

## IPOTESI E METODI DI STUDIO

# Incorporating the Principles of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy into Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy

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## ABSTRACT IN ITALIANO

La terapia assistita con cavalli è un modello di intervento progettato per trattare una varietà di condizioni neuro-psicopatologiche, da lievi a moderate, che sembra fornire risultati promettenti ma, allo stato attuale manca di una solida base teorica di riferimento e di un'adeguata verifica empirica. Essa presenta punti di contatto con il modello terapeutico di accettazione e di impegno nell'azione, la cui validità scientifica è ampiamente riconosciuta. Entrambi i modelli in particolare incoraggiano il paziente a essere "presente nel qui e ora" e a concentrarsi sulle azioni intenzionali. Il presente lavoro descrive i punti di sovrapposizione tra i due modelli e fornisce un'ipotesi di integrazione che può dare evidenza scientifica alla terapia assistita con cavalli.

## KEYWORDS

Terapia assistita con cavalli, Terapia di accettazione e di impegno nell'azione, Terapia assistita con animali.

## ABSTRACT

Equine-assisted psychotherapy is a promising new psychotherapeutic intervention designed to treat a variety of mild to moderate mental health conditions, however it appears to lack a strong psychological framework underpinning the methodology. The Acceptance and Commitment therapy model complements equine-assisted psychotherapy, with both approaches encouraging clients be in the 'present moment' and focused on committed action. We highlight how these two therapeutic interventions can be incorporated and aligned together to create an effective evidenced-based treatment for mental health conditions. Discussions on the similarities will address how each model can overlap each other.

## PAROLE CHIAVE

Equine Assisted Therapy, Acceptance Commitment Therapy, Animal Assisted therapy.



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## 1. Introduction

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) has become a topic of increasing interest over the past several decades within mental health. The beneficial effects of equine-human interaction on humans, has been documented throughout history, associated with both riding and non-riding experience [1; 2; 3].

With the founding of the British Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) in 1969, therapeutic horse riding began to gain recognition in the United Kingdom [4]. The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) was established in the United States three decades later, in 1999. EAGALA is now a prominent organisation in equine therapy, offering certification in Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) or EAP in the United States and across the world [5].

Despite the expanding experiential evidence of the benefits associated to horses in therapeutic settings, in current literature there is a lack of a strong psychological framework that underpins the methodology [6].

Similarly to the processes of Animal Assisted Therapy [6], EAP aims to facilitate sessions involving horse-human contact with the goal of assisting the client in addressing specific mental health difficulties. The aim is usually to improve the patient's social, emotional and cognitive functioning, as well as increasing their motivation to engage in therapeutic work. Above all, it's interesting to note generally, clients perceive human-animal interactions in a therapeutic setting as non-invasive, allowing clients to work figuratively and play out a part of their lives [7].

From our clinical experience we have identified that The Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) model compliments EAP. Both approaches encourage clients to be in the 'present moment' and to work around understanding their actions, values and the influence these interactions have on their self.

Therefore, this paper aims to introduce the theoretical underpinning on how the two models can work in tandem with one another. This will facilitate the development of clinical evidence and evidence-based knowledge to reinforce the use of EAP clinically.

## 2. Discussion of hypothesis

### 2.1 Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP)

EAP is a non-traditional approach to psychotherapy that utilises horses as part of the therapeutic process to promote emotional growth and wellbeing [8]. EAP promotes client awareness and discussion of their thoughts, feelings, and associated behaviours, enabling the development of self-awareness and others along the process. The aim of EAP is similar to traditional therapy in that a qualified mental health professional assists the client in understanding and managing their social, emotional, cognitive, or behavioural difficulties.

Notgrass and Pettinelli [9] acknowledge that EAP differentiates from other modalities such as hippotherapy or therapeutic riding since it does not need horseback riding or

horsemanship abilities; nevertheless, grooming, feeding, and ground exercises may be included. Clients have the opportunity to process thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and associated patterns through these interactive activities, as well as build awareness and trust, stimulate problem-solving skills, and learn goal setting [10].

EAP has been adapted to treat a variety of disorders, including depression, anxiety and PTSD, evidenced to be beneficial across different age demographics.

Horses are instinctively hyper-sensitive and attentive to subtle changes in mood and behaviours in their environment [11], which leads them to react depending on the way they are approached by the human, subsequently generating a mirroring effect [12]. Due to the horse's ability to detect subtle changes in the environment, it becomes difficult for clients to display an inaccurate depiction of themselves [13].

## 2.2 Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

ACT is a third wave therapeutic model, based on traditional cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) principles, incorporating acceptance and mindfulness techniques with behavioural change and committed action [14]. Within the ACT framework psychological rigidity is identified as the root cause, while achieving psychological flexibility is the key aim of the model and process.

The core principles of ACT differ from traditional CBT in as much that it targets more reflective and mindfulness practice that may align more appropriately for certain clients and interlink easier with EAP.

This nonlinear model of therapy is based around 6 core processes, known collectively as the hexaflex [14]. These processes are contact the present, cognitive defusion, acceptance, self-as-context, values and committed action. The core processes interlink together through the ACT triflex that comprises these processes into three functional units. The first unit is '*being present*' that links the self-as-context and contacting with the present moment. This unit involves the client paying attention to and engaging in the present moment both in treatment and during committed action. De-fusion and acceptance are compiled together into the second unit '*opening up*'. The aim of this unit is to allow clients to be able to separate thoughts from feelings and allow their thoughts to come and go by opening up to what these truly mean. Finally, the third unit of the ACT triflex is '*doing what matters*', which combines committed action with values. This is described by Harris [14] as clients initiating and sustaining actions that will enhance their life based on their values. During the sessions clients will tackle tasks related to these core processes to increase their psychological flexibility – the ability to act mindfully guided by one's own values, working towards value congruent behaviour.

ACT has been consistently shown to be effective throughout the literature for the treatment of a variety of different mental health disorders. Bai et al. [15] conducted a meta-analysis of 18 studies (1,088 participants) investigating the effectiveness of ACT for depression. They found that ACT significantly reduced depression symptoms compared to the control group [SMD = 0.59, 96% CI (0.38, 0.81)]. The effec-

tiveness of ACT is further supported by a meta-analysis of 39 randomized control trials (1,821 participants) by A-Tjak et al. [16]. A-Tjak et al.'s. [16] analysis compared ACT intervention groups to three other conditions; waitlist, placebo and treatment as usual. They reported that ACT was more effective at treating anxiety disorders, depression, addiction and somatic health problems compared to all the other study conditions.

Overall, the evidence base surrounding ACT is seen to target similar disorders to what EAP demonstrates in clinical practice, including depression, anxiety and trauma related disorders. This apparent similarity allows us to suggest that it would be appropriate to align the theoretical framework and principles of ACT with EAP practice. This provides an evidence-based theoretical structure to EAP, helping to build and develop the scientific evidence base for EAP.

Currently, EAP is a promising intervention that requires a greater understanding of its process, which can be further explored and developed through the alignment of the ACT model. Both EAP and ACT align in their key principles and desired outcomes with both aiming for the client to be self-aware and present throughout the treatment. In the following sections we discuss and evaluate how EAP aligns with the core principles of the ACT triflex and the underpinnings of psychological flexibility.

### *2.3 Engaging in the Present Moment*

Engaging in the present moment means to flexibly focus one's attention on their experience in the present moment [14]. This can be done through narrowing, broadening, shifting, or sustaining one's focus on what is decided to be most useful in the present situation. This can involve consciously focusing attention on the physical or psychological world, or both at the same time to connect with and fully immerse oneself in the experience. In order to do that, one has to engage the senses of thinking and noticing or observing oneself. Problem solving always requires the examination of past reflection and future prediction, however this can overwhelm and in turn neglect flexible attention to the present moment [17]. This works in tandem with having to open up by accepting and observing one's thoughts; taking a step back to look at the big picture of what is happening in the present moment [14]. This allows individuals to act and respond while being in touch with the current environmental demands rather than ruminating over what-if situations reflective of past experiences or to anxiously anticipate future problems [18]. When an individual is able to flexibly adjust and attend to the immediate relevant environment, it shows in the allowance of performance demands that can be adjusted in relation to the present situation [17].

In EAP sessions, the human- horse interaction will require the development of a shared awareness of the present moment, horses will instinctively turn their attention to the surrounding space and 'presence', acting and reacting to the situational dynamics happening in the here and now. Due to the therapeutic setting, the client will then be placed in a position of having to be in the moment as they try to decipher the meaning behind the horse's behaviour which in turn will require the clients to remain grounded

in the present, monitoring and interpreting the horse's behaviour as well as their own experiences.

We could suggest that therapeutically the horse-human interaction can offer itself as a 'live metaphor' of the internal state of the client, that having become aware of their 'self' and the present moment will in turn be more able to explore and reflect with the therapist on their own internal states.

## *2.4 Opening Up*

Opening up in the ACT model requires clients to develop the skill of defusion. This is where function-altering cues and strategies are used to reduce the negative transformation of a stimulus [14]. For example, a client having difficulties with anxiety disorders may be engaging in verbal behaviours that describe a social situation as being "too difficult". When the verbal description is extremely literal it inhibits the ability to physically respond or achieve anything in a given situation. Harris [14] suggests that defusion is important to increase a client's ability to separate and detach themselves from negative thoughts, feelings and emotions and create a space of reflection. The aim of increasing a client's ability to defuse is to reduce the problematic dominance of these negative thoughts and their influence on human behaviours. Additionally, defusion allows people to become more psychologically present and engaged with their thought processes.

In EAP, horses appear to be a safe platform where clients can explore a variety of defusion techniques. As previously described, an advantage of EAP is the concept of the horse acting as a mirror through the horse reacting to the client's mood and behaviour. The physical presence of the horse and their action-reactions offer a point of reflection simply by the fact that clients will try and 'make sense' of what is happening. The horse's behaviour offers opportunity to explore problematic thoughts and supports the client in becoming a witness on how the thoughts affect their mood, just like the behaviour mirrored by the horse may have played out in front of them. EAP can also support the use of metaphors, as used as part of the defusion techniques of ACT.

In ACT practice there is awareness that some clients might not be as receptive to metaphors and are unable to understand the abstract concept or find it difficult to visualise and draw links as easily. EAP allows these abstract metaphors to be cemented through a more physical sense, through the presence of the horses. This way EAP offers real time bridge between abstract metaphors and concrete behaviours, feelings, and thoughts via the experiential therapeutic method. Horse behaviours and horse-human interactions become animated metaphors that clients can use to draw links to their own 'self' experience and reflect on situations.

The horse can also act as a non-judgemental therapeutic rapport builder to help reduce the feeling of being invalidated by the therapist and the defusion process. This notion is supported by Meinersmann [11], who found that clients self-reported feeling more accepted and less defensive during EAP sessions due to the perceived lack of negative

judgement they felt. This will aid in the defusion process of ACT, as it will help increase the client's engagement and trust in the treatment. Combining the core principle of opening up, through defusion and acceptance, with the benefits of mirroring and a non-judgemental environment involved in EAP, the strengths of both interventions can be highlighted and aligned to reduce both models' possible limitations.

### *2.5 Doing What Matters*

Being able to identify one's own values and being able to live according to these values is a key principle in ACT intervention. The link between one's mental health and value guided actions is key to wellbeing [19]. Being aware and subsequently mindful of one's chosen values is a critical part of ACT. The principal scope is to guide one's life through committed actions as it allows the client to expand their valued responses to create larger patterns of positive activity. Similarly, in EAP, the goal is to bring about the promotion of emotional growth and healing through horse-human action-reaction [5; 8]. While the goal is to help the client learn about themselves and others through the process and discussion of their own feelings, behaviours, and patterns, the human-horse interaction will be led by the values present in the therapy setting. The client will only be able to actively promote change or action with the horses if they interact in a way that is perceived as meaningful. Meaningful actions in horses and humans is perceived differently. One could suggest that the horses aim is to be safe and survive, therefore their actions are driven by immediate stimulus in the external environment. Similarly, human action is also driven through the attainment of safety and survival but also through seeking gratification and experiencing positive emotions [20]. During an EAP session the horse-human goals connect, as feeling safe and feeling positive emotions align and become common denominators for the action-interactions between the two.

## **3. Conclusions and Future Research Directions**

Although EAP and ACT both have an increasing evidence-base in the treatment of mental health conditions, the integration of the two models is an evolving area of research. Therefore, it is important to work towards collecting more support of EAP aligned to ACT principles, promoting a justified rationale for its use clinically.

The proposed alignment of ACT and EAP described in this paper warrants the need for future clinical research to empirically assess the efficacy of the model treating a range of different mental health conditions. This could take the form of high-quality clinical case studies, which would help provide insight from the clients, therapists and equine-specialists on the acceptability and effectiveness of overall treatment and methodology. Conducting interviews and subsequent qualitative analysis would also allow researchers to further develop theoretical links and establish evidence-based treatment and standardised methodological protocols.

Further consideration to the theoretical underpinnings and alignment of the two models is also warranted, for example, developing a greater understanding of the core



principles that have been identified in this paper and how they can be hypothesised to link the two psychotherapeutic models. The ACT triflex, psychological flexibility, and concrete metaphors could also be investigated through a mixed methodological approach to see how and ensure that these core principles align and will be suitable to work together in clinical practice.

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