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Adults with ASD: Therapeutic Riding and Observed Social Behaviors and Stress Levels

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Introduction

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental disorder that affects 1% of the child and adult population (Murphy et al., 2016).
- Adults with ASD have demonstrated significantly higher levels of perceived stress than adults without ASD, which is also commonly contributed to social functioning impairments (Bishop-Fitzpatrick, Mazefsky, Minshew, & Eack, 2015).
- Animal-assisted therapy using horses has demonstrated improvements in areas of physical, psychological, social, and educational functioning of children with disabilities (Grandos & Agis, 2011).
- The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of equine-assisted therapy on observed social and stress behaviors in adults with ASD.

Hypotheses

After 6 weeks of therapeutic riding instruction, adults (18 years old and older) diagnosed with ASD will experience:
- Higher levels of observed social responsiveness
- Lower levels of observed stress levels

Methodology

- The surveys were completed by 8 therapeutic riding instructors who worked with these adults, 2 of which completed both pre- and post surveys.
- Demographics:
  - Mean age: 45.7 years
  - 7 participants reported race as white, 1 reported being of a Spanish origin

Results

No significant results in social responsiveness or perceived stress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant 1 Data</th>
<th>Participant 2 Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONTACT</td>
<td>EMPATHY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTACT</td>
<td>EMPATHY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant 1 Results
- Increase maladaptive behaviors in all social behavior categories
- A slight decrease in perceived stress

Participant 2 Results
- No change in all social behaviors
- A slight increase in perceived stress

Contact: t(1) = -1.0, p > 0.05; Empathy: t(1) = -1.0, p > 0.05; Insight: t(1) = -1.0, p > 0.05; Violations: t(1) = -1.0, p > 0.05; Stress: t(1) = 0, p > 0.05

Discussion

- This study utilized a very small sample size, thus this study is unable to make any meaningful observations.
- The results show overall not much change in social responsiveness or perceived stress levels among their adult rides diagnosed with ASD.
- It is important to continue this research as there is almost no research on TR and adults with Autism.
- More research needs to be conducted in this field to help establish this as an intervention for adults with Autism, a severely limited field to begin with.

Future Direction

- More research in this field must be conducted
  - Larger sample sizes
  - Increase intervention length
  - Examine riders as individuals rather than groups
- Apply current knowledge of TR with children to adults
  - Understanding that effectiveness in children may also be revealed in studies with adults
- Adults need help, too
  - Study alternative interventions that could decrease maladaptive behaviors in adults with ASD