# Equine-Facilitated Counselling and Anxiety: An Exploration of Possibilities

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## Abstract

Anxiety is a common mental health issue faced by many people. Equine-facilitated counselling (EFC) presents a promising alternative for people who may not respond well to more traditional forms of therapy for the treatment of anxiety. This literature review describes animal-assisted therapy and EFC, with a focus on specific factors that may be at play in reducing and managing anxiety in clients. Implications for research and practice are explored, along with an account of the author's reflections.


*Keywords:* equine-facilitated counselling, anxiety, EFC, AAT, horses, human–animal bond, animal-assisted interventions

**Equine-Facilitated Counselling and Anxiety: An Exploration of Possibilities**

In this paper, I explore how equine-facilitated counselling (EFC) can help individuals manage their anxiety and begin to reclaim their lives. In 2018, an estimated 5.3 million people in Canada indicated that their mental health was suffering and that they needed help (Statistics Canada, 2019). However, only half of those 5.3 million Canadians received help or felt their mental health needs were partially met (Statistics Canada, 2019). In May 2020, a few months after the COVID-19 pandemic first emerged, an online questionnaire showed that 24% of the 46,000 Canadians who participated indicated fair or poor mental health (Statistics Canada, 2020a). The online questionnaire, set up by Statistics Canada (2020b), collected data on the impact COVID-19 had on Canadians and on what health, social services, and economic supports are needed for Canadians. Topics on the questionnaire included disability, economic accounts, health, income, and mental health and well-being.

When considering anxiety, the percentage of Canadians who deal with anxiety disorders is 8%–12% (Government of Canada, 2015; Statistics Canada, 2020a), with approximately 27% saying their anxiety affects their life and only about 20% receiving psychological counselling (Government of Canada, 2015). Information on Canadians suffering from anxiety disorders was found through the Survey on Living with Chronic Diseases in Canada (SLCDC), a cross-sectional survey completed every 2 years and focused on different chronic diseases (Statistics Canada, 2014). The survey asked about Canadians' experiences with various chronic health conditions and diagnoses, treatment received from professionals, medications, and management of these conditions. The 2014 SLCDC looked at 5,875 adult Canadians diagnosed with anxiety and mood disorders. Excluded from the survey were people living on reserves, people employed

full-time in the Canadian Forces, people in mental institutions, and people in remote regions (Statistics Canada, 2014).

The relatively low rate of 20% of people accessing treatment for anxiety disorders (Government of Canada, 2015) speaks to the many barriers they may face (e.g., financial burden, time constraints, stigma), and it may also point to a lack of treatment options. Although traditional talk therapy approaches may help some individuals, others may be better supported through nontraditional interventions. One such intervention is animal-assisted therapy (AAT), which incorporates different animals into the therapeutic process. In this paper, I focus on EFC as it has emerged as a forerunner in terms of AAT in Canada. Understanding alternative therapy models is necessary so people have more options for counselling, especially in situations where traditional talk therapy within a closed room does not work effectively or may not be preferred. For example, EFC, which can take place outdoors and be socially distanced, can mitigate concerns regarding the transmission of COVID-19.

Humans have naturally been drawn to be around animals and nature (Fine & Beck, 2019; Hosey & Melfi, 2014; E. O. Wilson, 1986). In the AAT field, research has increasingly demonstrated that animals can be therapeutic and beneficial for physical and mental health, specifically in terms of anxiety (Bhatnagar et al., 2013; Dietz et al., 2012; Earles et al., 2015; Holmes et al., 2012; Kemp et al., 2014; O'Haire et al., 2015). Studies have shown that AAT can help people with a wide range of issues including autism spectrum disorder (Harris & Williams, 2017; Nuntanee & Daranee, 2019), anxiety in children (Nammalwar & Rangeeth, 2018), stress in elementary school children due to problems with reading and other subjects (Linder et al., 2018), and medical illnesses such as stroke (Machová et al., 2019).

Despite the research about animals helping people deal with a variety of problems and issues, there are gaps in the literature. Animals have a useful and therapeutic benefit, but there is a lack of understanding of exactly how animals are helpful, which animals are helpful, which conditions or situations animals can help with, and the general scientific credibility of the therapy. With this project, I hope to bring awareness to AAT in general and deepen readers' understanding of equine-assisted therapy and how horses can help people cope with anxiety.

The literature review explores AAT, specifically EFC, and how it can help people deal with anxiety. The review was guided by the over-arching question: "How can EFC help people experiencing anxiety?" A subquestion was, "What is the experience of clients who have participated in EFC to address anxiety?"

## Self-Positioning Statement

### Personal Connection to Topic

For as long as I can remember, people have described me as horse crazy. As a child, I loved being around horses. I would beg my mother to put me into summer horse camps or horseback riding lessons because I had an urge to be around horses. Horses brought me a sense of calm and peace not otherwise present in my life. For some reason, I was able to communicate with horses and felt understood by them, whereas with people, it was not as easy. There is also the aspect of aromatherapy with horses that add to the relaxed feeling I have around them. Horses have a particular smell that could be described as outdoorsy and earthy. The horse barn smells, too. Hay, horse manure, horse sweat, and other smells combine to make me feel good as there is a positive association linked to the smells. Essentially, smelling a horse or a barn brings me feelings of joy, happiness, enjoyment, and relaxation. I have a lot of respect for horses because they helped me overcome some life challenges such as anxiety, poor self-esteem, and

the grief over losing a parent at a young age. I also have a drive to be around other animals, such as cats. Cats have always been in my life, and I do not think I could live without them. I find I receive different benefits from both animals. Every animal is therapeutic, but in its own unique way.

I chose the topic of AAT, and specifically EFC, as I was interested in exploring how beneficial EFC is for life stressors such as anxiety. I wanted to pursue research in EFC to learn more about it and because horses are my passion. My research was not done to prove that horses are the best therapeutic animal, and I did not approach the research in that way. I wanted to explore and delve into EFC by researching more deeply than I had before to gain greater insight into and knowledge of the field.

**Biases**

With any research, there are personal and professional biases. I do have biases about animals, AAT, and horses, yet I am also open-minded. I believe that animals, especially horses, are therapeutic and beneficial for people. People can learn a lot from spending time with horses. I also see that even though there is an instinctual drive for humans to be around animals and in nature, not everyone will be comfortable or even find this approach to therapy therapeutic. Animals, specifically horses and cats, have been a large part of my life and have played a role in who I am today. It would be wrong of me to say that animals have had no impact on me, or to even say that I have no biases. Of course, I have biases and opinions about the power of animals due to my experiences, but I also have empathy and understanding that even though animal therapy works for me and other people, it will not work for everyone, and it may work in different ways for different people.

Recognizing and dealing with bias was an important aspect of this project. The main bias to overcome was that I love horses and believe they are therapeutic. There was also the possibility of confirmation bias because, unconsciously, I may have wanted to prove that AAT is the "best therapy," that it has no faults, that animals are therapeutic, and that everyone should accept AAT as a credible therapeutic method. To mitigate this bias, the goal of my research was not to prove the therapeutic value of animals, especially horses, but rather to look at what the research indicates about EFC and people dealing with anxiety.

The other bias possibly influencing my opinions was my assumption that horses are better in AAT than other animals such as dogs or cats. I have no way to prove that point, nor do I want to prove it. Every animal is therapeutic in its own way. No animal stands out therapeutically among the most used animals in AAT, which are horses, cats, and dogs. However, there could be bias because I am more drawn to horses, and even cats, than I am to dogs.

I bracketed these biases by intentionally dealing with alternative perspectives on AAT in my literature review. Finding literature that was not favourable to my opinion was challenging, as I am used to providing literature that proves my point. Providing this alternative section pushed me to be more open-minded in my thinking about AAT even though I had already done significant research on the field. Additionally, keeping a field journal enabled me to keep track of, write, and manage the biases and assumptions that I found myself having when engaging in the research. The field journal also helped me to explore my reactions and emerging understandings throughout the entirety of this project.

## Definition of AAT

The International Association of Human–Animal Interaction Organizations (IAHAIO; 2018) has defined AAT as

> a goal oriented, planned and structured therapeutic intervention directed and/or delivered by health, education and human service professionals. Intervention progress is measured and included in professional documentation. AAT is delivered and/or directed by a formally trained (with active licensure, degree or equivalent) professional with expertise within the scope of the professionals' practice. AAT focuses on enhancing physical, cognitive, behavioral and/or socio-emotional functioning of the particular human recipient. The professional delivering AAT (or the person handling the animal under the supervision of the human service professional) must have adequate knowledge about the behavior, needs, health and indicators and regulation of stress of the animals involved. (p. 5)

AAT commonly uses cats, dogs, and horses, but other animals such as birds, guinea pigs, rabbits, reptiles, goats, chickens, llamas, and pigs can be used. Almost any animal can be deemed therapeutic, but a good therapy animal needs to be able to connect and interact with individuals in beneficial and therapeutic ways (Chandler et al., 2010). For an animal to qualify as a therapy animal, it must have a good temperament, be calm and gentle, enjoy being around people, not be dangerous, and be able to handle unpredictable sensory stimuli such as unusual sights, sounds, or smells (Fine, 2019). AAT has been used with people in all age ranges from children to seniors.

## Origins of AAT

Levinson (1969), a psychiatrist often considered the founder of AAT, detailed the first instance of animals being used in the therapeutic process. In 1969, Levinson published *Pet-*

*Oriented Child Psychotherapy*, after an accidental encounter between his dog, Jingles, and a distressed child. He saw the effect Jingles had on the child, who had presented with increasing signs of withdrawal. During sessions, he had coherent conversations with the child while the child interacted with Jingles. After some time, the child ended up associating Levinson (1969) with the comfort of Jingles and opened up more in sessions. Eventually, the child's issues were managed. At a conference, Levinson (1969) presented his findings on how the child benefited from therapy with Jingles. Conference attendees reacted positively and explained that they had similar experiences when using pets in therapy. Levinson (1969) mentioned that Rogers, who developed person-centred therapy, supported him and the AAT approach. Some ideas from person-centred therapy appear in AAT given that animals reflect unconditional positive regard, genuineness, and empathic understanding—the core tenets of person-centred therapy (Levinson, 1969).

## Mechanisms Behind AAT

Therapeutic approaches have underlying mechanisms believed to help encourage psychological growth and healing. The therapeutic mechanisms behind AAT are hypothesized to be the biophilia response, the human–animal bond, and touch and attachment.

### Biophilia Response

According to E. O. Wilson (1986), biophilia refers to natural, innate, and evolved instincts that urge people to be around animals and nature because of the physiological, psychological, and social benefits. These benefits include relaxing the nervous system, lowering heart rate and blood pressure levels, helping to lower anxiety and depression, and creating a sense of social support and well-being (Allen et al., 2002; Friedmann et al., 2010; McIntosh, 2018b; E. O. Wilson, 1986).

Support for the biophilia hypothesis comes from evolutionary evidence, which indicates that certain animals have been able to pass down information crucial to their survival through generations (Krčmárová, 2009; E. O. Wilson, 1986). For instance, chimpanzees have been shown to engage in tool use and teaching their young how to use those tools (Musgrave et al., 2016). Another example is lemurs and old-world monkeys in Madagascar, who are instinctively scared of snakes, which is even more remarkable as Madagascar does not have snakes (Krčmárová, 2009; E. O. Wilson, 1986). In addition, guenons and vervets have evolved to become herpetologists (Krčmárová, 2009; E. O. Wilson, 1986), demonstrating that they have developed knowledge about which reptiles and snakes are more likely to harm them and which are safe to eat; that knowledge has been passed down generationally (E. O. Wilson, 1986).

Sasaki and Biro (2017) also found knowledge transfer happening cross-generationally when they looked at homing pigeons. They found that pigeons in direct generations engaged in the same flight routes as their ancestor pigeons and were able to fly the same flight route more efficiently than pigeons who were born and instructed to learn a new route and had no ancestral pigeons who had engaged in that flight route.

Just as animals have developed evolutionary knowledge that helps them to survive, humans are hypothesized to have evolved an affinity towards animals for the physiological, psychological, and social benefits that they provide (E. O. Wilson, 1986). Shipman (2010) asserted that the connection humans have gained with animals has made an impact on human evolution. For example, the domestication of plants and animals, leading to an agricultural system, was a significant shift for humans from foraging, hunting, and gathering. Humans started to domesticate wild animals and developed a way for animals to be a part of everyday life. For example, horses have been used for farming, transportation, and battle (Robinson, 2011;

Shipman, 2010). Dogs and cats were domesticated for companionship (Driscoll et al., 2009), and pets may potentially have social, physical, and psychological benefits such as decreasing loneliness, increasing daily activity, decreasing stress, and increasing feelings of happiness (McConnell et al., 2011; Odendaal & Meintjes, 2003; Purewal et al., 2017). In more recent history, birds, such as pigeons, have been used to carry messages (Sasaki and Biro, 2017) and canaries have been used in mines as early warning systems (Fujimoto, 2016). These examples show that humans have interacted with animals and have used them as tools and companions.

Additionally, Kellert (1997) identified numerous reasons humans interact with nature: for enjoyment or pleasure, to sense danger, to feel an emotional connection, to engage in recreational activity, to use symbolic reasoning such as language or metaphor, or to do research on nature, such as studying wild horses' behaviours in their natural environment. Kellert also postulated that different forms of biophilia are expressed according to human needs and contexts, highlighting the adaptive intelligence of biophilia and the ways that it has helped us evolve.

**The Human–Animal Bond, Touch, and Attachment**

Biophilia is related to the human–animal bond, a term commonly used in the literature, which refers to the deep connection formed between people and animals (Fine & Beck, 2019; Hosey & Melfi, 2014). Biophilia could be one of the factors that enables the human–animal bond to be created, as humans are instinctively drawn to animals and want to be around them (Fine & Beck, 2019; Hosey & Melfi, 2014). The bond includes any animal, especially pets, and people. Pets develop strong relationships with their humans in such a way that animals can show attachment behaviours (Wanser et al., 2019). The human–animal bond happens for various reasons, including the need for social support (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1970, 1980; Sable, 1995). For example, drawing from attachment theory, the bond happens because animals provide

a sense of protection, safety, and the ability to cope with the world (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1970, 1980; Sable, 1995).

Another related mechanism behind AAT is the power of physical touch. Touch between clients and counsellors comes with cautions and limitations; therefore, it is not often utilized (Calmes et al., 2013; Fine, 2019). However, in AAT touch is allowed (and encouraged) with animals due to the unique power it brings to the therapeutic setting (Fine, 2019). Levinson (1984) found that touch and attachment were the most important aspects of AAT. Physical touch has been shown to release endorphins that combat anxiety, help the attachment formation process with the animals to occur, help release tension and produce relaxation, and help clients develop feelings of love, security, safety, warmth, and comfort (Fine, 2019; Jakubiak & Feeney, 2016). An additional benefit of touch is that oxytocin levels, beta endorphins, and dopamine levels increase, which may lead to a lowering of heart rate and cortisol levels (Fine & Beck, 2019). Beta endorphins are naturally made chemicals, specifically neuropeptides, that help with pain management and are involved in reward circuitry for activities such as eating, drinking, sexual activities, and parenting behaviour (Sprouse-Blum et al., 2010).

## Principles and Benefits of AAT

AAT is used to promote growth in physical, social, emotional, and cognitive function, as well as in social and personal connections, and build skill sets through either individual or group therapy often in nature-related settings (American Veterinary Medical Association, n.d.; Fine et al., 2019). It has been shown to help many people, such as at-risk children and youth, veterans, prison inmates, seniors, and hospital patients, in a wide variety of areas including medical conditions, mental functioning, emotional issues, undesirable behaviours, anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, trauma, developmental disorders, mood issues, self-efficacy, boundary building,

verbal and nonverbal communication skills, self-esteem problems, assertiveness training, problem-solving, teamwork building, creative thinking, confidence building, leadership, relationship concerns, and stress relief (Bachi & Parish-Plass, 2017; Fiocco & Hunse, 2017; Mueller & McCullough, 2017). These populations and issues are further explored in the sections to come.

Using animals in therapy may provide benefits as they can be used to build rapport, promote and enhance the therapeutic bond by creating a safe and comfortable environment, create a safe space for expressing emotions from laughter to sorrow, lighten the mood, and act as role models (Bachi, 2013; Earles et al., 2015; Fine, 2019; Lac, 2016). Another benefit of animals in a therapy setting is the animals may defuse a situation that is particularly tense due to heightened emotions (Bachi, 2013; Fine, 2019). This could happen when clients remember that the animal is present and realize that the emotions or actions they are engaging in, such as using a raised voice, may be impacting the animal. Usually, the animals will display a change in their behaviour in response to the new stimulus, such as a horse becoming nervous, showing the whites of its eyes, and stepping away. A cat or dog may swish its tail, move away from the person, or even start meowing or barking, which may be especially apparent if this behaviour is not usual for that animal. From a therapeutic standpoint, these reactions can help clients notice a change in the animals' behaviour and realize it is due to their own behaviour or emotions. They can then make the necessary changes to try to regain the comfort of the animal's presence (Bachi, 2013; Fine, 2019). When clients engage in emotional regulation, there may be a change in their behaviour or emotions when around animals, and they may learn how to handle tense situations outside of therapy (Bachi, 2013; Fine, 2019; Lac, 2016).

Another mechanism essential in therapy, especially in AAT, is agency. Agency is the feeling of control over one's actions (Moore, 2016). AAT is based on the idea that interacting with animals is healing and can create self-awareness in the individual. As clients interact with the animal participating in AAT, they become more aware of how their behaviours impact the developing relationship. With the support of the helping professional, they can begin to modify this behaviour as needed, building a sense of agency. The benefit of agency is that participants may never have had a feeling of being in control in their life, and AAT may be able to give them a safe place where they can have some control. Within EFC, a sense of agency can be fostered as clients learn how to engage with a large and powerful animal, communicate their needs and desires, and have them heard and responded to (Sharpe & Strong, 2015).

The use of metaphors in AAT is another unique therapeutic benefit, as it provides a different way for clients to process and understand information (Chandler, 2012). For example, in EFC horses can act as metaphors for emotions, significant others in the client's life such as friends and family (Fournier et al., 2018), or for sources of stress and conflict (K. Wilson et al., 2017). Metaphors can help clients understand and describe what is happening for them, while also allowing for the exploration of potential solutions in real-time.

## Use of EFC

Different terms are used when referring to the use of horses within AAT. The umbrella term is equine-assisted activities and therapies, and under that umbrella, the following names are commonly used: therapeutic riding, equine-assisted learning or equine-facilitated learning, equine-assisted psychotherapy or equine-facilitated psychotherapy, equine-facilitated counselling, and hippotherapy (Latella & Abrams, 2019). I chose to highlight EFC as it is a commonly used form of AAT in Canada and is the area in which I want to gain expertise and

focus on in my career as a counsellor. EFC connects both my passions of counselling and the healing power of horses into one.

According to the Professional Association for Equine Facilitated Wellness (n.d.), the horse is a part of the therapeutic process as it is a cofacilitator and a sentient being. Equine facilitated wellness has four main principles:

> Principle 1: Respect for the rights and dignity of all individuals—both human and equine —and the promotion of well-being for all participants
>
> Principle 2: Professional competence and sound judgment in the service of responsible caring for human and equine participants
>
> Principle 3: Integrity and honesty in relationships with human and equine participants
>
> Principle 4: Responsibility to society and the equine facilitated wellness profession. (Professional Association for Equine Facilitated Wellness, 2020, p. 3)

Equine therapy can include horses, donkeys, and mules. Horses have a sensitivity to other creatures' emotions and often display emotions or perceptions they are experiencing for themselves or from external sources (K. Brandt, 2004; Chandler, 2012). Horses, as prey animals, are very connected to their environment and other creatures, such as humans and other animals, for survival purposes (Latella & Abrams, 2019). Therapeutic benefit may be provided due to the horses' extreme sensitivity, intuition, and perceptiveness (K. Brandt, 2004; Chandler, 2012). Therefore, the horses may be able to offer valuable self-insight to people.

**Nature-Based Activities**

The unique aspect of physical activity in nature adds to the therapeutic benefits of EFC due to the settings in which horses are typically kept (Fine & Beck, 2019; Kinoshita, 2019; Yeh et al., 2016). Activities in nature, such as horseback riding, can improve mental health while

decreasing stress and anxiety (Maier & Jette, 2016; Yeh et al., 2016). Even without the physical activity component, there are unique benefits to simply being in nature (Hee Oh et al., 2020).

For example, researchers have found several therapeutic benefits in studies on veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) who engaged in nature-based therapy (Poulsen et al., 2016; Poulsen et al., 2018). These benefits included the veterans' preferences changing from desiring total seclusion from other people and areas that were secluded to developing a desire to be around other people and resting in more open areas. The veterans were also able to increase their attention on themselves and their surroundings due to spending time out in nature as they found a sense of calm and acceptance. Finally, the veterans found that being connected to nature increased the meaning of their actions, and they had an increased sense of agency regarding their view of self (Poulsen et al., 2016; Poulsen et al., 2018). The veterans also gained awareness of their bodily PTSD sensations and symptoms, which they were not as aware of before. They were more aware of headaches, memory issues, and sleep issues and had increased sensitivity to sounds; however, halfway through therapy, the veterans experienced more relaxation and peaceful moments (Poulsen et al., 2016; Poulsen et al., 2018).

Poulsen et al. (2018) also found that anxiety for the veterans had changed. At the start of therapy, the veterans indicated they felt a great deal of anxiety, but by the end of the 10 weeks of being exposed to nature three times a week, the veterans said that their anxiety was not as overwhelming and prominent in their daily lives. Although their research did not include EFC, it has been hypothesized that many of these same benefits might be at play in EFC due to the natural environment that EFC takes place in. In their 2015 research on women with eating disorders who participated in an EFC program, Sharpe and Strong (2015) highlighted similar nature-based benefits, including feelings of connection to the natural world; heightened

attunement to self, others, and environment; and feelings of peace and calm that were attributed to the natural environment.

In an earlier study, Bachi et al. (2012) also found that participants experienced nature-based benefits from EFC. They looked at the experience of 14 at-risk female adolescents who took part in a 7-month EFC program that involved sessions being held either in stables or in nature. The weekly sessions focused on self-image, self-control, and trust. Bachi et al. (2012) conducted in-depth interviews with the participants and had them complete questionnaires before the start of therapy and after one year. The setting of the EFC sessions was considered a strength, as going out to a stable and being in nature created an illusion for the clients that they were not in a therapy session. According to the authors, another benefit of the environment was being able to change the therapeutic setting based on the theme or meaning behind the session and personal preferences of the client. For example, a session could be held in the horse's stall because the clients wanted the intimate, protective feeling of the enclosed space. Alternatively, a session could be held in an arena or outside, so that clients would not have any walls around them, and they would have the experience of being in open space with fresh air. Other cited benefits for participants included an increase in general life satisfaction through gaining an increase in trust, self-image, self-control, and emotional regulation, as well as identifying and dealing with stress, anger, and anxiety (Bachi et al., 2012).

**Strengths of EFC**

A major strength of EFC is that it is considered meta-theoretical, meaning that it can be practiced using a variety of different theoretical orientations (Sharpe & Strong, 2015). It is also unique in that it incorporates aspects of both nature-based therapies and movement-based

therapies (Sharpe & Strong, 2015), and perhaps even elements of adventure therapy (H. Sharpe, personal communication, June 15, 2021).

EFC has some fundamental strengths as horses can help create psychological, emotional, physiological, and social benefits. For example, clients can learn to read and respond to nonverbal communication, create nonjudgmental relationships, experience safe and secure attachment, show their true selves, and overcome fears (Dunlop & Tsantefski, 2017; Tsantefski et al., 2017; Waite & Bourke, 2013). When clients engage in EFC, they often experience an increase in trust, positive self-image, general life satisfaction, self-efficacy, coping abilities, self-esteem, and social confidence (Bachi et al., 2012; Kemp et al., 2014).

According to Sudekum Trotter (2011), horses are also excellent animals to help teach clients about establishing, creating, and maintaining appropriate boundaries because horses are touch sensitive and will react when a physical or emotional boundary has been broken. In addition, horses will cross people's boundaries. When they cross boundaries in therapy sessions, they force the clients to define their boundary limits and learn how to respond when their boundaries are crossed and they are uncomfortable. EFC thus teaches clients how to keep and reinforce boundaries, stand up for themselves, and be firm. Additionally, setting boundaries with the horse gives clients a chance to be in control, become empowered, and express what they do and do not find acceptable (Sudekum Trotter, 2011).

Another major benefit of EFC is its multicultural approach (Jegatheesan, 2019; Kemp et al., 2014). EFC is based in nature versus a therapy room in a building; therefore, it may be easier for clients from some cultures who highly value the power of nature to feel a sense of home and comfort in EFC. For example, Indigenous clients may relate to the unique power of the horse and the nature-based perspective (Kemp et al., 2014) given that Indigenous culture is deeply rooted

in nature and the power of animals (McCubbin et al., 2013). In many collectivist and interdependent cultures, people do not seek therapy due to a belief structure that does not value counselling or that attaches a stigma to counselling (Asnaani & Hofmann, 2012). In these cultures, needing counselling may be seen as a weakness, and can thus be embarrassing for clients and their families. EFC may be a viable approach when there is a stigma around traditional counselling (Bachi et al., 2012). It can feel more natural because the setting is based in nature and, therefore, is different from traditional counselling.

**Limitations of EFC**

As with every type of therapy, counsellors need to be aware of limitations and ethical concerns and take them into account. The limitations of AAT, which also relate to EFC, can include clients having a fear of animals, allergies, or different attitudes toward animals due to cultural differences (Dunlop & Tsantefski, 2017). Horses can be frightening for some people owing to their size and power. Fear of animals can be a limitation as it can affect the therapeutic relationship that is supposed to be formed between the client and animal, which in turn can affect the clients' level of comfort and willingness to be vulnerable around the therapist and animal (Dunlop & Tsantefski, 2017; Mueller & McCullough, 2017). Having a fear of the animal would also limit the general benefits generated from being around animals such as relaxation, a decrease in stress and cortisol, and an increase in oxytocin (Fine & Beck, 2019).

Safety for clients and counsellors, and the welfare of the therapy animals, are also ethical concerns (Freeman & Linder, 2019; Ng et al., 2019). Accidents can happen around animals, especially due to their unpredictability and unexpected reactions due to a frightening stimulus (Freeman & Linder, 2019; Ng et al., 2019). In EFC, there is an arguably greater risk due to the power and size of horses. A fall from a horse can be a serious injury, but even groundwork

(activities that involve walking or standing alongside a horse) presents certain risks such as clients being accidentally stepped on or knocked over by a horse. Facilities that engage in EFC should ensure they have safety protocols in place before starting their business to limit the inherent risks (Freeman & Linder, 2019). Professionals interested in pursuing EFC need to consider the potential dangers for insurance and liability purposes. Clients must be informed of all the risks and what has been done to limit them (Freeman & Linder, 2019; Ng et al., 2019).

Another potential limitation of any AAT approach is financial (Mueller et al., 2019; Schroeder & Stroud, 2015). AAT may be more expensive than traditional talk therapy due to including animals in the therapeutic process. The cost of AAT, especially EFC, can create challenges as it might limit the accessibility of counselling to some people. The financial barrier can be lessened through charitable donations that help clients who cannot afford the cost. Also, school boards could pay for AAT for children, especially when offered in a group format.

Transportation is another potential limitation as well due to the therapy location (Schroeder & Stroud, 2015). EFC is commonly held outside the city limits, which means public transit may not be accessible, and a vehicle would be required. Mobility issues can likewise be a barrier to accessing EFC services and may limit people from fully engaging in EFC. For example, someone who has difficulty walking or standing may not benefit from EFC focused on groundwork, whereas they may benefit from an EFC program focused on riding. In some cases, adaptations may be required for people with different physical capabilities.

## EFC and Anxiety

EFC has been shown to be an effective intervention in helping children, adolescents, and adults manage their anxiety in different contexts, including social anxiety, generalized anxiety, anxiety related to PTSD, and separation anxiety (Alfonso et al., 2015; Bhatnagar et al., 2013;

Earles et al., 2015; Holmes et al., 2012; Kemp et al., 2014; Lac, 2016; Robinson-Edwards et al., 2019). In this section, I outline research in this area and then draw out the connections between these studies in the section to follow.

One EFC approach that has proven particularly helpful in treating anxiety disorders is Natural Lifemanship's trauma-focused equine-assisted psychotherapy (TF-EAP; Shultz-Jobe et al., 2018). Anxiety disorders can affect regulation and relationships, and TF-EAP focuses on addressing those issues to help treat anxiety disorders. For example, if a participant engages in mounted work, there is a focus on regulating the brainstem through the rhythmic and repetitive movement of riding the horse while also engaging in tasks asked by the counsellor that require talking out loud and cognitive processes (Shultz-Jobe et al., 2018). In addition, TF-EAP is based on establishing secure attachments for the participants. According to Shultz-Jobe et al. (2018), having a secure attachment to a parent or another being, such as an animal, helps clients learn how to appropriately respond to stressful situations and learn self-regulation skills that are useful in emotional or stressful situations.

According to the literature, the mindfulness that is required to participate in EFC may be one of the mechanisms that helps reduce anxiety for clients (Bhatnagar et al., 2013; Earles et al., 2015; Sharpe & Strong, 2015). For example, Sharpe and Strong (2015) explored the experiences of 14 women with eating disorders who took part in a six-session EFC group. The authors noted that the 14 female participants engaged in a type of dialogic attunement with their horses, which required a high degree of mindfulness and nonverbal communication. This present-moment focus appeared to induce a state of calm for many of the participants, which was cited as a significant contrast to their typical ways of experiencing that were marked by anxiety, bodily tension, and constraint (Sharpe & Strong, 2015). In addition, the attunement the female

participants had with their horses may be similar to having a secure attachment to an animal, as Shultz-Jobe et al. (2018) mentioned, which in turn helped the participants develop ways to deal with stressful situations.

In another study, Earles et al. (2015) incorporated mindfulness by having 16 participants observe each other engaging in a 2-hr EFC session. The study included 12 female and four male participants, aged 33 to 62. The study included aspects of individual therapy and group therapy. Each client worked one on one with a psychiatrist trained in EFC and a horse in the arena for six sessions, which allowed the clients to experience individual counselling. At the same time, the rest of the clients observed the sessions from a separate room. During the session, the group discussed what was occurring and any insights they were gaining from the process, promoting mindfulness (Earles et al., 2015). Earles et al. found that the participants engaged in mindfulness after the research study ended as well. The authors argued that the horses, as they are not creatures that dwell on the past or the future but instead are focused on what is happening in the present moment, could have encouraged mindfulness in the participants. They also believed that because the group members focused on nonjudgmental accepting awareness of themselves and of the person they were observing, mindfulness was encouraged (Earles et al., 2015).

Other studies have also noted the present-focus of EFC as a therapeutic mechanism, along with other hypothesized mechanisms including problem-solving in the moment and horses as metaphors. For example, Kemp et al. (2014) looked at anxiety in a study on the impact of an EFC program for children and adolescents (6 boys and 21 girls) who were survivors of sexual abuse. The participants engaged in individual counselling one time per week for 6 weeks, and a weekly 90-min EFC session for 9–10 weeks. In addition to anxiety, Kemp et al. looked at depression, posttraumatic stress, sexual concerns, dissociation, and anger. They found that the

participants experienced a reduction in symptoms for depression, anxiety, trauma, and unwanted behaviours. The authors indicated that the underlying mechanisms of change were the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) methods used. According to Kemp et al., EAGALA uses a person-centred model that has components of other therapeutic orientations such as gestalt and existential therapy to provide EFC. In addition, Kemp et al. noted that EAGALA uses metaphors and problem-solving activities, and clients gain insight into internal conflicts through their interaction with a horse. In their study, the methods that made a difference for the participants included the clients interacting with the horses, performing problem-solving activities, and using metaphors.

Experiential learning using ground-based horsemanship exercises was also important for change to occur for the participants (Kemp et al., 2014). The themes that emerged while the participants engaged in the ground-based horsemanship exercises were creating new thinking patterns that decreased anxiety, learning how to react and respond to various situations and outcomes in a way that decreased anxiety, and learning social skills and group dynamics (Kemp et al., 2014). In addition, the horsemanship experiential learning exercises focused on the participants learning trust skills, communication skills, boundary-setting skills, self-perception skills, and observation skills such as being mindful of body language. Kemp et al. (2014) stated that the EAGALA methods were the cause of the change in the participants, yet other causes of change that were not mentioned could be related to the mindfulness skills, such as the ones participants learned in Sharpe and Strong's (2015) and Earles et al.'s (2015) EFC studies. Other possible connections to change are gaining a safe space and secure attachment style, which Shultz-Jobe et al. (2018) mentioned. Gaining a secure attachment would have been especially important for Kemp et al.'s participants as they were survivors of sexual abuse and were learning

self-regulation skills during the study. The participants may have been able to reduce their symptoms of anxiety, depression, trauma, and other unwanted behaviours as they felt safe and comfortable in their EFC environment, so they were able to learn the skills mentioned earlier.

Lac (2016) also saw that interaction with a horse caused changes in behaviour and decreased anxiety. In a case study, Lac explored the benefits of 20 gestalt equine psychotherapy sessions for a 5-year-old who had an eating disorder, frequent panic attacks, and separation anxiety. Through engaging with the horse in equine play therapy, the child's confidence increased as she started to develop more of a sense of self, began to regulate emotions, and wanted to engage in adventurous activities with the horse. The client gained the most growth when engaging in mindful body awareness activities that paid attention to sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch for herself and the horse. Lac observed a noticeable reduction in the tension the child held in her body, a willingness to eat more foods than before, and a reduction in panic attacks and anxiety. Although there was still some anxiety when the 5-year-old was separated from her mother, it was significantly reduced.

EFC has also been found to help with social anxiety. Alfonso et al. (2015) wanted to measure how effective EFC was in helping young adults aged 18–29 reduce their symptoms of social anxiety. They looked at social anxiety in young women using an intervention called Project Stride that was a combination of EFC and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) strategies. Alfonso et al. found that Project Stride resulted in significant reductions in the participants' social anxiety. The authors postulated that the reduction in social anxiety could have been due to the shift of attention away from the participant and onto the horse. The shifting of focus onto the horse could be important in EFC therapy and potentially a mechanism of

change for anxiety (Alfonso et al., 2015; Grandin et al., 2019; Hemingway et al., 2019; Kendall & Maujean, 2015; MacNamara et al., 2019; Schroeder et al., 2018).

Alfonso et al. (2015) found that the shift in focus enabled the counsellor to use some CBT techniques with the clients while they were engaging with the horses. An example is when the clients learned to use a mnemonic that was taught to them during the study. The mnemonic was to help participants with problem-solving tasks by giving them a structured approach to follow and to help them to process their thoughts and emotions in a more efficient way, which also enabled the clients to feel less anxiety. Participants also learned social skills by engaging in team-building exercises with the horses. In addition, the participants learned adaptation skills in new situations, which can be difficult for someone with social anxiety to acquire (Alfonso et al., 2015).

According to Alfonso et al. (2015), the horses played an important role in decreasing the young women's social anxiety by creating a safe and comfortable space for them to engage in novel situations because horses are not judgmental. The safe space allowed the participants to feel comfortable enough to challenge their social anxiety fears. Overcoming fears is a reported benefit of EFC (Dunlop & Tsantefski, 2017; Tsantefski et al., 2017; Waite & Bourke, 2013). Another important benefit Alfonso et al. cited was the location: The EFC was held outside the city, which meant it was remote and few people were around. According to them, these factors could have played a role in helping to decrease social anxiety.

Robinson-Edwards et al. (2019) looked at five male prisoners who had a history of substance use or mental health problems such as anxiety, and their experience with EFC while in prison. The participants engaged in 10 EFC sessions, with each session approximately 90 to 120 min. Robinson-Edwards et al. found that over half of their participants experienced some

positive change in their anxiety levels. Specifically, the prisoners were able to experience moments of relaxation or calmness, which are not often experienced in prison. The prisoners also learned to engage and speak with others with an emphasis on being able to express emotions effectively. Some of the individuals even learned how to feel comfortable enough to speak about their emotions and needs to prison staff, family, and other inmates (Robinson-Edwards et al., 2019).

K. Wilson et al. (2017) looked at eight therapists' perspectives on EFC for adolescents dealing with depression and anxiety. All eight therapists were certified with the EAGALA to offer EFC to adolescents experiencing depression and anxiety. Therapists certified with EAGALA engage in ground-based exercises with a person-centred approach (EAGALA, n.d.). K. Wilson et al. used a semistructured interview process with open-ended questions to create thematic data. Three main themes of equine-assisted psychotherapy were identified: its nature, clinical implications, and its practice and limitations.

When discussing the clinical implications of the therapy, K. Wilson et al. (2017) mentioned seeing an increase in confidence, self-esteem, assertiveness, emotional regulation, self-control, and resourcefulness, and a decrease in depression and anxiety behaviours in the adolescents. The therapists indicated that the improvements or benefits showed in the changes in the adolescents' behaviours (e.g., standing up straighter or being more vocal). The therapists agreed that underlying mechanisms of change were likely the experiential aspect of EFC and the inclusion of a horse. The therapists explained that the students could immediately see how the horses reacted to their behaviours, and they could then alter what they were doing as needed. The students could see what worked and what did not work with the horses and modify their behaviour, which increased their confidence and self-esteem. In addition, the students had to lead

their horses in different tasks, which required skills such as assertive communication, that the students were then able to apply to other situations in their lives (K. Wilson et al., 2017). For example, some therapists received reports from the students' teachers at schools that cited that they were interacting more with other students and taking on leadership roles.

Holmes et al. (2012) studied how interaction with horses affected anxiety and self-esteem in 11 adolescent participants (10 male and one female) who interacted with both live and model horses at a racehorse rehabilitation centre. The participants had either emotional, behavioural, or learning difficulties. The activities focused on teaching safety behaviours around horses; providing quality time with the horses by grooming them; putting on halters, blankets, and other horse tack equipment; and cleaning the horses' feet, which took place over four 3-hr sessions. Anxiety and self-esteem were measured by having the adolescents fill out the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale and the Rosenburg Self-Esteem Scale, respectively. Holmes et al. found that the participants' anxiety decreased significantly, but that their self-esteem remained unchanged. The researchers noted that the changes in the participants' interactions with the live horses matched the decreases in anxiety, whereas there were no changes in interaction with the model horses. Despite the recorded decrease in anxiety, Holmes et al. were unable to determine definitively what caused the reduction in anxiety, although they speculated that exposure therapy may have played a role (e.g., the adolescents spent time in novel situations and social settings that over time led to a decrease in their anxiety). Findings such as these highlight how difficult it can be to tease apart specific therapeutic factors that take place in EFC.

Although the reviewed studies discussed different benefits seen or possible mechanisms of change, some underlying themes may be factors in the cited success of EFC and the treatment of anxiety. One such theme is the need for clients to shift attention away from themselves and

toward a horse (Alfonso et al., 2015; Grandin et al., 2019; Hemingway et al., 2019; Kendall & Maujean, 2015; MacNamara et al., 2019; Schroeder et al., 2018). This shifting of attention may be related to mindfulness, but it may also be related to creating space for experimenting with different ways of being with another or creating space between the client and the problem (Sharpe & Strong, 2015). Other possible mechanisms of change that decrease anxiety for clients are mindfulness and self-awareness (Bhatnagar et al., 2013; Earles et al., 2015; Latella & Abrams, 2019; Robinson-Edwards et al., 2019; Sharpe & Strong, 2015). There is also the connection of attachment style and safety and how it affects EFC sessions. Research has indicated that horses can create a safe place for participants and that there is an element of secure attachment fostered in EFC sessions (Bachi, 2013; Dunlop & Tsantefski, 2017; Fine, 2019; Jakubiak & Feeney, 2016; Kern-Godal et al., 2016; Kovács et al., 2020; Shultz-Jobe et al., 2018; Tsantefski et al., 2017; Waite & Bourke, 2013; Wanser et al., 2019). As well, the natural environment and nature found in EFC sessions are a benefit (Bachi et al., 2012; Fine & Beck, 2019; Kinoshita, 2019; Poulsen et al., 2016; Poulsen et al., 2018; Sharpe & Strong, 2015; Yeh et al., 2016).

## Connections Between Traditional Therapies and EFC

As the research on EFC and anxiety has highlighted, proposed mechanisms for therapeutic change include helping clients learn emotional regulation and problem-solving skills, form secure attachments, experience moments of relaxation or calm, create healthy boundaries, learn social skills, and develop mindfulness and attunement with the horses (Bachi, 2013; Bhatnagar et al., 2013; C. Brandt, 2013; Earles et al., 2015; Fine, 2019; Kemp et al., 2014; Lac, 2016; Robinson-Edwards et al., 2019; Sharpe & Strong, 2015; Shultz-Jobe et al., 2018; K. Wilson et al., 2017). In traditional therapy, clients often learn emotional regulation skills through

CBT and cognitive restructuring. Cognitive restructuring allows clients to learn how to reframe their thoughts about an anxiety-producing situation more positively, which can impact attitude and thinking patterns, helping clients manage stress and anxiety (Al-Refae et al., 2021). In EFC, clients learn emotional regulation skills because they gain instant feedback from the horse due to their behaviours (Bachi, 2013; Fine, 2019). The clients learn that they may have to change their behaviours, by engaging in the process of emotional regulation during the therapy session, for the horse to feel more comfortable with them and to produce a desired behaviour in the horse. The clients also learn how to deal with difficult situations when the horse is not around (Bachi, 2013; Fine, 2019; Lac, 2016).

Forming a secure attachment is important in traditional anxiety therapy (Khademi et al., 2019; Rholes et al., 2011). People with anxious or insecure attachments may be more prone to depression and anxiety (Khademi et al., 2019; Rholes et al., 2011). Traditional psychotherapy helps clients with anxious attachment styles by providing a safe space for them to talk about prior events that were hurtful and perhaps not previously dealt with emotionally (Marmarosh & Tasca, 2013; Wallin, 2007). Dealing with these emotions and situations may help the clients learn how to cope with overwhelming emotions that prevented them from maintaining closeness with others or being able to handle distance in relationships (Marmarosh & Tasca, 2013; Wallin, 2007). In EFC, clients may be able to form a secure attachment with their horse. When clients touch and interact with the horse, they may experience the right conditions, such as a release of endorphins, a decrease in bodily tension, a feeling of relaxation, a safe space to express emotions, and the feelings of love, security, safety, warmth, and comfort, which foster attachment (Bachi, 2013; Earles et al., 2015; Fine, 2019; Jakubiak & Feeney, 2016; Lac, 2016).

Social skills are taught in traditional therapy to help clients deal with anxiety by having them engage in role play scenarios with others or with the therapist to learn problem-solving techniques, assertive communication, and alternative behaviours (Durães et al., 2020). Clients can learn social skills in EFC by engaging in team-building exercises while also focusing on situations or topics that are difficult, such as adaptation skills for anxiety-producing situations (Alfonso et al., 2015). In these situations, clients can learn both social skills and emotional regulation skills at the same time through interacting with the horses in EFC.

Mindfulness is often used as a treatment for anxiety in traditional talk therapy, as the clients may engage in it within sessions or counsellors may give homework to clients to engage in mindfulness outside of sessions (Kladnitski et al., 2020; Lalande et al., 2017; Navarro-Haro et al., 2019). However, mindfulness is not a requirement of traditional talk therapy, whereas in EFC, mindfulness is required to engage in any interaction with the horse. This kind of mindfulness or attunement to the horse may help in emotional regulation and fostering moments of calm or relaxation (Earles et al., 2015; Kemp et al., 2014; Lac 2016; Robinson-Edwards et al., 2019; Sharpe & Strong, 2015). Such moments may be rare for those living with anxiety, and these experiences can promote hope that similar moments are possible in the future.

Creating and maintaining healthy boundaries with others may be another challenge for those living with anxiety (Khademi et al., 2019; Marmarosh & Tasca, 2013; Rholes et al., 2011; Wallin, 2007). In more traditional talk therapy, boundaries are often talked about but rarely is there an opportunity to practice boundary setting in real-time. In EFC, however, there are many opportunities to explore this concept with the horse and to determine which boundaries are preferred and which are not (C. Brandt, 2013). This knowledge can then be applied to other situations, beyond the relationship with the horse.

As the research has demonstrated, EFC can be incorporated in numerous ways. Counsellors who facilitate equine therapy most often have a foundation in another theoretical orientation such as CBT (Alladin, 2015; Kemp et al., 2014; Lac, 2016; Sharpe & Strong, 2015; Stefan et al., 2019). As mentioned earlier, a wide variety of other theoretical orientations can be used in alignment with EFC. How counsellors approach equine therapy sessions with clients can change based on theoretical orientation. This flexibility is useful in the field of EFC because counsellors can draw on techniques and interventions that are useful for a certain type of issue, such as anxiety. CBT is often used to help clients with anxiety disorders, so it can be used in EFC as well (Alladin, 2015; Stefan et al., 2019). For example, one way to approach anxiety in an EFC session is with thought challenging and thought restructuring. The first step would entail the counsellor asking the clients to become aware of possible maladaptive thoughts they may be experiencing while working with the horse and encouraging them to observe how the horse behaves and relates to them while they are experiencing these thoughts. The next step involves having the clients replace the maladaptive thoughts with preferred ones (e.g., more compassionate, more logical) to see whether this replacement shifts their behaviour and the ways that the horse reacts to them. The clients and counsellor would then observe the horse to see if the horse does indeed react to changes made by the clients (Alladin, 2015; Karol, 2007; Stefan et al., 2019).

Although there has been research on the integration of EFC and particular therapeutic approaches such as CBT, gestalt therapy, psychodynamic therapy, and others, newer interventions such as eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) have yet to be studied fully in the context of EFC. Clark (n.d.) briefly mentioned a connection between EMDR

in EFC work by a company called Rhythmic Riding Groups, which helps children move past trauma with the help of horseback riding.

One area of interest is how bilateral stimulation relates to EFC. In EMDR, bilateral stimulation increases the communication between both brain hemispheres and enables the person to potentially remember a difficult event and at the same time not be negatively impacted (van den Hout & Engelhard, 2012). EMDR also helps the participant process trauma and relate to uncomfortable memories and experiences in a different way (van den Hout & Engelhard, 2012). The use of bilateral stimulation, employing eye movements and other bilateral movements, is important in EMDR and is thought to be the underlying therapeutic mechanism (Shapiro, 2007, 2014; van den Hout & Engelhard, 2012). Examples of other bilateral movements include the therapist tapping the outside of the clients' leg, clients tapping their own shoulders or collarbones, and clients holding small vibrating objects in their hands. Recalling an emotional memory and making eye movements use working memory (Shapiro, 2007, 2014; van den Hout & Engelhard, 2012), which does not have much capacity and can be spent quickly (Baddeley, 1998). Therefore, when people move their eyes, there is not much room for the difficult memory, and the memory may become less vivid and less emotional (Shapiro, 2007, 2014; van den Hout & Engelhard, 2012).

Similar mechanisms may be at play in EFC, as there are back-and-forth movements people engage in. For example, when participants brush their horse with back-and-forth movements with both the hands and the eyes, those movements could imitate the back-and-forth movements of the eyes in traditional EMDR work. EMDR can also be used in EFC while riding, as participants follow the horses' natural rhythmic back-and-forth movements (Rigby & Grandjean, 2016; Sterba et al., 2002). Additionally, having participants do tasks that teach self-

regulation behaviour through patterned, repetitive, and rhythmic actions restores pathways in the brain (Dautovic et al., 2016; Szpringer et al., 2018; van den Hout & Engelhard, 2012).

Bilateral stimulation, such as EMDR, has also been used to help treat PTSD and anxiety symptoms (Dautovic et al., 2016; Szpringer et al., 2018). More research is needed to determine if engaging in the physical tasks in EFC would reduce anxiety symptoms as EMDR does for clients with anxiety. EMDR uses a back-and-forth movement with the eyes to help clients process difficult memories. Would the back-and-forth method of brushing a horse affect a person with anxiety in a similar way if they were also being guided to process difficult memories or events? Research could be undertaken to see if engaging in physical activities with horses in EFC provides benefits similar to EMDR. These and other important areas for future research are explored in the next sections.

## Implications for Counselling Psychology

EFC may be a suitable therapeutic intervention for dealing with anxiety. Research has shown the benefit of EFC for dealing with anxiety symptoms (Alfonso et al., 2015; Bhatnagar et al., 2013; Earles et al., 2015; Holmes et al., 2012; Kemp et al., 2014; Lac, 2016; Robinson-Edwards et al., 2019), although the exact mechanisms behind therapeutic change are still under consideration. For many individuals struggling with anxiety, talking with a therapist may be uncomfortable. In EFC, the horse is used as a mediator and a source of comfort, which can decrease the stress and pressure typically felt in traditional talk therapy and increase overall comfort in the therapeutic relationship (Kern-Godal et al., 2015; Waite & Bourke, 2013). Comfortability in the therapeutic relationship can bring about positive change and may make the client more willing to participate with the therapist (Kern-Godal et al., 2015; Waite & Bourke, 2013).

As mentioned, EFC can be a complementary approach, used in conjunction with other therapies or treatments. EFC can also incorporate processes and interventions from other therapies such as mindfulness (Bhatnagar et al., 2013; Earles et al., 2015), nature-based therapies (Fine & Beck, 2019; Kinoshita, 2019; Poulsen et al., 2016; Yeh et al., 2016), and potentially others such as EMDR to help treat anxiety-related symptoms.

The limitations of EFC must be considered when using this approach to treat anxiety. For example, some clients experience fear around animals, especially horses. Questions for EFC counsellors to consider asking include what activities they could engage in that would help decrease a client's fear of horses and whether EFC could still be beneficial for clients who do experience fear around horses. In addition, as mentioned earlier, mobility and transportation difficulties may limit the accessibility of EFC for different populations. Although EFC may be a good therapeutic intervention to try for treating anxiety, is EFC reasonably accessible, or is EFC available only for specific clients? Ways to make EFC more accessible for people need to be explored further.

Increased standardization of what EFC means in the field of psychology is also needed. Standardization could be handled by a licensing organization that ensures all businesses claiming to offer EFC are producing the same level of services. Various organizations such as the Professional Association for Equine Facilitated Wellness (2020), EAGALA (n.d.), Path International (n.d.), and the Certification Board for Equine Interaction Professionals (n.d.) offer licensing and training for professionals in the EFC field. However, having a range of organizations providing certification could create problems with the quality of the level of service provided and ethics. McIntosh (2018a) stated that having a variety of programs means requirements for certification, cost, and time commitment may vary significantly. For example,

some programs provide certification in a weekend, whereas other certification programs take a few years because of course requirements. Costs can also vary a great deal. In addition, according to McIntosh (2018a), some EFC training programs are not linked to certification bodies, which can create ethical concerns. Having different approaches on how to do EFC may offer some benefits, but consistency in certification and training is needed.

In addition, EFC needs to receive broader coverage from insurance companies. Insurance companies are willing to cover costs such as service dogs or therapy dogs (Ballard et al., 2020), yet horses in EFC sessions may not be seen as a critical factor in therapy and, therefore, are not covered in some cases (Ballard et al., 2020). Although some EFC or AAT businesses may be funded by government agencies such as child services (McIntosh, n.d.) or possibly by schools, there may be clients who have to pay for the cost of therapy (Ballard et al., 2020). Not having insurance coverage to see a psychologist is unfortunate given that EFC may benefit individuals who do not benefit from traditional talk therapy. Additional funding for EFC programs would advance the EFC field, help with the standardization of EFC services, increase research quality as more people would be able to access EFC and would be available for research, and increase the number of people receiving help for their mental health (Ballard et al., 2020).

The research discussed in this paper indicates a need for more public policies that increase access to animals, whether companion animals or therapeutic animals (Feldman et al., 2019). The public policies could include options such as funding to bring animals into classrooms for students (Feldman et al., 2019). Another option could be for the psychology field, businesses, and the government to organize programs and initiatives that allow EFC and AAT more broadly into a variety of medical practices. Medical practices that have the space could bring in horses or other animals, such as dogs, to help patients with anxiety (Feldman et al.,

2019). Public policies are important to increase access to animals for individuals who may benefit from it, such as children in school, patients in hospital, people with PTSD, or elderly people in nursing homes. The increased access would allow them to receive the therapeutic benefits gained through regular encounters with animals.

## Fundamental Next Steps for Research

Additional research on the efficacy of EFC for treating anxiety compared to other therapeutic approaches is needed. One recommendation is to conduct studies comparing EFC for treating anxiety to other traditional psychotherapy approaches for treating anxiety (Kazdin, 2019; Kovács et al., 2020). Knowing how well EFC compares to other modalities for treating different types of anxiety (e.g., panic disorder, generalized anxiety) would help determine which course of treatment may be most beneficial for certain clients.

Other routes of exploration could include looking at EFC interventions primarily focused on groundwork and those that rely on horseback riding and investigating whether there is any difference between the two. Researchers could go even deeper and include a third condition to explore the benefits of participants having both groundwork with horses and horseback riding, and see whether that group produces any difference in results.

Researchers could also look at what other therapeutic interventions or theoretical approaches could be included in EFC work that leads to better outcomes for participants (Fine, 2019; Kazdin, 2019). This research could include further exploration of the use of EMDR within EFC, and the possible links between the two. Additionally, investigating characteristics of the client, family context, or other client factors could be fruitful avenues for exploration (Kazdin, 2019). Some other possible directions for research exploration could focus on how to integrate couple or family interventions into EFC work.

For EFC to be accepted as a scientifically credible therapy, the research methodology used for studies needs improvement. A barrier to AAT and EFC being accepted as scientifically credible and a valid therapeutic approach is the lack of empirical research to indicate whether the animal is the factor that determines change (Crossman, 2017; K. Wilson et al., 2017). Previous studies have had problems with small sample sizes, short time frames, low percentages of participants being randomly assigned to conditions, insufficient control conditions and groups, and not enough replication of study results (Anestis et al., 2014; Crossman & Herzog, 2019; Mueller & McCullough, 2017; Robinson-Edwards et al., 2019). The areas to focus on are developing better research designs, having research with control conditions when feasible, using larger sample sizes, replicating research studies to increase consistency in results, and exercising more control over researcher bias so biases do not influence results (Crossman & Herzog, 2019).

Although EFC research has improved in the last few years with longer-term studies, larger sample sizes, increased use of control groups, increase in participants being randomly assigned to experimental groups, and more use of standardized treatments and validated measures, continued improvements are still needed for EFC to be considered an evidence-based approach (Crossman & Herzog, 2019; McCune et al., 2019). Developing more diversity in AAT and EFC research would lead to both being seen as having scientific credibility. Current research about the benefits of AAT and EFC that adds to the empirical evidence would support AAT as an evidence-based practice. If AAT and EFC were accepted as evidence-based practice, they would be more accessible for individuals who do not respond to traditional therapy methods.

Also, additional research on participants' anxiety outcomes in the short- and long-term, after therapy has ended, would be extremely beneficial. Research could also examine how EFC helps people with different levels of severity of anxiety, and how the facilitators, participants,

and the animals engage with each other to foster therapeutic benefit (Fine et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2019; Kazdin, 2019).

Future research should ideally look towards inclusion of vulnerable populations such as youth and the elderly, as well as specific problems including mental health concerns. Research needs to be done on the underlying processes that enable the human–animal bond to be therapeutic to develop a deeper understanding of exactly how human–animal interactions help people with their mental, emotional, and physical health (Kazdin, 2017). In addition, studying different technologies, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging, genetics, and stress and attachment hormones, would allow for a better understanding of the biological processes that happen within the human body regarding the human–animal bond (McCune et al., 2019). Another area to explore is what changes happen on the personality and human development level when clients engage in EFC work (Feldman et al., 2019). Also, research could look at what characteristics of EFC influence personality and human development changes, and the underlying processes of how those characteristics create change.

Another question that has arisen from the literature review is how does EFC help the therapist in counselling sessions? For example, does the therapist feel more relaxed and calmer during sessions? Does engaging with and being around horses make it easier for the therapist to deal with more complex and challenging issues? Given that studies have indicated that EFC helps clients with symptoms of anxiety, I wonder if there are benefits for therapists and whether there are any noticeable differences for therapists who have engaged in both traditional talk therapy and EFC. Looking at the effect EFC might have on the therapists is important and a potential area for future research. Self-care is frequently discussed in the profession due to the risk of burnout, vicarious trauma, or compassion fatigue (Malinowski, 2014). Therefore, having

a type of therapeutic approach that benefits not only clients, but also therapists, is important to explore (Bachi, 2013; Poulsen et al., 2016; Robinson-Edwards et al., 2019) and may be helpful in establishing credibility for EFC and increasing empirical research in the EFC field.

## Recommendations for Practice

Counsellors involved in EFC should strive towards conducting and publishing research if they have the requisite skills or consider involving counsellors and students with research backgrounds to help establish EFC as scientifically credible. In addition, professionals who practice EFC and are certified under a professional board could lobby the government to put restrictions on who can and who cannot claim they are providing EFC to the public (Certification Board for Equine Interaction Professionals, n.d.; EAGALA, n.d.; Path International, n.d.; Professional Association for Equine Facilitated Wellness, 2020). There is the potential that people who own horses advertise in a way that indicates they practice EFC, but they do not because they are not professionally certified and, therefore, do not have the necessary training in the field. The consequences of having people who are not certified claiming they practice EFC include potential harm to clients and a lack of consistency in the service provided.

Having consistency in service is important because there should be standards for what is included in sessions and what EFC means. Clients should be provided with a concrete idea of what EFC looks like and what to expect when a business is providing EFC services. Another factor to consider is what is charged for EFC services. People who are not certified could offer horse-related activities at a less expensive rate than a regulated helping professional practicing EFC. The potential benefits of having EFC professionals lobby the government to restrict businesses that falsely claim they practice EFC and who are not under any professional

certification board may be better safety for clients, better representation of what EFC services entail, more consistent EFC service, and consistent cost representation.

Another step the professional community can take is to work towards creating a central or single governing and licensing board for EFC work. A benefit of a central governing or licensing board is to ensure people practicing EFC provide a standard level and quality of service. Another recommendation is having counsellors already practicing EFC more involved in the community. EFC counsellors can volunteer to participate in research studies and engage in networking events where they can inform people of their services and what EFC is, including the benefits and the research that supports EFC. Professionals and counselling training programs could also find ways for more people, specifically students, to become involved in existing EFC practices, such as finding spots for students to shadow or do internships or residences with the professionals.

With increased access to EFC businesses, potentially more people would be able to access the mental health help they need. Additionally, if more knowledge is gained about EFC, then the people who feel therapy does not work for them may find EFC to be useful. It is important for more people to know about EFC because that is the only way that the field of EFC will continue to grow and be able to become a scientifically credible intervention. Knowledge about the field is generally lacking. When I have mentioned EFC to others in the counselling field, a couple of people have known what I am talking about, but most of the time it is met with curiosity. People have typically not considered animals, especially horses, in therapy. I have even had a conversation with some people who grew up with horses, who said although they can believe in the benefits of horses in therapy, they had never thought in much depth about using them. Therefore, I believe that having more individuals, both professionals and the general

public, to learn about EFC would be beneficial to increase the reach of EFC. If these suggestions were put into practice, knowledge of the field would increase.

## Reflexive Self-Statement

As I travelled on the journey of writing this paper, I experienced many emotions and did a great deal of thinking. Earlier in the paper, I mentioned some biases such as not wanting to fall into the trap of confirmation bias or believing that horses are the best therapeutic animal. I find it hard to say whether I did fall into those biases that I said I would try to bracket. I found it difficult to not experience confirmation bias that EFC does work for anxiety symptoms when I kept finding articles that showed that EFC was effective in helping a variety of people deal with anxiety. However, I did not shy away from articles that were not as positive toward EFC due to lack of research or enough correlation to prove that the EFC was producing the change in the participants. I did learn that even though I do have more knowledge than some people about EFC, there is still a lot more information I need to gain about EFC and AAT. Realizing I had a lot more to learn about EFC and AAT was a humbling experience, especially because people look to me for information about horses and sometimes call me a horse expert, even though I do not identify as a horse expert. Although I know a lot about horses and have passion for the field and horses, having passion and some knowledge does not make me the horse expert that I hope to be one day.

At the beginning of my research, I knew about EFC and the benefits it can produce for people with anxiety because, although I was never technically in an EFC program, I remember the experiences of my anxiety decreasing when spending time around horses. My stance on EFC and anxiety has not changed, as I have always believed that EFC is beneficial for anxiety; however, my knowledge about the topic has deepened. For instance, seeing the evidence that

EFC has components of mindfulness (Bhatnagar et al., 2013; Earles et al., 2015), nature-based therapies (Fine & Beck, 2019; Kinoshita, 2019; Poulsen et al., 2016; Yeh et al., 2016), and potentially EMDR aspects fascinates me (Clark, n.d.). I had some understanding that features of mindfulness and nature were a part of the EFC process, yet doing research and finding evidence that supported what I already knew was substantial and has made a difference in my beliefs about EFC. I would say that my belief in the EFC field has grown from doing this research and seeing the evidence that supports the benefits of EFC. However, there were moments of frustration and questioning when I encountered research that specifically stated that the researchers or counsellors being studied could not determine whether the benefits were due to the animals, such as horses and dogs, or if the results were due to some other process happening (Crossman, 2017; Jones et al., 2019; K. Wilson et al., 2017).

This research has impacted how I will practice EFC in the future. I will work to continuously gain knowledge and be deliberate in my own practice. I will make sure I am aware of the different theories, such as attachment theory, underlying EFC. I will also advocate for this field and be a participant in research studies, if possible, as I want to further this field and help establish its credibility. As I was doing research and finding evidence that EFC does help people handle anxiety symptoms, I noticed that the positive research of EFC made me feel good about my instincts that horses are beneficial for helping mental health. It is one thing to have a personal experience of a therapy technique being effective even if it was not intentional, such as my experiences with horses helping my anxiety; the experience is quite different when reading published research about the positive changes that can come about from EFC.

## Conclusion

Even though the exact mechanisms of therapeutic change are still unknown, EFC appears to be a viable therapeutic approach to dealing with anxiety. Horses offer a variety of psychological, emotional, physiological, and social benefits during EFC. They can help build rapport between clients and counsellors, foster attachment, and help with emotional regulation. EFC can help clients learn and improve nonverbal communication skills, create and maintain healthy boundaries, overcome fears, and foster mindfulness, confidence, and attunement to self and others.

Having a variety of approaches, such as EFC and AAT, to choose from for mental health concerns such as anxiety creates more options and agency for clients. Options for mental health treatment and therapy are important because a one-size-fits-all approach does not exist; an intervention that works for one person may not work for another person. EFC, by offering a way for people to connect with horses, is a promising intervention that offers hope to people with anxiety.

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