<i>Yes. Gives me an adrenaline rush. I love the speed and the fast pace.</i>
	<i>I feel a great sense of adventure.</i>

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In this study, the majority of the participants are young, and have not been riding for many years — more specifically, 26 respondents of an age group of primarily 8 to 16-year-olds, whose horse riding experience ranges from approximately less than 1 year to around 4 years. Many participants claimed to have heard of the term “equine therapy”, seen in how survey responses showed a mean awareness score of 28.92 (wherein a maximum possible score = 40), showing that participants were aware of the term. 38.46 percent of respondents reported that they had not heard of equine therapy prior to the survey. However, follow-up questions showed inaccuracy in their belief of what equine therapy is, and therefore a false understanding of the term ‘equine therapy’ even if they had heard the term before. As seen in Figure 3, most participants who responded to the follow up seemed to believe that it was centrally related to the psychotherapy and physiotherapy of horses, and not human beings. As a primarily young group, it is possible that participants had only heard the term in passing from an adult or professional, and inferred a false understanding of the term based on their own schemas and a bit of context they were provided at the time. Therefore, it becomes clear that despite the sample’s association with equine-related activity, they seemed to remain unaware of what exactly equine therapy is.

Despite the sample’s lack of awareness on what equine therapy is and how it works, the natural effects of horse-human interaction are reflected in the majority of the participants in a primarily positive way. In the two qualitative response questions, participants claim to have felt feelings of calmness, joy, and ease around horses, and they believe that contact with horses has improved their own feelings of responsibility, showing positive long-term effects in their personalities and behaviour. Participants have also seen positive changes in their own physical health as a result of riding. Most respondents enjoy spending time with animals, some often specific to horses, as a result. In addition, many participants “humanise” horses and animals, which shows how horse-human interaction has enhanced their own ability to draw true emotional connections with other living beings and improve their ability to empathise with others. This is backed by Pelyva et al. (2020), which is a study that aimed confirm the hypothesis that equine-assisted activities correlate with positive behavioural traits, and found that equine students had fewer emotional and behaviour problems in comparison, and that the prosocial behaviour of equine students is approximately four times better than that of the control group of the study. It was seen that the equine students — who had all had regular contact with horses — had fewer behavioural problems upon entering the study, and the rate of decline in their behavioural issues is more significant than in the control group. (Anastasya et al. (2024), Pelyva et al. (2020), White-Lewis (2019))

Understanding the variety of benefits associated with equine therapy can allow individuals to better understand its importance and relevance. Improving awareness for this effective line of treatment will bolster attempts to make equine therapy more accessible/viable to all who may benefit. Thus, further steps must be taken to improve awareness of this form of treatment.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to understand the awareness of equine therapy amongst professional and amateur horse riders in India. Results showed participants were generally unaware of what exactly equine therapy is and its benefits to human beings, despite their close association with horses and despite many having heard the term before. This unawareness was unaffected by participant demographics such as gender and horse riding experience. At the same time, follow-up questions in relation to participant’s own thoughts and feelings with in contact with horses showed that participants were, in fact, experiencing

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the benefits of equine-assisted therapy unknowingly; participants reported feelings of calmness, joy, mental and emotional ease, confidence in the way they seek out adventure, responsibility, and a sense of a “bond” between themselves and the horse, showing us how they are able to better empathise and connect with other living beings. Participants also reported feeling physically stronger and healthier.

By gaining a better understanding of the benefits of equine-assisted therapy as well as proper awareness on this form of treatment or as a way to improve overall well-being, equine therapy may be implemented on a wider scale and used to treat particular symptoms or disorders in a more targeted manner. Steps must be taken to improve awareness of this form of treatment to allow it to become more accessible and therefore more viable to the general public. However, equine-assisted therapy at present is not an accessible form of therapy. Most people living out in metropolitan areas, for example, cannot frequently visit centres or schools with horses. In addition, equine therapy has proven an expensive form of treatment. This study had a relatively small sample size. The data collected was self-reported by participants, so there is a possibility of participant bias in the responses. In addition, central tendency in point scale ratings were not accounted for, which may have affected the results of the study.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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