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Andrew Thomas, human interest reporter for The Epoch Times

Horses Helping Veterans With PTSD



For many of our military members, it's difficult to go to war and return home as the same person. Our service members often experience traumatic, life-changing events during their deployments, and the scars from those experiences can manifest as [PTSD](#).

There are many different treatments for the condition, but now researchers at Columbia University are

experimenting with equine-assisted therapy for our veterans.

Working with [horses](#) can be therapeutic for several reasons: Horses are naturally hyper-vigilant, which helps the veterans they work with perceive and comprehend fear responses. They are also sensitive to verbal and non-verbal cues, are social animals, and are forgiving and non-judgmental.

Early research in the field had mostly been anecdotal. Now, researchers are collecting empirical data to determine the effectiveness of the therapy.

Studying PTSD

Dr. Yuval Neria is one of the researchers in charge of the study. He teaches medical psychology at Columbia University and is the Director of Trauma and PTSD at the New York State Psychiatric Institute.

Neria himself is a veteran of the Israeli Defense Forces. He earned the Israeli Medal of Honor for his service as a company commander during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Neria also served in the 1982 Lebanon War as battalion commander in which he was wounded. He's been studying psychology since 1984, and works on developing new ways to treat PTSD at Columbia University.



One of the studies he is working on is called the Man O' War Project, which is focused on researching the effectiveness of equine-assisted therapy for veterans suffering from PTSD. This will be the first clinical trial of its kind, and the findings will be synthesized into a treatment protocol manual.

So far 60 veterans have participated in the research, and the team has been collecting data since 2016. Initially, the

veterans are assessed to determine if they have PTSD and if the treatment will be safe for them.

Once the veteran is accepted as a candidate, they undergo an MRI before and after treatment to examine the brain's structure and functional connectivity.

The researchers study areas of the brain responsible for memory storage and retrieval, fear processing and response, distinguishing between safety and danger, learning, and how these areas are connected.

Horse Therapy

[Veterans](#) arrive at the Bergen Equestrian Center in New Jersey and are placed in groups of three to six veterans. Each group is paired with two horses, and the veterans engage in a variety of activities with them. The treatment lasts 90 minutes once a week for eight weeks.



First, the veterans begin by getting to know the horse and grooming them.

They then begin leading the horse, and then start more complicated exercises with obstacles.

Veterans have to earn the horses' trust, and they develop a relationship with the animal based on respect and affection.

"The treatment is not so much about the trauma or about the symptoms. It's really about intense and concentrated interaction with the horse," Neria told The Epoch Times.

A Veteran's PTSD



Tei Pascal is one of the veterans who has completed the program, and she agreed to speak with The Epoch Times about her experience.

Pascal is a 21-year veteran of the United States Air Force, and currently resides in the Bronx. She has been deployed five times, but her deployment to Kirkuk, Iraq left an indelible mark on her psyche.

Pascal was deployed early in the war, and she and her unit experienced mortar attacks at least five days a week. The barrage of mortars had a profound effect on her over time.

“It really takes a toll on you mentally, and this is where I discovered my PTSD started. I didn’t know it at the time, I didn’t even know about PTSD until years later, but Iraq was the catalyst for my PTSD,”

Pascal said.

When Pascal returned home she experienced a fair amount of stress, and struggled to figure out what she was feeling.

Pascal was living at Florida at the time, and one particular day there was a severe thunderstorm. The thunder was so loud that it set off a car alarm, and she remembers taking cover with her son.

“This kind of shocked me because this is the first time this happened to me, so I didn’t know what it was, and it took me a moment to realize that ‘Hey, I’m not still in Iraq,’” Pascal said.

Pascal still didn’t realize that she had PTSD, and didn’t seek help for quite some time. But over time she noticed that she had trouble remaining resilient about past traumas, found herself hyper-vigilant, isolated herself, and worried about loud sounds.

Building Trust

Initially, Pascal tried to cope by putting on a brave face and pretending nothing was wrong. When she moved to New York she wanted to start doing new things.

Pascal had always wanted to learn how to horseback ride, and began taking lessons. After one of her lessons, she noticed a flyer for the equine-assisted therapy research Columbia University was conducting.

Pascal knew she was struggling, plus the study involved something she loves: horses. So she decided to participate in September 2018.



“It focused instead on relearning skills necessary to build and maintain relationships. As a mother, this was really important to me because I needed to learn to trust people again. I needed to learn how to trust myself,” Pascal said.

Pascal and her group were paired with two horses named Dutch and Jack. Initially, the group started by grounding themselves to keep themselves in the present.

Pascal would then do exercises with Dutch and Jack.

She had to build trust with the horses, and learned that they picked up on her energy. She had to allow the horse to feel her energy and allow herself to feel the horses' energy.

Healing and Horses

Pascal started by grooming the horses, and then began talking to them. As they built trust between each other, she and the other participants began taking them on walks and doing more complex activities.

It took time and effort for her and the horses to be open and receptive toward each other, and Pascal learned she had to let her own guard down to earn their trust