



## Examining Prisoner Experience of an Equine Assisted Psychotherapy

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**Abstract**

Engagements in complementary therapies such as animal interventions appear to improve people skills, ability, and wellbeing. Yet little is understood of the role Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) might play when supporting incarcerated patients. This paper outlines the findings of a study which used an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach to explore the experiences of five incarcerated participants who engaged in a short structured EAP. The themes which emerged include: The effect of EAP on mental health and anxiety; The impact of EAP on confidence and communication; The impact of EAP on emotional regulation; Building a bond and Sense of achievement. EAP appears to help promote positive change, while encouraging the development of positive coping strategies, confidence and communication skills.

**Keywords:** Narratives, Equine Assisted Psychotherapy, Therapeutic Communities, Mental Health, Achievement

## Introduction

Animal assisted therapies offer alternative interventions to those solely reliant on a 'human provider' (Masters, 2009, p. 8). Indeed, many positive psychological and cognitive effects of the inclusion of animals in therapy are reported (Cirulli, *et al*, 2011) including: improving mental health, helping veterans with post-traumatic stress disorders (Masters, 2009); helping to address mood, attention deficit, and behavioural disorders, communication issues, and substance abuse, (Tetreault, 2006; Shultz, 2005) decreasing stress and increasing trust (Barker & Dawson, 1998). In addition, such therapies can counteract issues of social withdrawal (Berry *et al*, 2013).

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP), as discussed here, constitutes the use of horses in therapy and involves a team approach from equine and mental health experts, focused upon the horse's communication and the physical safety of the rider and the client's emotional wellbeing respectively, techniques involve both mounted and unmounted activity (Lee, Dakin, & McLure, 2016). Baugh (2009) suggests that horses are particularly suited to such techniques, as they have certain qualities and characteristics that support the therapeutic process. Equines are deeply embedded in our psyche and symbolise 'spirit' and 'freedom', their large size and power demand respect and attention (Frewin & Gardine, 2005). Horses are intelligent animals, able to read subtle changes in human body language (Hallberg, 2008). They can, without judgment, interpret intention and respond accordingly (McCormick, 1997). It is this immediacy in response that makes them ideal for behavioural type therapies, as clients receive an instant reaction and response to their own behaviours. Although there is much literature examining animal assisted therapies, research into equine facilitated therapies have received little attention (Vidrine Owen-Smith & Faulkner, 2002) and even less is understood of such therapies within incarcerated populations.

Providing therapeutic interventions for people during periods of incarceration, may be regarded as an ethical and humane way to offer support in what is often a very harsh and hostile environment (Sykes, 1958); particularly given high levels of violence, mental health problems and substance use

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amongst current prison populations (Brooker *et al*, 2008; Singleton, Farrell & Meltzer 2003). The significant advantages of EAP include: helping individuals manage current situations and future challenges (Knapp, 2007); promoting qualities such as creative thinking and working as a team (Myers, 2004); providing structure and opportunities to take responsibility; offering time away from the harms of the prison setting; as well as providing a therapeutic opportunity to foster positive change. Such benefits suggest that the use of this type of therapy in prison requires much further exploration.

This paper therefore, outlines the findings of a study that examined the meanings made by five incarcerated participants who all engaged in an EAP intervention. Their unique and idiosyncratic experiences were collected and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which provided a wealth of data documenting their personal experiences and the meaning which they, themselves, attached to this Intervention. Due to this study's focus the following five most prominent themes are discussed in this paper: a) The effect of EAP on mental health and anxiety; b) The impact of EAP on confidence and communication; c) The impact of EAP on emotional regulation; d) Building a bond and e) Sense of achievement. An in-depth review of the five themes enables a more thorough discussion which may facilitate and inspire further research.

**Method**

Due to the exploratory nature of this study a phenomenological approach was adopted. IPA was deemed appropriate, not only because it allows for the exploration of participants' unique experience, but because it also explores the meaning taken from that experience through the lens of the third person. This deep and unique perspective is important as the voices and experiences of those incarcerated are rarely heard.

## Context

The prison in which the intervention took place was an adult, male, open condition prison in England (Category D) however participants who engaged in the equine intervention were from both the open prison and a nearby closed Category C prison. The equine intervention was delivered intensively over two weeks by a qualified therapist who worked to help improve emotional regulation among participants with a history of drug and alcohol abuse. People with drug misuse issues were chosen because of their difficulties in regards to emotional regulation both in prison and outside. It was hypothesised that through the project their feelings of anxiety could be improved. Intervention required participants to interact with a horse through group based and individual exercises, all led by the therapist.

A total of eight participants took part in this first intervention and five participants were a part of this study. The demographic details of the sample are outlined in Table 1. Participant names are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Two specially-trained horses were chosen and used for the EAP sessions. Both were adult, healthy, medium sized horses. At all times the welfare of the horses was considered and the therapist was given reassurances by veterinarians for the duration of the study. Prior to the research starting the therapist and prison officials attended preliminary meetings with the researchers and written material highlighting the content of the sessions were provided. The therapeutic setting included the prisoners, the horse and the therapist.

EAP intervention was made up of ten sessions, each session lasted between 90-120 minutes which included 30 minutes of grooming, 20 minutes of feeding, 20 minutes of hand walking the horse and 30 minutes of attending the stables and tidying up the surrounding areas. Grooming was incorporated to teach prisoners how to care and manage for the horses; prisoners were given instructions by the therapist and were encouraged to interact with the horse verbally and non-verbally. Feeding the horses was incorporated as this required the prisoner to be in a close proximity to the horses. Hand walking the horse was also a part of the intervention, this was fitting and

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3 required the prisoners to be confident, calm and manage their anxieties. Lastly tidying the  
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5 surrounding areas was important to enable the prisoner to appreciate the horse's environment and  
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7 wellbeing. In some instances prisoners volunteered to undertake certain tasks such as walking the  
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9 horse individually, however group based exercises consisted of preparing the feed and feeding the  
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11 horses. At all-times the therapist was present to ensure the safety and wellbeing of both prisoners  
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13 and horses.  
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17 **Sample and sampling**

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20 A period of approximately six weeks passed before participants were interviewed. It was hoped that  
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22 through the passage of time participants might process the experience, attempt some of the new  
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24 skills learned and therefore reflect upon the meaning of the intervention, as well as the experience  
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26 itself. While all eight participants were invited to take part in the evaluation, only five were included  
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28 in the sample. This is because, one participant chose not to engage in the study, one had been  
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30 moved to another prison where the researcher was unable to gain access, and the final participant  
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32 had been released from prison, but his address was unknown to the prison.  
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37 **Table 1. Demographics of Sample**

Participant	Age at Interview	Ethnicity	Index Offence	Previous Offence(s)	Substances Used *identified as problematic substance
Lewis	31	White	Robbery	Theft of Vehicle(s) Possession of Cannabis Carrying Weapons	Cannabis* Alcohol* Ecstasy
Jermaine	26	White	Not recorded	Anti-Social Orders Theft of Vehicle(s) Various Violence Breach of Orders	Cannabis* Alcohol* Mamba
Michael	47	Black	Assault	Common Assault	Cannabis Alcohol
Omar	26	Mixed	GBH	Various Violence Supplying and Dealing of Drugs	Cannabis* Alcohol* Cocaine Ecstasy
James	42	White	Robbery and ABH	Burglary Theft of Vehicle(s)	Cannabis Alcohol* Prescription Medication* Mamba

## Data Collection

Data was collected using IPA a qualitative approach which aims to provide detailed examinations of personal lived experiences (Smith, 2015). IPA offers a flexible and non-prescriptive approach (see Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009 and Larkin & Thompson 2012). IPA is committed to “the detailed examination of a particular case” (Smith *et al*, 2009, p3) and appropriate in exploring complex and emotive topics. Engagement took place with prisoners who are considered a vulnerable population. Ethical approval was granted by the National Offender Management Service Research Committee and the University of Birmingham’s Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Ethical Review Committee. The respective prison highlighted potential participants who were briefed about the research. Prisoners sentence length, behaviour and potential risk were all discussed beforehand and the ability of prisoners to work with others was also a consideration. The prison is a working farm and the safety of animal and participant were brokered throughout.

The nature of IPA interviews requires a flexible, conversational approach, therefore a semi structured interview schedule was developed and used as a prompt and guide for each interview. This paper seeks to understand the role EAP might play when supporting incarcerated patients. The aim is to explore the experiences of prisoners who partook in EAP intervention. The schedule consisted of general introductory questions with the aim of putting the person at ease. The interview then moved to questions about the experience of EAP. Participants were asked about the effects of the intervention in terms of their sense of self, confidence and self-awareness. The interview ended with questions about the participant’s view of the future and the extent to which the intervention played any role in their future plans. Each interview (carried out by the second author) lasted approximately 60 minutes. These were audio recorded and transcribed, a copy of the transcript was sent to each participant. To ensure anonymity, participants were given pseudonyms. Where a participant mentioned a place, name or specific date this was replaced by the letter X to further ensure anonymity, this ensures that any identifying information has been redacted.

**Data Analysis**

Transcripts were analysed individually and separately. The first author analysed the data. A process of first reading and re-reading the transcripts took place, during this process she simultaneously listened to the interviews. This first step facilitated familiarisation with the interview and the participants' narratives. The second phase saw a line by line analysis of the text with observational notes being made to the right of the page. Notes included commentary on the linguistic style such as pauses, repetition, tone and laughter. Important descriptions given by the participant and insights into their experiences and relevance to them were noted. Commentary was also made in relation to more conceptual observations interpreted from the text. A summary overview of the text and notes was developed along with audit checks through supervision with the second author, this ensured observations and analysis remained close to the text.

The third stage involved the analytical shift from observation to interpretation and the development of emerging clusters or themes. Here analysis involved drawing ideas and interpretations together, mapping together comments and observations into meaningful clusters. Important here was the process of retaining what was idiosyncratic and important to the participant, whilst also developing an understanding and interpretation by the researcher. Again, this process developed alongside regular discussions during supervision to ensure rigour and validity of the analysis.

**Results**

Although individual stories were unique many similarities and shared experiences were uncovered. A total of five themes featured strongly in over half of the sample; and two themes were expressed by all participants. Themes and their presence across each participant are detailed in Table 2.



**Table 2. Summary of Themes Identified within the Study.**

Themes	Lewis	Jermaine	Michael	Omar	James	Present in Over Half of the Sample
The effect of EAP on mental health and anxiety	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
The impact of EAP on confidence and communication	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
The impact of EAP on emotional regulation	Yes	No	Yes	no	yes	Yes
Sense of achievement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Building a bond	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

For the aforementioned reason, and for purpose of this paper, the above five themes will be discussed in turn.

### **Theme One: The Effect of EAP on Mental Health and Anxiety**

The first theme identified is mental health issues experienced by participants and the reported effects of their engagement on the EAP. In summary, participants felt they learned skills which helped them deal with feelings of stress and anxiety. They felt these experiences would equip them for future situations. It was interesting to hear Lewis' experiences of the EAP, and how it helped him to relax. Lewis talked about not being able to express emotions but interacting with the horses gave him the opportunity to engage and speak to others. He reported that the EAP helped him to feel calm. Calmness in prison can be invaluable:

“you see since I’ve done the course I’ve calmed down to tell you the truth like I ain’t got no attitude when things go wrong for me like I was supposed to go on a home leave on Tuesday ‘n like [pause] ... (yeah) but I never went cos my paperwork wasn’t ready (oh) but like I’ve let the kids down by not coming out to stop with them n like I just bit my tongue [inhales] took some deep breaths n carried on carrying on with my daily activities go work an helpin’ officers ‘n that” (p22, 308-313)

Learning the necessary skills to control difficult emotions was new to Lewis; he reported the benefits of this not only to himself, but also to others in the prison such as officers. In prison not being able to engage in a home visit can have a negative effect on the well-being of inmates. Being able to positively deal with such a situation is to Lewis’ credit as he may have previously responded in an undesirable manner, the fact that he acknowledged a correlation between him practicing self-control and the EAP is extremely encouraging.

Jermaine has also experienced a number of challenges in his life and has found that EAP has helped him to address some of these problems. After his engagement on the EAP, although his unhelpful thinking has not been eradicated he has managed to control the degree to which these factors cause him to feel ‘stuck’. Indeed, he talks about feeling enabled and now being able to do things that he believed he was unable to do prior the intervention. EAP has helped Jermaine to be more open in relation to his feelings and emotions with staff in prison and his family, to such an extent he recognised there is now help he can access:

“That’s like before I could have done it like (that’s interesting) there’s help out there everywhere but for me it’s like now I think I’m more open (yeah) so I’ll talk to the majority of people about my problems now (yeah) so some people probably don’t like it [laughs] (it’s like the opposite now) yeah so now I just talk about everything an I’ll tell everyone everything [laughs]” (p13, 193 - 201).

Like both Lewis and Jermaine, after the intervention James experienced improvements:

“At the time I had bad blood pressure and erm just only slightly out it was and when they tested it like cos we had to go out walk around every morning like and it was all relaxing and they did say that my blood was more relaxed to when I’m going to work with the horses... I think it was relaxing cos I knew that erm what I was gonna do I was gonna I was gonna enjoy myself for like the next few hours” (p8, Line 121- 127).

James also became more aware of his surroundings:

“Like I didn’t realise you can hear like certain noises around the house like the fridges and the cooker and you know the house quieting down and stuff (right ok) and then I asked her why she was teaching us that and she said erm because so we can get to realise what the horse can hear” (p7, Line 100 - 103).

Participant’s experiences suggest that mental health and physical health are significant issues for men incarcerated. EAP has played a role in acknowledging and addressing these issues.

## **Theme Two: The impact of EAP on Confidence and Communication**

In addition to the psychological benefits participants reported in the previous theme, there were other advantages reported. Indeed, the EAP had a positive effect upon participants, in terms of them developing personal skills and improving their relationships. EAP enabled the participants to reflect on how the skills learnt can assist them in their everyday lives. The importance of self-presentation and body language is explored. Jermaine expresses: “Your body language an’ how the like I think what I took from it was how other people can pick up on your state and your emotion”. (p 23, Line 355 - 356). Lewis wants to teach his children the skills he has learnt, Lewis: “(yeah) ‘n obviously for when I do get on release ‘n I wanna take the kids out (mm) that’s a’ experience I can show them innit (ok)”. (p16, Line 228). This experience has given Lewis the aspiration to teach his children something new upon his release. The aim being to work on his relationship with his children and

family. Michael echoes similar sentiments, dealing with negative energy and emotions is crucial in the quest for positive emotional-bonds, the relationship with his daughter is specified:

“It was like my breathing you know erm being in sequence with the horse (mm right) and it oh gosh it was even my thoughts as well in my thinking you know... just been calm you know (right) getting all the negative energy out (wow) and it was brilliant and I can’t wait to speak about it to my daughter” (p16, Line 243 - 246).

Self-awareness and confidence is apparent, Jermaine expresses his anxieties surrounding being around a group of people however EAP intervention has proved beneficial. Jermaine: “ Before it it be like I didn’t even feel like completely comfortable around a lot of people (mm) but now it doesn’t really bother me” (p20, Line 312 - 314).

Lewis acknowledged that he had to have belief in his own ability before the horses would respond and acknowledgement and praise from staff has help Lewis’s confidence and self-esteem. Lewis recalls:

“I had to give myself a lift as well like to show him like whose boss ‘n that ‘n to show I was in control (ok) ‘n give him a signal to move back or keep still (right) mmm (right and it responded to that) yeah (wow how did that make you feel when that happened) the lady said it liked me so it kind of gave me a big head [laughs]” (Lewis, p10, Line 127-130).

Building upon this, EAP helped Jermaine who expresses that improvement was in the form of having the ability to deal with things effectively, and not letting them build up. He has formed a structured way of dealing with issues which may arise and understands the impact of his actions:

Jermaine: “Expressing myself not letting things build up (mm) and then going on that course there was being more aware of how my behaviour and my actions can impact on others even that was just from the horses I think I took that on with people as well because sometimes as well when you’re tense and uptight” (p26, Line 404 – 408).

Jermaine highlighted the benefits of EAP and believed that most participants got something positive from the course: "I think most people that was on it with me erm got something out of it (ok) even if it was only just while they was doing it (right) people got something out of it" (p18, 281 - 282). This was at a cost and was not easy for all participants. Some reported that they had to make an effort and work at developing these new interpersonal skills, again this was something new for the group:

"I enjoyed the one on contact with the horses because I ain't never really had any contact with any animals like that before but also the it was like you got like erm you only put in what you put out of it" (James, p4, 55 – 57).

One of the skills routinely referred to by participants was the ability to assert confidence and control with the animal. This was an interesting and new experience for participants:

"You've got to be like super confident with the horse because he is relying on you to trust him or her... you've got to build up a certain level of trust with the horse" (James, p5, Line 63 – 66).

EAP participants were able to experience success through a calm and controlled interaction. This was surprising to participants and a skill they could see transferred within their 'human' relationships. Omar refers to the animals as having a mind of their own, similar to human beings; suggesting that he has to work at relationships and trust, with both humans and animals.

"You know erm you know animals have a mind of their own at the end of the day but seeing how it gradually at first it might be a bit hesitant but... it got more and more comfortable" (Omar, p33, Line 537 - 539).

EAP had a profound effect upon participants in this study. Confidence improved, and they learned new and transferable skills. EPA and emotional regulation is discussed below.

**Theme Three: Impact on Emotional Regulation**

The improvement in confidence and communication is an important factor when exploring the recognition of emotional regulation. All participants reported an improvement in the manner in which they managed emotions on a day to day basis. The equines ability to sense is acknowledged, Lewis explains “yeah yeah your feelings or your emotions it can tell if you are stressed or depressed n all that” (Page 9, Line 117-118).

Participants describe some of the challenges they experience in prison. A common response to the intervention was to state that ‘it was a good experience’. As aforementioned improvement in regards to emotional regulation is expressed. Yet, the degree to which participants acknowledged this improvement is interesting. Lewis recognises some of the benefits of EAP on his emotional wellbeing. Lewis: “you see since I’ve done the course I’ve calmed down to tell you the truth like I ain’t got no attitude” (Page 22, Line 308). Lewis attributes his change in attitude to EAP and recognises that prior to the intervention he did not always act in an appropriate manner.

Lewis provides an example of this improvement and states, “I just bit my tongue [inhales] took some deep breaths n carried on carrying on with my daily activities” (Page 22, Line 313). Indeed, Lewis recognises that he has adopted steps to manage his emotions and is of the opinion that he now has the capacity to deal with situations more appropriately. EAP has enabled James to become more aware of his emotions and importantly how to deal with them. James: “I’d like to put down that it was a... a very good experience... did make me feel like made me think with my emotions more an’ that” (p15, Line 230)

This experience suggests an improvement in participant’s ability to acknowledge and discuss their emotions; Michael acknowledges and embraces this. Michael: “I’ve learned to reach out now...I’ve learned to tell my sister that I love her I can speak... I can tell my aunt I phone her up sometimes and

say I love you" (Page 5, Line 65 - 67). Participant's narratives suggest that EAP had a positive impact on emotional regulation, well-being and emotive expression.

#### Theme Four: Sense of Achievement

It is vital to explore participant's sense of achievement in order to contextualise their experience of EAP. Some participants were sceptical about being involved in the therapeutic intervention, Jermaine for example states:

"A bit sceptical when we've gone out there and they're like well we're gonna be doing this an' I'm thinkin' I thought it was gonna be like talking to the horses and I thought this is a bit crazy [laughs] (p18, 276 - 27).

Lewis echoes this perspective to some extent, "the horse can tell if you're stressed n that's what I was weary at first of the course because I am kind of a stressed guy (yeah yeah)" (Page 16, Line 216-218). Participants reported a sense of achievement, Lewis's ability to successfully interact with the equines in the presence of others is acknowledged. Lewis: "yeah cos I dun it in front of the governor n thing so he knows that I took part in the course and achieved something" (Page 12, Line 167-169). The recognition and acknowledgement from others is rewarding.

This sense of achievement goes beyond solely working with equines; it has also enhanced the confidence of participants. For Omar, this was a sense of achievement:

"It's kind of like erm maybe like a sense of achievement a sense of pride like erm everyone likes to be liked... even if it's by an animal you know what I'm saying so the fact that you know like erm you know I always wanted to interact with a horse" (p33, 523 - 526).

Omar built a bond with the horses over a short period of time. This was important as such an attachment is rarely experienced in prison, and he recalled how he felt as the horse he worked with came from across the field to greet him:

“I’ve come through the gate so something triggered the memory in this horse over the space of three days that the horse likes me you know what I mean an although everyone is over there it’s come straight over to me over here so I just felt like yeah, a sense of pride and a sense of achievement and I felt good you know what I mean” (p33, 528 - 531).

Similarly, James explores his achievements in relation to EAP:

“I’d say the achievement for me was knowing that I’ve done something positive for that day compared to the standard prison day I’ve done something positive erm and I’m learning to do something that I have been trying to use on the outside” (James, p6, Line 79 - 82).

EAP provided the opportunity for participants to engage in a different form of therapeutic intervention. Michael was happy with the intervention and discusses personal achievement and his ability to interact with the equine – Michael recalls,

“it was just sheer trust the horse trusted me and I trusted the horse you know and we worked together... I thought it was strange and amazing at the same time that that I could do something like that you know” (Page 18, Line 281 - 285).

Participants have highlighted personal achievements in regards to partaking in EAP. As aforementioned this intervention took place intensively over the course of two weeks. Arguably a longer time period may have revealed further achievements. The final theme will explore the participant’s ability to bond with the equine.

#### **Theme Five: Building a Bond**

Finally, in addition to the sense of achievement participants developed a bond with the equine. Over the course of the intervention participants were introduced to the equine and took part in daily activities such as grooming, feeding and walking the horses. Post EAP Lewis describes bonding with the horses and also acknowledges what is needed for positive interaction,



Lewis: "was kinda shocked that it listened to me for the first time it was the first time I'd met the horse and the horse has met me in it... cos it's something new and it just shows what energy you got in it... it just shows you how to use your energy really in it" (Page 10, Line 132-136).

Most participants in fact noticed they had developed a bond with the horses. EAP has enabled them to view therapeutic intervention in a new light. Michael reports feeling close to the horse, EAP enabled Michael to bond on a number of levels. Michael: "an I think just working with animals even being close like how close I felt with the horses as well its putting trust" (Page 22, Line 349 - 353). Working and spending time with the horse over the course of the two weeks enabled Michael to develop a bond with the horse.

The participants of this study constantly reflected up this process,

Omar: "yeah I felt great about it I was quite excited to interact with a horse...it was very relaxing being with a horse an stroking the horses an interacting them and feeding them you know I'd take bits of my lunch down an like few apples n that an give it to them and I just thought it was amazing" (Page 32, Line 507 - 510).

Omar further expresses,

"yeah of course you know I brushed it an you know stroked it an I just loved to just stroke it an scratch it an it just seen that I'm like we are fulfilling a need for both of us like the horse is fulfilling my need to be in contact with something normal and natural. (Page 37, Line 586 - 590).

Not only did participants enjoy bonding with the horses, many also comment on the personal connection they had with the equine. Additionally, therapist recognised bonds established between participants and the equine. Omar states "the staff commented on er how quick we'd like build a bond with them..." (Page 32, Line 512). The recognition from members of staff, therapist and

prisoners reassured the participants that they had successfully established a bond. The timing as it relates to establishing a bond with the horse is recognised, interestingly the bond with the equine was established in many ways and many recognise the importance of building this bond. The bond between the prisoner and horse is not unidirectional, in fact, participants are aware of the benefits bonding with the equine has on both their personal wellbeing and the equine.

**Discussion**

The study examined the meanings and experiences of an EAP intervention. We analysed five in-depth interviews with participants incarcerated in a UK prison, following their completion of an EAP. To our knowledge, no previous study has examined such an intervention using this method and as such the findings of this evaluation are important. They enhance and develop our knowledge about how best to support and treat people with histories of substance use and/or mental health problems and anxiety while in prison, and the vital role such therapies may play. In this paper we presented the findings of five themes which emerged from our analysis: The effect of EAP on mental health and anxiety; The impact of EAP on confidence and communication; The impact of EAP on emotional regulation; Building a bond and Sense of achievement.

Alternative approaches such as animal assisted therapies are worthy of consideration when attempting to support the rehabilitation and treatment needs of incarcerated clients. This is supported by much of the very positive experiences reported in our study. Participants achieved a number of goals and their confidence improved as they felt a sense of achievement. For people who are disempowered this can be a powerful treatment gain. Indeed, self-efficacy and the belief that change is possible is one of the essential requirements needed to support a process of rehabilitation (Maruna and Immarigeon, 2004). Having their behaviours validated and rewarded, continues to reinforce this positive process of change (Maruna *et al.*, 2004). Of even greater utility was the bond and connection participants felt with the horses.

Clearly in an environment of hyper masculinity and a constant threat of violence, stereotypically prison is an unlikely place for participants to experience such a connection and a bond. Yet, in an effort to help support a process of change, it is just this type of experience that clients need in order that they can feel connected, attached and even needed. Reclaiming an identity of value and worth in society is again an important factor that supports the desistance process (Maruna, 2001) and is one that can begin in prison. It provides participants with proof that they are able to have a positive impact upon another living being, something they can translate into their connections with humans.

Participant's experiences suggest that poor mental health is enhanced for men incarcerated who misuse substances, and that EAP can offer some support in dealing with these challenges. They are able to clearly articulate signs such as low mood, feeling depressed, aggression or violent behaviour, isolating oneself and suicidal attempts and/or ideation. While no claim is being made that the EAP alone is the solution to this issue, it does appear to offer some comfort and support to those experiencing poor mental health during incarceration. Participants appear to be able to cope better with problematic thoughts, express themselves to others with greater ease and self-regulate difficult emotions such as anger and frustration. This study took place only six weeks after the intervention was administered, therefore, a greater time period is needed, along with different contexts to fully explore the effectiveness of the intervention. While, participants acknowledged that the skills developed and learnt through EAP improved their mental health, other benefits were also experienced.

While it is important that people are given the opportunity to engage in programmes such as EAP, it is also valuable for them to learn and have the opportunity to practice new skills to support the process of rehabilitation (McNeill, 2009). Our findings support this idea and EAP was experienced as a learning opportunity that helped participants develop communication, relationship skills, and emotional regulation that would support future desistance. It is imperative that in order for people to desist and engage in meaningful lives after prison, they are helped to develop the capacity to

learn and practice new skills (Ward & Brown, 2004). Such skills are vital for helping to increase people's social capital (Farrall, 2004) which in turn serves to support the reintegration and reconnection of people and their communities (Weaver & McNeill, 2015). Most of our participants spoke of the bond they developed with the horses and their ability to reconnect. Through the EAP, they felt able to transfer skills learned into their relationships. Our evaluation of one EAP intervention is therefore, encouraging. We feel that as part of a suite of treatment strategies, EAPs can help people during periods of incarceration cope with their environment and begin to develop strategies and learn skills that will support the desistance process. The desistance process is of course a complex one (Piquero, Sullivan & Farrington 2010) and therefore an EAP must be delivered within a suite of interventions and risk management strategies.

Our study was a small qualitative examination of one pilot intervention and as such, has no strength in terms of generalisability. However, while this might be deemed a limitation, its in-depth and unique look at this intervention is the first of its kind and thus, has value in facilitating greater dialogue and consideration of animal-based therapies. Its qualitative nature also allows for a more robust role for those directly affected by such intervention, with the most intimate knowledge of its impact. Much more work is needed to understand the utility and effectiveness of EAPs and it is recommended that further exploration is undertaken, in particular longer-term recidivism studies. Future research may include further exploration of the effect of EAP on female prisoners.

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**Abstract**

Engagements in complementary therapies such as animal interventions appear to improve people skills, ability, and wellbeing. Yet little is understood of the role Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) might play when supporting incarcerated patients. This paper outlines the findings of a study which used an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach to explore the experiences of five incarcerated participants who engaged in a short structured EAP. The themes which emerged include: The effect of EAP on mental health and anxiety; The impact of EAP on confidence and communication; The impact of EAP on emotional regulation; Building a bond and Sense of achievement. EAP appears to help promote positive change, while encouraging the development of positive coping strategies, confidence and communication skills.

**Keywords:** Narratives, Equine Assisted Psychotherapy, Therapeutic Communities, Mental Health, Achievement