

HORSES HEALING THE WOUNDED WARRIOR: A QUALITATIVE
INQUIRY OF EQUINE-FACILITATED PSYCHOTHERAPY IN TREATING
POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER FOR FEMALE VETERANS

by

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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FOR FEMALE VETERANS by Rebecca R. Wara-Goss, and that in my opinion
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ABSTRACT

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a major concern for military veterans in the United States and current research on women's experiences in the military and the effects of their postmilitary PTSD are limited. Currently, there are a variety of evidence-based and alternative treatment options for veterans with PTSD, and one alternative treatment option includes equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP). EFP is a form of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) that integrates the human-animal bond as part of treatment and recovery. The purpose of this exploratory study was to explore in-depth experiences of the horse-human relationship in EFP with female veterans to elucidate how the horse-human relationship may assist in reducing impacts of PTSD. The research question was, "What is the lived experience of EFP in female veterans with PTSD?" The research was designed as an exploratory qualitative inquiry study that utilized semi-structured interviews with 10 female veterans. The findings from this study included six theme groupings with a total of thirty-three themes found. The most significant themes common to five or more participants included: *Emotional discomfort with the horse*, *Spiritual experience with the horse*, *Experience of safety with the horse*, *Visual contact with the horse*, *Emotional connection with the horse*, *Beneficial impact of therapy*, *Increased connection with others*, *Reduced anxiety*, *Reduced withdrawal*, *EFP advocacy for others*, and *Delayed awareness of PTSD*. Through exploring the nature of the human-animal bond in EFP, this research revealed invaluable insights into the potential healing power of horses and alternative mental health treatment options and served to honor women's experiences in the military. In addition, this qualitative study provided an

opportunity to gather rich detail and general information as to the effects of EFP for sufferers of PTSD.

Keywords: Alternative posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) treatment options, animal-assisted therapy (AAT), equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP), female veterans, horse-human connection, human-animal bond (HAB), interconnectivity, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) treatment options, transpersonal psychology, veteran