

APPLICATION OF EQUINE FACILITATED THERAPY TO MITIGATE THE LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19

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Abstract:

Background/Aims Following a Covid-19 infection, some patients continue to show symptoms, often known as Long Covid. These symptoms include fatigue, shortness of breath, coughing, worsening physical condition, balance disorders, cognitive impairment and temporary mental problems such as depression, anxiety, attention deficit disorder, and mood changes. Scientific studies evaluating the effect of Equine Facilitated Therapy (EFT) on alleviating these symptoms in different types of patients suggest that EFT can be an effective and motivating tool for improving all of these areas. The World Health Organization recommends breathing exercises, adequate regular aerobic activity, training to restore muscle strength, treatment of cognitive impairments and mental disorders to alleviate the long-term consequences of a COVID-19 infection. Intervention in these areas can be provided in a motivating and effective way by registered professionals who are trained to provide EFT.

Methods: The Czech Equine Facilitated Therapy Association (CEFTA) developed a comprehensive programme for the use of EFT in paediatric and adult patients suffering from long-term consequences of a COVID-19. A multidisciplinary team from the field of physiotherapy, occupational therapy, special education, social care, psychology and physical medicine and rehabilitation in creating the methodology participates. Thus, methods from Equine Facilitated Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Psychotherapy and Learning are intertwined here. The intervention is performed in both individual and group settings. Mounted and unmounted activities are incorporated. Contact with the equine is complemented by other methods, including relaxation techniques, respiratory physiotherapy, psychotherapy and crisis intervention. CEFTA standardized procedures are also aimed at the Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy program focussing on solving the burnout syndrome in healthcare workers and other on the frontline.

Results: The influence of EFT within the series of case reports in paediatric and adult patients after a COVID-19 infection was investigated in selected CEFTA's centres (according to their focus and specific types of clients). Qualitative methods were used to monitor the therapy effect (e.g. medical history, assessing the patient's skills and health during the intervention, initial and discharge evaluations and psychological assessment, etc.). Patients well-tolerated EFT and no side effects were found. Improvements were observed in individual patients in the areas targeted by EFT. Patients experienced improved dyspnoea, physical health, balance, and reduction of anxiety and depression. It may have been due not only to EFT but also to spontaneous improvement during recovery. A study of the impact of EFT in a larger sample of patients using uniform standardized tests is currently being prepared for an objective evaluation of the effect of this intervention.



Conclusions:

EFT can alleviate the physical and mental consequences of a COVID-19 infection. The pilot results suggest the safety and positive effect of this intervention in paediatric and adult patients.

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