



**Healing with horses: equine-based therapy as a  
therapeutic modality in social work practice  
in the South African context**

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Health Sciences  
in  
the Faculty of Health Sciences at the Durban  
University of Technology

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SEPTEMBER 2023

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Date: 20/09/2023

## **ABSTRACT**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Recently published research studies have delved into how the connection between humans and horses can address social, educational, and emotional challenges among distressed individuals. The current body of literature falls short of adequately explaining the mechanisms that underlie these therapeutic approaches, particularly when it comes to understanding the role of equines in facilitating the therapeutic and learning processes. This comprehension is crucial for establishing a strong foundation for such therapeutic efforts and for broadening its application within the field of social work. It is important to note that previous research has not deeply explored the complexities of equine-based therapy or the methods that practitioners use when working with their clients. The current study was undertaken with mental health practitioners who are engaged in equine-based therapy. It sought to understand equine-based therapy and its potential as a healing tool in the social work.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study was to explore the potential of equine-based therapy as a therapeutic modality in social work practice. It sought to understand the principles that guided equine-based therapy. It further explored the processes underpinning equine-based therapy. The study also looked at the emotional and social problems that were most suited for equine-based therapy and sought to understand the benefits individuals experienced through equine-based therapy. It also focused on the experiences that mental health practitioners had with regard to their use of equine-based therapy. Finally, it explored how equine-based therapy can be used to enhance social work practice.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory-descriptive design as it sought to extract rich information pertaining to the process of equine-based therapy, its benefits, and its significance in social work. The study was further guided by an instrumental case study approach. The study consisted of one sample of mental health practitioners who used equine-based therapy as a therapeutic tool. Semi-structured interviews were used as the technique for data collection. Data was collected till saturation. In total, fifteen

mental health professionals were interviewed. Data collection occurred in person at the offices of the mental health professionals. Data collection was conducted in four provinces, namely, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, and Western Cape. The process of data analysis was guided by the steps of thematic analysis. This enabled the transcripts to be reduced to patterns and similar themes. Words and phrases were generated to represent these themes and sub-themes. The themes served to illustrate the essence of the mental health practitioners' responses to how they worked with equine-based therapy.

## **FINDINGS**

The major themes that emerged from the analysis, were namely. the values and principles which were guiding equine-based therapy, the process underpinning equine-based therapy, the facilitation of equine-based therapy, clients who are suitable for equine-based therapy, and the benefits of engaging in equine-based therapy and equine-based therapy in social work. The study found that a diverse range of values and principles were used to guide the practice of equine-based therapy. Some of the critical values and principles that emerged were humility, respect for clients and horses, maintaining a non-judgemental attitude, maintaining professionalism, confidentiality, self-determination, and no harm to clients.

The process underpinning equine-based therapy included the use of different approaches to equine-based therapy. Clients had to be oriented into equine-based therapy before they started engaging with the horse. The clients also had to follow a specific procedure before they could be part of a therapeutic session. The process also involved a check-in session between the mental health practitioner and the horse. Moreover, it was found that when conducting equine-based therapy, the setting for the session should be considered as it plays a role in the process. Sessions were also found to be set up within specific time frames. One of the key findings in the process was that it was compulsory to have three partners in the equine-based therapy process i.e., the horse, horse professional and the mental health practitioner.

Furthermore, the facilitation of equine-based therapy was found to involve the inclusion of structured activities and various techniques and interventions such as play therapy, counselling interventions, the use of storyboards and spiritual interventions. The

inclusion of equine-based therapy in social work found several benefits for various groups of clients and indicated significant value in the social work field.

## **CONCLUSION**

Equine-based therapy has shown promise for its inclusion in the field of social work practice. The study highlighted the understanding of equine-based therapy, its process, the key values, and principles as well as the benefits of equine-based therapy. The study further highlighted stories of healing from the perspective of the client and mental health practitioners involved in equine-based therapy. Moreover, the study gave an overview of the significance of horses in social work and the value of equine-based therapy in social work. It also included the education and training required for social workers to practice equine-based therapy effectively.

## DECLARATION

I, Lyrise Naidu, declare that the research reported in this thesis is my original work, except where otherwise indicated. All sources used or cited have been explicitly acknowledged by means of complete references. This work has not been submitted previously to the Durban University of Technology or to any other institution for any purpose.

Lyrise Naidu

Signature

Date: 19 - 09 - 2023

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## **DEDICATION**

To all the special individuals who supported my PhD Journey, this thesis is dedicated to you. In the labyrinthine pursuit of a doctorate, your unwavering support has been the guiding light. To those who stood by me through the intellectual storms, who shared in the triumphs and tribulations, who offered their wisdom, patience, and love, this dedication is a heartfelt expression of gratitude. To the future we envision, the impact we aspire to make, and the knowledge we continue to seek and share, this thesis is dedicated to our shared journey and the bright horizons it promises...With heartfelt gratitude and deep appreciation.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Completing a PhD thesis is a monumental journey, and I am deeply grateful to the many individuals whose support and guidance have been invaluable throughout this endeavour.

To the Lord Almighty for his blessings throughout my Ph.D. journey. Your divine presence has been my source of inspiration and resilience.

My supervisor, Professor Raisuyah Bhagwan. Thank you for your commitment to excellence, your patience, and your constant encouragement. Your mentorship has not only shaped my academic growth but has also inspired me to strive for the highest standards in research.

To all the research participants, whose voices and perspectives are the heart and soul of this study, I extend my heartfelt gratitude. Your openness, honesty, and trust in the research process have illuminated the path toward a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

To Prabashnee, you have been more than just a sibling; you have been a confidant, a friend, and a constant source of inspiration. Your belief in my potential and your unwavering support have been a driving force behind my success. Your presence in my life has made every trial seem surmountable and every triumph more meaningful.

To Keshnee, your support, encouragement, and willingness to assist or offer a helping hand, has been nothing short of extraordinary. It is people like you who make the journey worthwhile. Your kindness and selflessness have left an indelible mark on my heart and my academic path.

To mum (S. Gounden), I would like to express my sincere appreciation for your warmth and kindness. Your home became a sanctuary for me, offering a place of comfort and respite during challenging times. Your support and encouragement meant the world to me. I am deeply grateful for your generosity and the sense of belonging you provided throughout this journey.

To my family and friends for their support during my Ph.D. journey. Thank you for being my pillars of strength and for sharing in the joy of this achievement.

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# CHAPTER 1

## OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

### 1.1. Introduction

The concept of using horses for therapeutic purposes dates back to the 1950s. More recently, the incorporation of horses into diverse healthcare fields such as occupational therapy, speech therapy, and mental health has gained momentum (Wang et al., 2015: 28). Numerous therapeutic interventions have recognized the unique and powerful bond that can form between humans and horses (Kirby 2016: 60; Lac 2017: 23; Hallberg 2017: 10; Escobar 2019: 33; Seerup 2021: 58; Takacs 2022: 46).

It is worth highlighting that equine-based therapy represents a relatively novel form of treatment, and few psychologists, clinical social workers, or psychiatrists are well acquainted with its methodologies (Karol 2007: 78). Despite the growing trend in using horses for mental health and wellness, empirical evidence of robust strength remains limited, as per researchers' assessments (Battestella-Williams 2019: i). Bridging the gap between academic research on equine-assisted activities and therapy and individual beliefs and opinions regarding equine-based therapy entails an exploration of usage patterns of horses in therapeutic contexts (Hallberg 2017: 79; Battestella-Williams 2019: 18). Hence, the focal point of the present study is to explore the process underpinning equine-based therapy and to understand the experiences of mental health care professionals about their use of equine-based therapy.

Hallberg (2017: 16) delineates equine-assisted therapy as encompassing any therapeutic or treatment approach involving equine interactions, activities, or strategies, along with the equine environment. Healthcare professionals with appropriate education, training, and credentials (licensed or registered) administer services while adhering to relevant legal regulations. Equine-assisted therapy encompasses various forms, such as equine-assisted speech therapy, equine-assisted physical therapy, equine-assisted occupational therapy, and equine-assisted mental health (also known as equine-assisted psychotherapy).

Thus far, the integration of equine-assisted therapy as an intervention to address social and emotional challenges has remained somewhat peripheral to the field of social work

practice. Equine-facilitated therapy involves the horse (equine) playing a role in facilitating the relationship between the client and the clinician, aimed at achieving therapeutic objectives. This parallels animal-assisted therapy, which entails a structured therapeutic intervention led by a licensed therapist, who guides interactions between a client and an animal to attain specific goals (Chandler 2012: 64; IAHAIO 2014: 415). The inclusion of an animal is intended to yield outcomes that may be challenging to achieve without the animal's participation (Nimer and Lundahl 2007: 225). Within equine-based therapy, the horse collaborates in the therapeutic process, aiding in establishing social rapport (Chandler et al. 2010: 364; Matuszek 2010: 190) between clinician and client (e.g., traumatized youths) for therapeutic purposes. Furthermore, the bond that forms between the client and the horse contributes to the therapeutic process and relationship building (e.g., affect management and attunement) (Vincent and Farkas 2017: 12).

Over time, equine-assisted therapy has gained popularity among both clients and referring entities. Medical practitioners refer patients for equine-assisted physical, occupational, or speech therapy, while mental health professionals engage with patients at equine farms. Clients report improvements in a wide array of conditions (Abrams 2020: 77). This surge in popularity has firmly established equine-assisted therapy as a viable treatment avenue. However, significant disparity persists between scholarly research findings and the personal convictions, beliefs, opinions, and practice patterns prevalent in accessible literature (Powalski 2018: 8). Many equine-assisted therapy providers encounter limited access to peer-reviewed journals, which is the primary source for documenting contemporary research and practice trends (Stroud and Hallberg 2016: 7). The field of equine-assisted therapy and learning (EAT/L) for delivering psychosocial interventions to young individuals has grown rapidly. Nevertheless, recent reviews have emphasized the necessity for further establishing a theoretical foundation and evidence concerning the outcomes of such programs (Anestis, Anestis, Zawilinski, Hopkins, and Lilienfeld 2014; Bachi 2012).

Amidst the evolving landscape of equine-based therapy, diverse approaches exist, and a lack of uniformity can contribute to confusion (Fry 2013: 255; Hallberg 2008: 23). Equine-assisted therapy and learning encompass a broad spectrum of equine-based interventions targeting mental, social, and emotional challenges, as well as offering

educational support. Viewed as a contemporary practice, equine-based therapy operates on the premise that interaction with horses can offer therapeutic benefits to individuals who might find conventional therapeutic or educational approaches challenging (Burgon 2014; Fine 2010). Equine-based therapy should be perceived as a strategy employed by qualified mental health practitioners, operating within the framework of their unique theoretical orientations, such as psychology and social work (Bachi 2012; Fry 2013; Burgon, Gammage, and Hebden 2018: 3).

While the field of equine-based therapy remains largely unregulated, several organizations provide frameworks and ethical guidelines to uphold professional standards. Examples include the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International and the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, both originating in the United States where the field has flourished (Notgrass and Pettinelli 2015; Burgon, Gammage, and Hebden 2018: 4).

Equine-assisted therapy has witnessed a surge in popularity as a means of assisting individuals who are grappling with various psychological challenges (Masini 2010: 30). The Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association boasts around 600 equine-assisted therapy programs (Eagala 2014: 1). However, the efficacy of equine-assisted therapy necessitates robust empirical support (Earles, Vernon, and Yetz 2015: 149). A compelling need exists for research to establish the effectiveness of specific equine-assisted therapy techniques for individuals who are facing diverse psychological disorders (Earles, Vernon, and Yetz 2015: 149). Despite the involvement of numerous therapists in equine-assisted therapy (Eagala 2014), the consensus remains elusive regarding its methodologies, and the degrees of efficacy across different therapy programs that address diverse psychological symptoms vary (Earles, Vernon, and Yetz 2015: 151).

## **1.2. Background of the study**

### **1.2.1. Social work in its context**

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) characterizes social work as a "helping profession." (2017: 1). The overarching goal of social work is to "enhance human well-being and address fundamental and intricate needs of all individuals," with particular attention to those who are impoverished, oppressed, or most susceptible. The domain of social work encompasses a multitude of responsibilities, including evaluating the physical and mental health of clients, delivering child protective services, ensuring the safety and welfare of individuals in need, and providing support to victims of abuse and neglect (Bartlett 2003: 5).

According to the International Federation for Social Work (2022: 1), the global description of social work is as follows:

Social work is a practice-oriented profession and an academic field that advances social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of individuals. Key principles of social justice, human rights, shared responsibility, and respect for diversity are at the heart of social work. Rooted in theories from the social sciences, humanities, and indigenous wisdom, social work engages individuals and systems to address life's challenges and amplify well-being.

In the context of South Africa, Van du Ruit (2017: 275) defined social work as a professional endeavour that employs values, knowledge, skills, and processes to address issues, needs, and predicaments arising from interactions among individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. It is a societal service aimed at improving the social functioning of individuals, empowering them, and nurturing a mutually beneficial interplay between individuals and society, ultimately enhancing the quality of life for all.

Furthermore, Van Breda (2018: 67) delineated that micro-level social work tends to focus on work with individuals and families, including case management, mental health services, substance abuse treatment, and family therapy.

Therefore, equine-based therapy is a valuable instrument within the field of social work to tackle a wide array of physical, emotional, and social requirements of individuals,

especially those who are marginalized or grappling with challenges (Hojgaard-Boytler and Argentzell 2022: 1). According to Damien, Magdalena, Ilona, Magdalena, Justyna and Urszula (2020: 302), equine-based therapy is particularly beneficial to those who have suffered trauma, abuse, neglect, or mental health issues. The interaction between humans and horses, characterized by support and absence of judgment, fosters a secure environment in which vulnerable clients can delve into their emotions and life experiences.

### **1.2.2. Purpose and Objectives of Social Work**

The Introduction to the American Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) (2015:5). Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards asserts that "social work practice advances human well-being by enhancing opportunities, resources, and capabilities of individuals within their surroundings and by formulating policies and services to rectify conditions that curtail human rights and quality of life".

Furthermore, the International Federation for Social Workers characterizes social work as a dynamic field that champions social transformation, the resolution of human relationship challenges, and the empowerment and liberation of individuals to augment well-being. Social workers engage at the crossroads of individual interactions and their surroundings. By integrating the tenets of social work into equine-based therapy, practitioners can effectively harness this therapeutic approach to drive social change, empower individuals, and enhance well-being. The distinct interplay between humans and horses in equine-based therapy can complement and enhance the mission of the social work profession to foster positive change and provide support for individuals on their path to personal growth and healing.

Similarly, Banham (2021: 8) asserted that the purpose of equine-based therapy is to leverage the unique qualities of horses to facilitate personal growth, healing, and positive change in individuals of all ages and backgrounds. Morton (2022: 30) said that the specific objectives of equine-based therapy can be tailored to each individual's needs and goals. Trained equine therapists work closely with participants to design interventions that address their unique challenges and support their personal growth and well-being.

### **1.2.3. The role of social workers**

In a broader context, the roles encompassed by social workers' scope of practice (Social Service Professions Act 2022: 213-214) include:

- Administering counselling, psychoeducation, support, treatment, evaluation, development, therapy, and referral services to individuals, couples, families, and groups, utilizing evidence-based social work interventions to address diverse social functioning and psychosocial challenges.
- Navigating socio-legal matters and making ethical decisions related to social work interventions.
- Conducting assessments of risks, social functioning, and psychosocial facets linked to individuals, families, groups, and communities.
- Delivering prevention, early intervention, statutory, residential, alternative care, reunification, and aftercare services, forming part of a coherent spectrum of interlinked interventions.
- Devising intervention strategies, interventions, referrals, monitoring, and assessment for clients, overseeing the aiding process and achievement of objectives within client systems.
- Providing crisis intervention to offer assistance, safeguarding, and/or trauma counselling for vulnerable and/or at-risk individuals and families.
- Supplying specialized expertise, evidence, and/or viewpoints.

Accordingly, Surya (2020) argues that the role of the therapist in equine-based therapy is critical in facilitating the therapy process and providing support to individuals or groups participating. They conduct in-depth assessments to determine the client's needs, strengths, and therapeutic objectives. According to Jalongo and Guth (2022: 10), they collect information about clients' mental health history, challenges, and desired outcomes. Based on this evaluation, they work with clients to create individualized treatment plans that include equine-assisted activities and interventions. According to Fry (2021: 66), therapists actively participate in equine interactions and activities with their clients. They direct clients' interactions with horses and facilitate exercises that encourage self-reflection, personal growth, and skill development.

Furthermore, according to White-Lewis (2020: 62), they provide a safe environment in which clients can explore their emotions, develop healthy coping strategies, and build self-esteem. According to Hultsjö and Jormfeldt (2022: 201), the therapist follows ethical guidelines and professional standards to ensure confidentiality, client autonomy, and the well-being of all participants. They maintain appropriate boundaries and participate in ongoing professional development to improve their equine-assisted therapy skills and knowledge.

#### **1.2.4. Equine-based therapy and social work**

Therapeutic horseback riding, as posited by Smith-Osbourne and Selby (2010: 295), emerges as a potent avenue for witnessing notable transformations among social work clients. Moreover, Selby and Smith-Osbourne (2010: 298) highlight the burgeoning interest among social workers in exploring innovative approaches to aid their clientele. Notably, therapeutic horseback riding stands out as a remarkable program that yields remarkable outcomes. Demonstrating efficacy across a diverse spectrum of social work populations, this therapeutic modality has proven effective with children, teenagers, juvenile delinquents, physically challenged individuals, those with developmental delays, as well as those who have experienced blindness, deafness, and various forms of abuse (Selby and Smith-Osbourne 2010: 295; Cody, Steiker, and Szymandera 2011: 198; Kerker, Aimers, and Perry 2015: 24; Carlsson 2017: 320). The profound connection forged between children and horses elucidates this success rate. Children who have exhibited limited progress within conventional therapeutic settings often thrive in therapeutic riding scenarios. In this context, children candidly communicate with horses, and share secrets, thoughts, setbacks, dreams, and aspirations, as horses attentively listen without judgment. This unique rapport enables children to express themselves more openly to horses than to parents, teachers, friends, pastors, or traditional therapists. Furthermore, the presence of a horse emboldens children to tackle various physical challenges (i.e. difficulties with walking, coordination, and movement), fuelled by the perceived support beneath them (Carlson and Robinson 1983: 318; Christian 2005: Karol 2007: 77).

In the field of social work working with vulnerable populations, social workers should consider equine-assisted therapy as a viable and impactful intervention. Educational and healthcare professionals have already implemented the therapeutic riding concept

(Jones, Rice and Cotton 2019: e0210761). The practice of social work thrives on interactive, process-oriented dynamics. By establishing therapeutic alliances and identifying evolving needs, objectives, and resources unique to each client, social workers craft solutions to challenges (Adams, LeCroy, and Matto 2009: 165). However, discordant viewpoints between clients and social workers regarding problem origins and appropriate remedies can heighten the intricacies of this process (Nevonen and Broberg 2000: 279). Integrating horses into treatment might seem to introduce further complexity, although this work with horses has been regarded as distinct (Burgon 2011: 165; Holmes, Goodwin, Redhead and Goymour 2012: 11; SmithOsborne and Selby 2010: 291).

Examining the landscape of social work unveils a paucity of research on treatment methods, in terms of the practical application of equine-based therapy within a therapeutic setting and their effects on clients. Much institutional work with equine-based therapy is conducted without reliance on established theories or models (Burgon, Gammage and Hebden 2018: 6). Horses have emerged as a recent treatment option (Statens Offentliga Utredningar SOU 2000:109), with nearly twenty organization units in Sweden incorporating them into treatment and care (Hakansson, Karlsson Palmgren, and Sandgren 2008). Despite this growth, limited research delves into the role of horses for both staff and clients, necessitating further exploration to determine whether equine-based therapy warrants classification as a distinct method or as a complementary tool.

In terms of definition, horses hold varied significance for individuals, assuming different roles in diverse contexts. For some, a horse is a partner or friend, while others view it as a tool, mentor, motivator, or mirror (Klontz, Bivens, Leinart, and Klontz 2007: 257; Scerri 2018: 11). Norwegian therapists engaged in horse-assisted interventions for clients with chronic, severe eating disorders found that horses enable clients to experience intimacy and hone relational skills in a direct, effective, and less intimidating manner (Traeen, Moan, and Rosenvinge 2012).

#### **1.2.5. Equine-Assisted Social Work and Therapy**

As per the findings of McConnell (2010: i) and Notgrass (2011: i), it was evident that social workers emerged as a prominent professional group in the utilization of equine-

based therapy and other equine-assisted therapeutic modalities when compared to other professional groups i.e. psychology and counselling. In a comprehensive, online survey conducted by McConnell (2010: ii) among members of the Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) and the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.), social workers accounted for a substantial portion of the respondents. Among the diverse range of professional affiliations, counselling (n = 57), social work (n = 48), and psychology (n = 20) were among the most prevalent. Notgrass (2011: i) similarly undertook a study aimed at capturing insights into the roles, practices, beliefs, and professional development of equine-assisted psychotherapy professionals. The survey was distributed via email to members of the Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA). Notably, the distribution of professionals in Notgrass' study closely mirrored that of McConnell's, encompassing licensed professional counsellors (n = 47), licensed clinical social workers (n = 32), and licensed psychologists (n = 13).

Within their research paper, Carlsson, Ranta, and Traeen (2014) meticulously outlined the domain of equine-assisted social work while delving into the intricate dynamics of how horses impact client and staff relationships within a Swedish residential treatment program. Numerous other studies have meticulously explored the advantages that are derived from integrating horses into client psychotherapy sessions, thus setting equine-assisted psychotherapy apart from traditional talk-based therapeutic approaches (Abrams 2013: 10; Devon 2011: 1; Esbjörn 2006; Frame 2006: 25; Albert 2013: 475; Lee and Makela 2015: 78; Pugh 2010: 3). These inquiries illuminated a multitude of insights: horses serve as adept educators, instructing clients on assertiveness and boundaries through direct, interactive engagement; the inherent playfulness of horses assists clients in mitigating distress and embracing relaxation; parallels between the issues and attributes of horses and those of clients foster enhanced therapeutic rapport and reciprocal healing between the two; for instance, clients with traumatic backgrounds frequently formed profound connections with horses who share similar histories; horses' physical forms serve as inspiration, prompting clients to address body image and eating concerns.

### **1.2.6. The salience of the study**

The profound impact of the human-horse connection has proven instrumental in helping individuals overcome various mental health challenges. Despite the prevalent dissemination of these potent bonds through narratives and visual depictions, their advantages have yet to be formally acknowledged or extensively harnessed within the field of social work as a versatile tool or resource for practice (Vincent and Farkas 2017: 7).

Numerous studies highlight the diverse benefits achievable through the application of equine-based therapy. Brouillette (2006: i) undertook a study aimed at assessing whether a 12-week therapy program involving horses could yield psychological, behavioural, social, and academic benefits for special education students. The findings illustrated that equine-based therapy facilitated increased responsibility and active participation, fostering the development of self-control, emotional insight, behavioural awareness, relationship skills, and coping mechanisms. Students also shared heartwarming accounts of positive interactions with both horses and staff. A similar exploration by Stickney (2010: ii) delved into the perceived advantages of a therapeutic riding program for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), focusing on optimizing their physical, emotional, and social well-being. Thematic analysis revealed improvements in physical, cognitive, psychological, and social domains, accompanied by additional support mechanisms for the families of participants. Enhanced physicality, heightened focus and attention, modulation of inappropriate behaviours, improved self-concept, increased social interaction, and refined communication skills emerged as some of the frequently reported benefits. The unique movements and sensory stimuli offered by horses, the supportive ambience of the facility, and the heightened motivation among children to engage in structured activities and exercises within the riding class environment were recognized as pivotal factors contributing to the intervention's success.

Furthermore, Sulkowski (2017: iii) documented successful instances of horse therapy benefiting special needs children and their families, culminating in tangible improvements in health and overall well-being. Despite evident challenges, such as funding constraints, a consensus among twelve ecological experts endorsed the value of horse therapy centres within communities. This lends credence to the notion that

equine-based therapy has the potential to assist and uplift a diverse spectrum of special needs families, solidifying the significance of these therapy centres within local communities and their broader public health initiatives.

Grimm (2015:103) highlighted that equine-based therapy offers children and youth a distinctive avenue for cultivating skills that may not be readily accessible within conventional academic or therapeutic settings. In the context of school environments, equine-based therapy could potentially prompt special education teachers to reassess their instructional approaches. The collaborative nature of equine-based therapy, as seen in programs like Riding for the Handicapped of Western Pennsylvania (RHWPA), fosters synergy among educators, parents, children, youth, families, and the community, culminating in the creation of a potent educational and therapeutic milieu. Schultze (2009: iii) conducted a comprehensive national bilingual (English and French) survey which encompassed helping professionals to incorporate animal-assisted therapy and equine-based therapy in Canada (n=131). The findings revealed a diverse landscape marked by varying terminology, education and training levels, and divergent interpretations of practices, resulting in a fragmented and perplexing landscape of the practice and implementation of equine-based therapy.

Notably, equine-based therapy has demonstrated its efficacy across a range of contexts, including at-risk youth (Bachi, Terkel, and Teichman 2012: 298; Trotter, Chandler, Goodwin-Bond, and Casey 2008: 254), individuals grappling with mental health issues (Chardonens 2009: 319; Ewing, MacDonald, Taylor, and Bowers 2007: 59; McCullough 2018; Schultz, Remick-Barlow, and Robbins 2007: 265), adults in residential substance abuse treatment (Schulz 2005), those affected by secondary traumatization (Park and Arbaut 2013), and war veterans (Lanning and Krenek 2013: vii; Gomez 2016: 18).

Equine-based therapy has also been employed as an intervention for children and adolescents who have experienced trauma (McCullough 2018; Schultz et al. 2007: 269), are deemed at-risk (Bachi et al. 2012: 300; Trotter et al. 2008: 260), grapple with psychological distress, exhibit mental health concerns (Chardonens 2009: 320; Ewing, MacDonald, Taylor, and Bowers 2007: 65; Schultz et al. 2007: 266), and manifest behavioural challenges (Chardonens 2009 320).

Recent research publications have explored the role of horse-human relationships in addressing social, educational, and emotional issues (Bachi, Terkel, and Teichman

2012: 302; Burgon 2011: 167; Karol 2007; Rothe, Vega, Torres, Soler, and Pazos 2005: 373). However, studies investigating quality standards for effective implementation are still lacking (Murphy, Wilson and Greenberg 2017). A more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms and utility of equine-facilitated therapy has the potential to expand its application among social work clinicians and amplify its benefits for mental health clients (Vincent and Farkas 2017: 8).

According to Vincent and Farkas (2017: 8), a deficiency in comprehending the methods and utility of equine-based therapy in practice has led to an underestimation of the positive potential of the horse-human bond. Social workers can enhance their grasp and application of equine-based therapy to assist vulnerable populations by delving into the theoretical foundation of this therapeutic intervention. Hence, the significance of the current study.

Hallberg (2008) asserted that the strategic alignment of a suitable horse with the client's therapeutic needs and personality is crucial for fostering the therapeutic alliance. Despite limited exploration, only a handful of studies in South Africa have examined patients' encounters with animal-assisted therapy (Coetzee, Beukes, and Lynch 2013; Lubbe and Scholtz 2013; Boshoff, Grobler, and Nienaber 2015). Consequently, there exists a dearth of knowledge regarding mental health practitioners' perceptions of equine-based therapy in terms of its therapeutic processes. Insights drawn from related fields like psychology and psychiatry may contribute to refining equine-based therapy within the field of social work (John, Bobat, and Holder, 2016: 199).

Surujlal and Rufus (2011: 372) delved into the perspectives that parents of children with intellectual disabilities had toward the impact of equine-based therapy on them. Their research focused specifically on therapeutic riding as a means to positively influence the psychological well-being of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Respondents in their study perceived equine-based therapy to be beneficial and attested to its positive effects on their children. This suggests that the therapy holds promise and warrants exploration as an alternative to conventional methods. Additionally, Boshoff, Grobler, and Nienaber (2015: 86) examined the effectiveness of an equine-assisted therapy program targeted at enhancing the psychological well-being of boys in a custodial school of industry. The findings demonstrated that the

program significantly improved the boys' subjective well-being, problem-focused coping, and emotion-focused coping.

Furthermore, Koekemoer (2016: i) conducted a descriptive and exploratory research study aimed at elucidating the experiences of licensed mental health practitioners and/or credentialed equine specialists who have integrated equine-assisted psychotherapy into their practice. The study, guided by constructivist epistemology, revealed significant consensus regarding the contributions of equines to psychotherapeutic sessions, encompassing unique equine characteristics, opportunities for metaphorical learning, and relational dynamics. The practice was found to aid clients in developing assertiveness, emotional awareness, social skills, empathy, impulse control, confidence, and relationship skills. Participants concurred that equine-assisted psychotherapy could offer benefits across a broad spectrum of psychotherapeutic populations in South Africa.

A separate investigation, carried out within the forensic unit of Valkenberg Psychiatric Hospital in Cape Town, South Africa, by Roffey, Garland, Bromfield, Abdulla, Hawtrey, Moodley, and Nune (2018: 7), documented the outcomes of an equine-assisted psychotherapy initiative. This venture garnered success, receiving positive feedback from participants and staff, while also yielding preliminary therapeutic gains. Notably, this marked the inaugural implementation of an equine-assisted therapy program within a South African forensic unit. The hope was that this project would pave the way for future research endeavours in this vital field.

In a related study, Garland (2013: i) scrutinized the application of Equine Assisted Therapy (E.A.T.), a therapeutic modality utilizing horses to engage clients on an emotional and metaphorical level. This approach enabled clients to undergo emotional and behavioural transformation and growth. Employing an exploratory qualitative paradigm, the researcher tapped into the perspectives of 16 social workers specializing in areas like family violence, child welfare, and sexual assault. These professionals participated in a single Equine Assisted Therapy (E.A.T.) session to gain insights into the therapy model. Notably, the study unveiled that social workers' secondary traumatic stress symptoms ameliorated due to their ability to identify and address these symptoms through the non-threatening nature of Equine Assisted Therapy (E.A.T.). The social workers experienced the E.A.T. encounter as empowering, influenced by the impact of activities and metaphors, which facilitated a deeper personal and professional understanding. The research highlighted that the

participating social workers perceived Equine Assisted Therapy (E.A.T.) as a supportive psychosocial framework.

Another study by Heffer (2006) explored the psychosocial functioning of primary school children partaking in a therapeutic horseback riding program. Employing an exploratory research design for a qualitative investigation, the study's findings corroborated those uncovered in the literature review. Specifically, it was noted that physically disabled children encountered challenges in meeting psychosocial developmental milestones. However, horseback riding emerged as a significant contributor to enhancing these children's social participation, self-confidence, self-image, emotional regulation, discipline, cognitive stimulation, and educational growth. The alignment of rehabilitation philosophy and psychology with social work goals was evident, and the viability of equine-assisted therapy as a rehabilitation avenue was underscored. This, in turn, had implications for social work practice, theory, training, research, and policy concerning physically disabled clients.

It's important to note that these studies primarily span the fields of psychology and psychiatry, with research still growing within the field of social work (Lee, Dakin and McLure 2016: 240; Wilkie, Germain, and Theule 2016: 377). The current study endeavours to explore the potential of equine-based therapy as a healing modality within social work practice.

Research into the advantages of equine-assisted activities and therapies for individuals with special needs, coupled with the accomplishments of these programs, has spurred an increase in equine-based therapy education within the United States (Colston, Shultz, and Porr 2015: 189). While international research has extensively addressed this topic, the anticipation was for a similar response from South African researchers (Boshoff, Grobler, and Nienaber 2015: 86). However, studies published in peer reviewed journals may lack generalizability due to factors such as small sample sizes, absence of control groups, diverse study populations, non-standardized measures, and limited reproducibility (Nimer and Lundahl, 2007: 225; O'Haire et al., 2015: 1121). Anestis, Anestis, Zawilinski, Hopkins, and Littlefield (2014: 1115) scrutinized 14 peer reviewed published studies and concluded that a robust research foundation is imperative for this treatment (Anestis et al. 2014: 1129).

Lentini and Knox (2009: 51) advocated for the availability of equine-based therapy to clients who may not be effectively reached through traditional methods. This proposition, aligned with the definition of equine-based therapy, underscores its viability as a complementary therapeutic approach. Lentini and Knox (2009: 52) outlined a prospective study framework, aimed at social work researchers, to establish an evidence base for equine-based therapy. Their study, incorporating a mixed-method approach with biofeedback data, revealed the allure of this unconventional therapy, particularly, for challenging client groups like hardened youths and gang members. Moreover, it proposed benefits for maltreated, eating-disordered, or neglected children who may not respond optimally to traditional office therapy. In light of this, a collaborative effort between social workers and researchers is warranted to conduct high-quality research promptly, given the ripe landscape for such endeavours.

### **1.3. Problem statement**

Equine-assisted therapy is gaining increasing popularity in both the United States and Europe. Notably, educational institutions are increasingly acknowledging its significance (Hallberg 2008: 68). In spite of this, equine-based therapy lacks a solid theoretical or empirical base (Hallberg 2008: 69), emphasizing the need to comprehend the underlying processes and benefits of this approach for distressed clients. A research inquiry into this domain is essential to enhance our comprehension of this intervention. Given the surging popularity of equine-based programs, it is imperative for researchers exploring equine-based therapy to assess its efficacy, ascertain suitable populations and conditions, and establish a comprehensive theoretical framework to guide intervention (Bachi 2013: 188). The context of the present study is shaped against this backdrop.

Equine-facilitated therapy (EFT) has been recognized as an essential tool for mental health professionals and social workers over the past two decades, based on both clinical and anecdotal evidence. Recent research has started to unveil the mechanisms of equine-facilitated therapy as a therapeutic approach for individual clients (McNamara 2017: 412; Vincent and Farkas 2017: 7; Harbeson 2019: iii; Wood et al. 2021: 88). However, a cohesive theoretical foundation for equine-assisted therapy remains elusive (Verheggen, Enders-Slegers, and Eshuis 2017: 13). Additionally, numerous studies lack explicit theoretical underpinnings on equine based

therapy as a therapeutic modality in social work practice (Kern-Godal et al. 2015: 1; Burgon, Gammage, and Hebdon 2018: 3; Watson 2019: 5; Punzo, Skoglund, Carlsson, and Jormfeldt 2022: 1080). According to Vincent and Farkas (2017: 19), robust empirical support is dependent upon a solid theoretical framework, which is lacking within the research arena, preventing the scientific validation of equine-facilitated therapy.

Additionally, since the 1980s, the demand for equine-based therapy has increased significantly within the community, prompting the creation of certification boards and licensing organizations for a variety of therapeutic techniques. Although this growth is encouraging, it is exceeding the research base, which might compromise the efficacy of equine-facilitated therapy as a clinical modality. Despite the paucity of empirical evidence, the growing prevalence of equine-based therapy programs underscores the urgency for rigorous studies to explore its benefits within the social work practice (Lentini and Knox 2009: 50; Trotter 2012: 41). Moreover, research specifically dedicated to equine-based therapy within the South African context is limited. Although studies from other countries highlight the effectiveness of equine-based therapy, differences in culture, social dynamics, and economic factors may influence its practicality and impact in South Africa (Trimmins 2022: 3; Koekemoer 2016: v).

Furthermore, existing literature falls short of elucidating the mechanisms underlying these therapeutic modalities, particularly, the role of equines as facilitators in the therapeutic and learning processes. This understanding is pivotal for establishing a robust framework for such therapeutic endeavours (McConnel 2010: 4) and expanding its application within a social work context. Notably, prior research has not delved into the intricacies of equine-based therapy or the processes that practitioners employ with their clients. Additionally, few articles describe the populations serviced and how equine-based therapy contributes to the well-being of vulnerable and troubled individuals, particularly in a social work context. The current work is highly significant in light of this gap. Many of the evaluations of horse therapy are still only available in the "grey literature," which hinders its advancement and application in social work practice (Vincent and Farkas 2017: 7).

Consequently, a more profound understanding of equine-assisted therapy is imperative (Coetzee, Beukes, and Lynch 2013: 48; Lubbe and Scholtz 2013: 91;

Boshoff, Grobler, and Nienaber 2015: 98). A bedrock of applied knowledge concerning existing programs that employ this therapeutic method, particularly, within a social work context will empower practitioners and researchers to nurture and advance the practice of equine-based therapy. The field of equine-assisted therapy can expand its reach in terms of both practical efficacy and overall beneficial effects once a solid and thorough foundation is formed (Johns, Bobat, and Holder 2016: 199). Following a thorough evaluation of the literature, the researcher has determined that this PhD study is a ground-breaking endeavour that will considerably advance knowledge of equine-assisted therapy within the field of social work in South Africa.

The establishment of definitive best practices for equine interventions stands to benefit numerous individuals and holds immense potential for the South African populace. Scrutinizing the fundamental processes underlying equine interventions, along with their implementation, will serve as a testament to the diverse applications and benefits of equine interventions for individuals, groups, and broader populations. This inquiry also underscores their contributions to mental and physical well-being, as well as the cultivation of multicultural sensitivity. Equine interventions not only offer a means of positive change for both horses and humans, but also provides purposeful and enriching lives for the animals involved (Lentini and Knox 2015: 279). Many of the equine participants are either rescue animals or retired therapy animals, and their involvement in equine-assisted activities provides a second chance at a fulfilling existence, counteracting neglect or underutilization (Seerup 2021: 32). The convergence of humans and horses in therapeutic settings offers an innovative alternative to conventional methods, reconnects humans with nature, revitalizes horses' purposes, and addresses multicultural aspects within therapy. Moreover, horses serve as therapeutic resources for diverse cultural groups and communities, facilitating a novel connection with the natural world (Merkies, McKehnie and Zakrajsek 2018: 61). Ultimately, equine interventions possess the capacity to foster healing for both humans and horses while concurrently promoting positive societal change (Battestella-Williams 2019:17-18). This collectively strengthens the value of the current study.

#### **1.4. Aim of the study**

The study aimed to explore the potential of equine-based therapy as a therapeutic modality in social work practice in the South African context.

#### **1.5. Objectives of the study**

The objectives of the study were as follows:

- 1.5.1.** To understand the therapeutic principles that guide equine-based therapy.
- 1.5.2.** To explore the therapeutic process underpinning equine-based therapy.
- 1.5.3.** To inquire about what emotional or social problems are most suited for equine-based therapy.
- 1.5.4.** To understand what bio-psychosocial and spiritual benefits individuals have experienced through equine-based therapy.
- 1.5.5.** To understand the experiences of mental health care professionals about their use of equine-based therapy.
- 1.5.6.** To explore how equine-based therapy can be used to enhance social work practice.

#### **1.6. Research questions**

The research questions for this study were as follows:

- 1.6.1.** What are the therapeutic principles that guide equine-based therapy?
- 1.6.2.** What are the therapeutic processes that underpin equine-based therapy?
- 1.6.3.** Which emotional or social problems are most suited for equine-based therapy?
- 1.6.4.** What the bio-psychosocial and spiritual benefits have individuals experienced through equine-based therapy?
- 1.6.5.** What are the experiences of mental health care professionals about their use of equine-based therapy?
- 1.6.6.** How can equine-based therapy be used to enhance social work practice?

## 1.7. Significance of the study

The majority of research in the realm of human-animal studies has been centred on the bond created between individuals and their pets or companion animals (Schneider 2005: 171), a trend mirrored in the literature on animal-assisted therapy (AAT) (All et al. 1999). The involvement of companion animals in human healthcare can be traced back to as early as 1860, as was documented by Florence Nightingale (All et al. 1999: 49). Moreover, their role in mental health care dates back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and as far back as 1970 (Netting et al. 1987: 61), detailing accounts of psychosocial benefits, particularly, in children who were handicapped and who engaged in horseback riding (Harpoth 1970: 235). Fuelled by both anecdotal reports and investigations into its rehabilitative effects, a significant portion of equine activities literature has been dedicated to exploring its advantages for children and adolescents, alongside the emerging discourse on equine-facilitated psychotherapy (O' Rourke et al. 2004: 22; Smith-Osbourne and Selby 2009: 291).

Recent research has cast light on the potential benefits of equine-assisted activities for young people. These activities have been shown to foster socialization, bolster self-esteem, enhance personal boundaries, and elevate self-awareness. Furthermore, equine-based therapy has demonstrated effectiveness in mitigating emotional desensitization, and attachment-related challenges, while concurrently enhancing cognitive functions like metacognition and reflective thinking (Karol 2007: 77; Roberts et al. 2004; Rothe et al. 2005: 373; Schultz et al. 2007: 265). Earlier literature has also underscored equine-based therapy's role in significant enhancements of self-confidence, self-esteem, and motivation to learn, while also honing skills like attention, spatial perception, and verbal communication. The implications of these findings underscore the potential benefits of integrating equine-assisted activities within therapeutic interventions (MacKinnon et al. 1995: 17).

It's worth highlighting that professionals across various health and human service domains have woven animals into their interventions and programs (Smith-Osborne and Selby 2010: 295; Sundal and Sundal 2017). For instance, physical and occupational therapists have harnessed therapeutic horseback riding and hippotherapy to enhance posture, balance, and muscle symmetry in children grappling with cerebral palsy. Conversely, special educators and school psychologists have embraced therapeutic horseback riding, unmounted activities, and vaulting to address

self-efficacy, language limitations, attentional shifts, cognitive sequencing, and impulse control issues among children facing learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, or disruptive behaviours (Roberts et al. 2004). The decision to integrate animals has been guided by the observation of the profound companionship animals offer in everyday human existence, or by clinical experiences and research pointing towards the physical and psychosocial benefits for humans associated with such interactions (Flynn, Gandenberger, Mueller and Morris 2020: 633; Shoesmith et al. 2021: 11908).

The field of social work has made a few notable contributions to this literature, particularly, in the domain of animal-assisted therapies with mental health clients (Netting et al. 1987: 60; Frame 2006: 12; Jones, Rice and Cotton 2019: e0210761; Koukouriko 201; Chalmers 2020: 5; Hewitson 2021: 15; Acquadro Maran et al. 2022: 383). Accounts in social work literature that highlight the practical relevance of the human-animal bond trace back to 1975, with a distinct social work department within a veterinary hospital established in 1978 to address psychosocial dimensions of human-animal interaction (Netting et al. 1987: 61). Social workers have extended their expertise to companion animals, farm animals, and equines within therapeutic contexts (Frame 2006: 20; Gilligan 1999: 189; Muschel 1984: 451; Netting et al. 1987: 60; Reichert 1998: 177). The exploration of this domain has also seen involvement from other human service disciplines, with a focus on the experiential and psychosocial aspects of equine-based therapy. Concurrently, allied health disciplines have directed their efforts towards investigating the physical health outcomes of equine-based therapy, with secondary attention on psychological and social effects.

Horses, as flight animals, are intrinsically attuned to their surroundings and the emotional states of human counterparts with whom they interact (Ekesbo 2011: 20). The survival of horses in the wild hinges on their capacity to perceive fear and discern the intentions of other animals through body language and pheromones. Consequently, horses rely on the ability to gauge the emotions of fellow horses and various animals, including humans, for their well-being (Ekesbo 2011: 21). Research reveals that a horse's heart rate is influenced by a human's negative thoughts towards it, whereas a neutral or positive attitude does not affect the animal's heart rate. The behaviour of a horse is notably impacted by the disposition of the person interacting with it (Chamove, Crawley-Hatrick, and Stafford 2002: 323; Hama, Yogo, and

Matsuyama 1996: 66; Henry, Hemery, Richard, and Hausberger 2005: 341). Given this sensitivity to emotions, horses are ideal for engaging with specific client groups.

Equine-assisted social work emerges as a complementary or alternative therapeutic approach that establishes a triangular connection among staff, clients, and horses (Punzo, Skoglund, Carlsson and Jormfeldt 2022: 1082). Focus on the mechanics of horse-human interactions within therapy and social work has only recently emerged, leading to several methodological challenges (Pauw 2000: 523; Smith-Osborne and Selby 2010: 291). Qualitative and quantitative research findings on the impacts of equine-based therapy often present conflicting outcomes (Pauw 2000: 523). These investigations have unveiled enhancements in behavioural and social communication skills through equine-based therapy. Moreover, equine-based therapy has proven to be a viable alternative for at-risk youth compared to traditional interventions. The research in the domain of equine-assisted work often generates hypotheses (Johansen 2008: S122; Kaiser et al. 2004: 63; Wilson and Barker 2003: 16). Observations, client reports, and feedback from staff practising equine-assisted work suggest potential benefits for clients with mental illnesses, including eating disorders (Cumella 2003: 143). A reduction in self-reported anxiety has been documented by Holmes et al. (2012: 111). The stable setting is conducive to enhancing self-competence, particularly, for young girls and women (Koren and Traeen 2003: 3). While Hauge and Kvaem's (2013: 57) study with Norwegian adolescents found no significant impact on self-efficacy, a correlation between low self-efficacy and increased task persistence involving horses was observed. Other advantages in at-risk groups encompass enhanced self-assurance, self-esteem, self-competence, a sense of mastery, empathy, and the creation of positive opportunities through horse interactions (Bower and MacDonald 2001: 62; Burgon 2014: 10).

The World Health Organization's (2017) report on mental health has placed the spotlight on the prevalence of mental health disorders among older demographics, and the urgency to enhance effective mental health services for this expanding population. Researchers specializing in geriatric mental health have uncovered intricate links between depression and cognitive impairment (Potter and Steffens 2007: 105; Wilkins, Mathews, and Sheline 2009: 51). Multiple studies have recognized the stigma associated with mental health as a significant barrier for older individuals to access services (Conner et al. 2010: 531; Katona and Livingston 2000: 91; Sirey et al.

2001: 1615). As a result, there is a growing need for innovative interventions, coupled with efforts to dismantle the stigma surrounding mental health.

Lee et al. (2015: 78) conducted a study to explore the perceived benefits of equine assisted psychotherapy among older adults with cognitive or functional impairments. Employing a mixed methods research design with simultaneous triangulation, the study revealed that such individuals can effectively engage in the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) model of equine-assisted psychotherapy, deriving meaning from the experience. The benefits extended beyond horse interactions, encompassing positive influences from peers, outdoor surroundings, and increased social engagement. Social workers could play a pivotal role in equine assisted psychotherapy for older adults, offering a potential pathway for mental health treatment that is less stigmatized than traditional talk therapy.

Ward (2022: e4920) said that mental health practitioners, including social workers, should further their awareness of the advantages of equine-assisted psychotherapy for clients). Their active involvement and understanding are pivotal, enabling integration or referrals to equine-assisted services in long-term settings or clinical practices. Equine experts should receive appropriate training to collaborate effectively with older adults, considering their unique needs and interaction strategies (Bennet and Woodman 2019: 1041; Ward 2022: e4922). Collaborative efforts between service providers and equine professionals hold substantial potential, enriching programs and enhancing well-being for older adults (Simmons 2011: 33).

Continued research in this domain is imperative as mental health professionals and social workers increasingly recognize the enhanced benefits of equine-assisted psychotherapy (Dunlop and Tsantefski 2018: 16).

## **1.8. Definition of concepts**

### **1.8.1. Social work**

Social work focuses on improving a person's social functioning, both individually and within a group, by intervening in their social relationships, which encompass the dynamic interplay between people and their environment. These interventions can be

categorized into three core functions: rehabilitation of diminished capacities, delivery of personalized and communal services, and mitigation of social malfunctions. (Council on Social Work Education 2022: 1).

### **1.8.2. Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA)**

The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) model for equine - assisted psychotherapy and personal development originated in 1999 (EAGALA, 2012: 1; Mandrell, 2006: 53). EAGALA offers a solution-focused, non-riding approach to mental health therapy that encourages the exploration, application, and integration of personal experiences. This method necessitates a collaborative team comprising licensed mental health experts (such as social workers or psychologists), equine specialists, and horses, ponies, or donkeys.

Within the framework of the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association model, mental health practitioners concentrate on clients' emotional experiences during their interactions with the equines, while equine specialists prioritize the physical safety of both clients and animals, as well as the nonverbal communication of the animals themselves (Lee et al. 2016: 225). Working together, equine specialists and mental health professionals ensure that both clients and animals are fully engaged and provide mutual support throughout the therapeutic process (Notgrass and Pettinelli 2015: 162).

### **1.8.3. Animal-Assisted Activities**

Hallberg (2017) defined animal-assisted activities as non-therapeutic interventions involving animals, which aim to impart skills and improve the overall quality of life. While these services do not fall under the regulation of healthcare laws, ethical guidelines, competency prerequisites, or established practice standards in the United States, they are typically offered by professionals, paraprofessionals, or volunteers who have specialized training. Similarly, the animals engaged in animal-assisted activities programs usually undergo specialized training and may, at times, receive certification through industry associations.

#### **1.8.4. Animal-Assisted Therapy**

Burgon (2011: 166) characterized animal-assisted therapy as the integration of animals into clinical interventions conducted by licensed healthcare practitioners. These services adhere to healthcare regulations and are typically administered by professionals such as physicians, occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech therapists, certified therapeutic recreation specialists, nurses, and mental health professionals.

#### **1.8.5. Conventional Therapy**

Hallberg (2017) described this as a form of therapy that is widely accepted and commonly used by most professionals. It is also known as traditional therapy. Conventional therapy is regular counselling which takes place inside a counselling room. It offers clients a safe and confidential space to talk through their problems with a qualified counsellor.

#### **1.8.6. Equine-based therapy**

Equine-based therapy is characterized as a short, cooperative intervention involving the client, horse, therapist, and equine expert. It encompasses experiential therapy and therapeutic exercises which is conducted in the presence of horses (Schultz et al. 2007: 268). The central emphasis of equine-based therapy lies in nurturing relationships, fostering trust, enhancing communication, and cultivating more wholesome and constructive connections (Chardonnens 2009: 322; Kirby 2016; Schultz et al. 2007: 269; Gomez 2016: 15).

#### **1.8.7. Equine Assisted Therapy**

Equine-assisted therapy can be defined as a psychotherapeutic approach that emerged from the integration of horses into the therapeutic process, aimed at fostering personal growth and transformation for individuals who face challenges in effective functioning (Equine Assisted Psychotherapy Institute of South Africa [EAPISA] 2009:

1). Equine-assisted therapy (EAT) also encompasses physical or psychological treatments and is fundamentally characterized by the involvement of equines within a therapeutic context to enhance client treatment outcomes (Fry, 2013: 258; Burgon, Gammage, and Hebden 2018: 7).

In essence, equine-assisted therapy is an intervention that harnesses horses as facilitators for clients to gain insights into their interpersonal dynamics and their impact on others' reactions. The multifaceted benefits it offers include empowering clients to project and express themselves within a secure and accepting atmosphere. Engaging with horses in a therapeutic environment nurtures the development of qualities such as empathy and patience. It also refines skills related to building relationships, communication, bolstering self-esteem, and orchestrating a shift from dysfunctional behavioural patterns to functional ones (Cumella and Simpson 2007: 2013; Kohanov 2003; Mandrell 2006; Boshoff, Grobler, and Nienaber 2015: 89).

#### **1.8.8. Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy**

Equine-facilitated psychotherapy is precisely defined by the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH) as an interactive endeavour where a licensed mental health professional collaborates with or operates as a suitably qualified equine professional. This partnership involves appropriate equine(s) to work towards the psychotherapy objectives that are established jointly by the mental health expert and the client. Programs for equine-facilitated psychotherapy are customized to effectively tackle the social, emotional, behavioural, and mental health requirements of a diverse range of clients, spanning from children to adults.

The scope of equine-facilitated psychotherapy initiatives extends to individuals, couples, families, and groups, all with distinct therapeutic aims. The breadth of possibilities within the spectrum of equine-assisted psychotherapy is as expansive as the diverse practice areas covered by each mental health professional, encompassing subjects such as trauma, addiction, eating disorders, as well as grief and loss. The unique setting of equine-assisted psychotherapy has the potential to address these various concerns effectively (Path International, 2011: 5).

### **1.8.9. Equine assisted learning**

Burgon, Gammage, and Hebden (2018: 5) further elaborate on equine-assisted learning, encompassing the extensive realm of therapeutic horsemanship. Equine-assisted learning represents an immersive approach that encompasses the cultivation of particular proficiencies and extends to the enhancement of social, emotional, and behavioural growth. These interventions which fall within the domain of equine-assisted learning are frequently guided by experts like social workers, educators, and professionals from related disciplines (Burgon, Gammage, and Hebden 2018: 4).

### **1.8.10. Therapeutic Riding**

Therapeutic riding is defined as an equine-assisted activity that imparts horsemanship knowledge and riding skills to individuals with special needs. Moreover, it serves as an equine-assisted endeavour that is aimed at fostering positive enhancements in the cognitive, physical, emotional, and social dimensions of those with special requirements (Ward et al. 2013: 2191). The core of therapeutic riding lies in developing skills like attentiveness, control, concentration, sensory management, and both nonverbal and verbal communication, all geared towards the teaching of riding abilities (Fine 2010: 170, 2015: 141; Gabriels et al. 2015: 541, Anderson and Meints 2016: 3344).

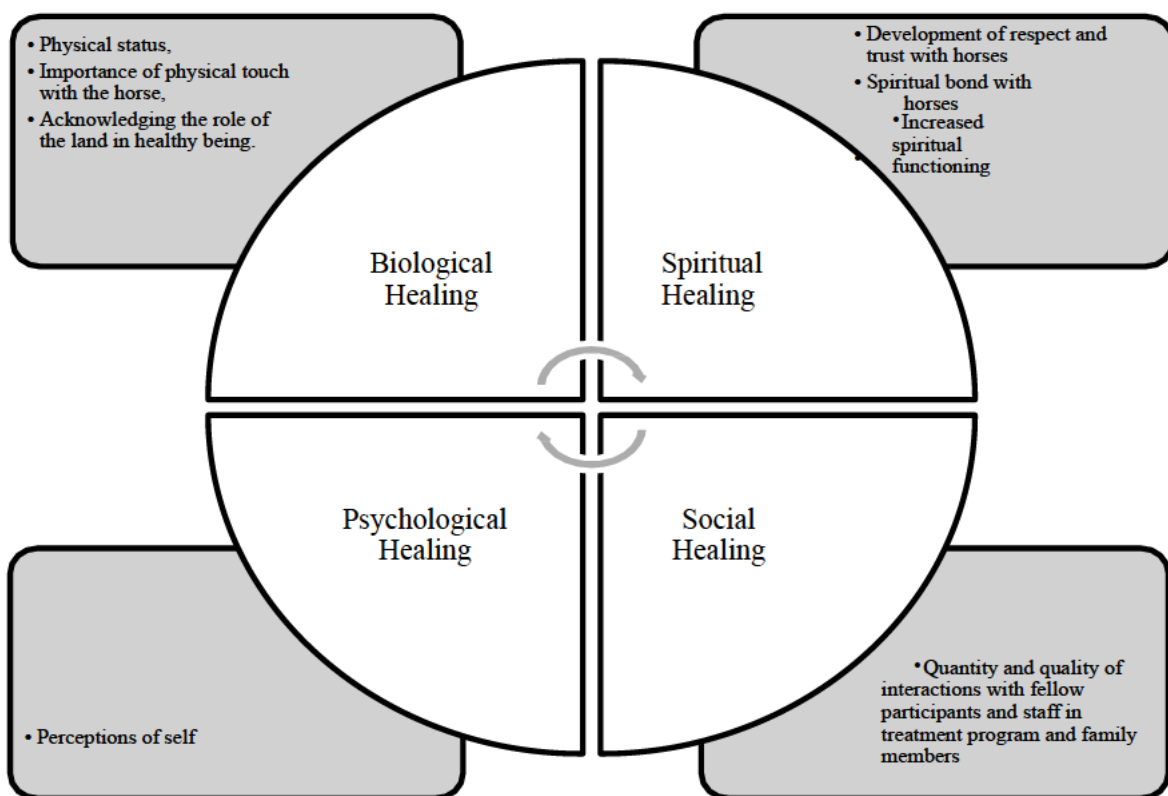
### **1.8.11. Hippotherapy**

Koca and Ataseven (2015: 247) defined hippotherapy as a therapeutic approach incorporating the movement of a horse within an intervention strategy. This technique capitalizes on the inherent gait and motion of a horse to deliver sensory and motor stimuli. The core focus is on enhancing neurological functions and sensory processes, making it particularly beneficial for individuals with both physical and mental disorders.

Consequently, various modalities of equine-based therapy exist, encompassing therapeutic riding, Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), Equine-Facilitated Learning (EFL), Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP), and Equine-Assisted

Experiential Learning (EAEL), all of which are extensively discussed within the existing literature (Gomez 2016: 3). For the scope of this study, the concept of equine-based therapy will encompass both equine facilitated psychotherapy and equine assisted learning.

### 1.9. Theoretical framework - Holistic bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework of healing



**Figure 1.1: Holistic bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework of healing**

This study was guided by the holistic bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework of healing, as developed by White Buffalo (2015: 34). It is compatible with Cartier's Equine assisted learning program. This framework reflects that the four quadrants namely biological healing, spiritual healing, psychological healing and social healing are all interrelated and work synergistically to bring about healing holistically.

The distinctive aspect of the social work profession lies in its focus on evaluating and addressing clients through a person-in-environment perspective. This implies that social workers perceive the client's physical and mental health needs within a larger

social context. Beyond examining psychological and physical requirements, social workers also consider the impact of the client's surroundings, and how their spirituality influences overall well-being. The biopsychosocial-spiritual framework, as denoted by its name, encompasses four key dimensions: biological, psychological, social, and spiritual (Lacks and Lamson 2018: 707). This evaluation involves not only the process of collecting information within these domains and their interconnectedness but also the creation of a written document. This document is employed to delineate treatment goals and objectives for the client.

The biopsychosocial-spiritual framework presents a comprehensive approach to comprehending a client's experiences, encompassing both their physical and mental well-being (Khalid and Naz 2020: 171). Within this framework, the bio-psycho-social-spiritual assessment stands as the principal tool employed by social workers to appraise a client's treatment requirements. This assessment involves an array of activities and processes which is aimed at gathering pertinent information about the client's current situation, needs, factors of risk and protection, and the contextual backdrop in which these elements exist. The culmination of these elements is compiled into a written document that serves as the foundation for determining treatment objectives and goals. Moreover, within mental health settings, the biopsychosocial-spiritual assessment plays a role in aiding the identification of the client's mental health diagnosis. While the particulars of each assessment may differ based on factors such as age and challenges, a comprehensive bio-psycho-social-spiritual assessment consistently integrates information from all four domains.

As asserted by Braganza and Oliveira (2022: 94), the concept of biological healing pertains to one's physical well-being and the physiological essentials necessary for maintaining a healthy body. These essentials encompass elements like nourishment, hydration, unpolluted air, physical activity, as well as a profound connection to and reverence for the environment. This study is primarily concerned with the aspect of physical well-being, a facet that can be discerned through (a) an individual's physical condition, (b) the significance of physical interaction with the horse, and (c) the association with the natural surroundings, represented by the equine milieu.

Engaging in horseback riding mirrors the human gait, thus often leading to enhancements in flexibility, balance, and muscle strength among riders (Murphy, Wilson, and Greenberg 2017: 366). Interacting with horses offers valuable exercise

opportunities, especially for individuals requiring assistance in refining both fine motor skills, involving intricate muscle groups like those in fingers, toes, and wrists, and gross motor skills, which encompass larger muscles in the legs, arms, and torso. Horse riding proves particularly advantageous for clients contending with diverse forms of cerebral palsy and autism, aiding in the cultivation of strength, balance, and muscle coordination (Penalva 2021: 23). Sheena (2020: 7) said that for many clients grappling with an array of physical challenges, the field of equine-assisted therapy offers therapeutic support. Remarkably, the unique advantage of this form of therapy is that, in numerous instances, the experience doesn't carry the conventional feel of "therapy" due to the enjoyable nature of working with horses.

The psychological healing aspect, represented in the second quadrant, primarily pertains to one's mental health condition. This encompasses a range of factors such as mood, emotions, cognition, perception, thoughts, self-perception, intellect, emotional responses, judgment, and individual identity (Aratoon et al. 2015: 58). In the context of this study, the prevailing interpretation of psychological healing found within equine-related literature has been adopted. It is more comprehensively described as mental well-being, encapsulating a broader understanding.

Sur, Ashcroft, Adamson and Tanner (2023: 12) noted that clinical social workers are involved in both diagnosing and treating mental health disorders. They offer therapeutic sessions for individuals, families, and couples, addressing concerns related to depression, anxiety, family dynamics, and various behavioural challenges. Van Breda and Addinall (2021: 3) added that their roles extend to private practice settings or within mental health institutions. Social workers play a vital role in organizing support groups, devising personalized treatment strategies, and orchestrating interventions when the situation warrants. Among their key responsibilities are identifying and engaging with individuals requiring assistance, evaluating their requirements, and executing a strategic course of action. Moreover, clinical social workers are equipped to respond adeptly during crises.

Maker (2019: 1) emphasised that equine-assisted therapy proves beneficial for individuals coping with an array of mental health challenges, including but not limited to depression, anxiety, ADHD, conduct disorders, addiction, trauma, eating disorders, spectrum and health-related issues, dissociative disorders, Alzheimer's disease, dementia, and other mental health complexities. Research focusing on the interplay between humans and animals has demonstrated a substantial reduction in

physiological anxiety levels through interactions with horses and other animals (Fuller-Lovins, Kanamori, Myers and Cornelius 2023: 6).

Atkinson (2019: 27) said that with the guidance of a skilled therapist and a trained therapy horse, whose authenticity and affection contribute to alleviating these anxieties, clients gain the empowerment to engage in therapy and mitigate their levels of anxiety. Moreover, Rebibo (2020: 7) noted that this form of intervention has particularly shown effectiveness with clients who have not experienced notable benefits from conventional talk-based therapeutic approaches.

Regarding mental health, research findings indicate that parents acknowledge the beneficial impact of equine-assisted therapy on a client's emotional well-being, enhanced self-regulation, social interactions, and psychosocial needs (Tan and Simmonds 2018). Furthermore, a considerable body of anecdotal evidence suggests that equine-assisted therapy exerts a favourable influence on various facets of mental health, including motivation, fostering relationships, and bolstering self-esteem (Ward, Hovey and Brownlee 2022: e4920; Wood et al. 2021: 90; Suárez-Iglesias 2021: 103161; Shelef et al. 2019: 594).

The third quadrant, referred to as social healing, pertains to an individual's connections and interactions within their social circle, encompassing friends, family, community, and the broader universe (Admas 2015). Social workers actively work to fortify relationships among clients, with a deliberate aim to foster, reinstate, sustain, and elevate the overall well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities (NASW 2017: 1). Recognizing that individuals seldom function in isolation, social workers take into account the intricate web of relationships, which can be either detrimental, beneficial or a combination of both. The impact of any change in a client's life extends to others, and conversely, external factors often contribute to a client's well-being or distress. Through efforts to mend relationships, social workers contribute to both the client's social realm and family unit. This restorative approach involves strengthening existing client relationships, harnessing them to cater to the client's needs, and imparting healthy communication skills, conflict resolution, and the acknowledgement of needs within relationships. Given that poor relationships can often lead to trauma, social workers also endeavour to address and heal the physical, mental, and emotional trauma stemming from problematic relationships.

Shelton (2022: 32) added that equine assisted therapy facilitates the development of crucial non-verbal and verbal communication skills in children, assisting them in comprehending both affirmative and critical feedback. Additionally, Lowe (2020: 1) said that it enables a grasp of reciprocity within relationships, encourages assertiveness, sparks initiative, and nurtures active participation. The remarkable impact of this therapy becomes evident in its capacity to transition socially isolated or withdrawn children towards a more receptive, optimistic, and fitting social context. Establishing a favourable rapport with a horse, frequently serves as the initial secure stride toward honing the social competencies necessary for forging closer human connections. Through this interaction, children acquire the means to cultivate trust, initiate more profound interpersonal bonds, and actively engage in social give-and-take.

The fourth quadrant, known as spiritual healing, encompasses an individual's inner belief system, encompassing elements like purpose, significance, values, and a higher power, along with their essence, being, or inner spirit (Selver 2013). Within this quadrant, spiritual healing is delineated by two aspects: the cultivation of an equine-human relationship marked by trust, and the establishment of a spiritual bond. This is discerned through (a) the development of mutual respect and trust with horses, (b) forging a spiritual connection to horses, and (c) an augmentation in spiritual functioning (Adams et al. 2015). Mirroring this comprehensive approach within the domain of social work, contemporary research underscores the positive correlation between religion, spirituality, and both mental and physical well-being. It highlights the role of religion as a psychological and social resource for coping with stressors like familial caregiving (Koenig 2011).

Catering to the spiritual needs of clients is regarded as an essential aspect of delivering comprehensive care thereby, encompassing the entirety of an individual's wellbeing. This holistic approach entails addressing not only the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual facets but also acknowledges the significance of social interactions (Aratoon et al. 2015). The presence of spirituality within nature can yield a transformative and all-encompassing healing experience that transcends the realms of mind, body, and spirit. Nature's grounding influence, as suggested by Nowakowski-Sims and Kumar (2020: 188), enables individuals to establish a connection with something beyond themselves. In this context, the insights of Hatala et al. (2019: 122) emphasized that this connection can offer solace, tranquillity, and a profound sense of belonging, which holds therapeutic value during times of adversity or emotional distress. Marques,

McIntosh, Cornwall, and Kershaw (2020: 443) further expounded that spirituality in nature creates an environment conducive to connection, introspection, rejuvenation, and inspiration. Escobar (2021) added that it taps into the innate bond between individuals and the natural world, providing support in discovering inner fortitude, resilience, and a sense of purpose. Ultimately, this process guides individuals along their paths of healing.

Scholarly literature validates the therapeutic potency of engaging with fellow sentient beings to address psychological and societal challenges. Psychotherapists McCormick and McCormick (1997: 191) have proposed that equine-based therapy serves as a conduit between every day, "mundane" experiences, and the mystical realm, facilitating spiritual growth. To awaken human awareness of their connection to the Source of life and bring people closer to their spiritual essence, horses act as catalysts (McCormick and McCormick 1997: 191). Through therapeutic interactions with horses, individuals are endowed with an expanded perception of creation and a heightened sense of intimacy with it. This process unveils the divine presence inherent in both the human experience and the natural world, illuminating the extent to which humans have become distanced from the interconnectedness of life, thus serving as purveyors of profound wisdom. Moreover, the scenarios enacted alongside horses are shown to amplify and elucidate one's internal struggles (McCormick and McCormick 1997: 202).

Using a holistic framework of wellness within the study is necessary because the field currently lacks a unified, widely accepted, or empirically supported theoretical framework for explaining how and why relationships between humans and animals are potentially therapeutic. This understanding frames how data was collected and analysed in the study.

### **1.10. Overview of the research methodology**

For this study, a qualitative exploratory descriptive approach was selected. This approach was selected as the researcher sought to gain an in-depth understanding of how equine-based therapy can be used as a healing tool for social work practice. The study consisted of one sample i.e., mental health professionals involved in equine-

based therapy. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Purposive sampling was used since the study requires participants who have knowledge and experience in the field of equine-based therapy. The data was analysed using the steps of thematic analysis.

### **1.11. Structure of the thesis**

Chapter 1 - Chapter 1 introduced the purpose and rationale for the study. The aim and the objectives of the study were also outlined. The holistic bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework of healing as a theoretical framework to guide the study was introduced.

Chapter 2 - Chapter 2 comprised the literature review which focused on the history of equine-based therapy, conceptual issues, and the benefits of equine-based therapy.

Chapter 3 – Chapter 3 introduced the research methodology. The qualitative exploratory descriptive design was used in conjunction with the case study approach. This paradigm allowed for the use of qualitative research approaches to collect data. The procedure for data collection and analysis was also discussed. This was followed by a discussion of the ethical considerations related to the study. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews.

Chapter 4 - Chapter 4 presented the data and a discussion of the findings made.

Chapter 5 - Chapter 5 was the concluding chapter. The conclusions of the study were presented. The limitations of the study and recommendations for further research were also presented.

### **1.12. Conclusion**

Although a significant amount of research has been conducted to date, the understanding of equine-assisted therapy and its uses is still in its infancy (O’Kelly 2015). There is still minimal research on equine-based therapy and its process. However, time spent in the presence of horses, simply being outside, connecting with another creature, and engaging the whole body in an activity that invigorates the senses and touches one soul feels good (Dawson 2014).

Over time, the quality and scope of research will begin to catch up with the enthusiasm of those providing the service. Until this happens, professionals are urged to speak about equine-assisted therapy as a novel treatment, one that necessitates a good deal of additional research before making claims about the benefits associated. Indicating the tentative, but hopeful nature of existing research, and sharing patient stories or the personal experiences of providers may be a more ethical way to communicate the excitement and passion for the industry until more can be gleaned from an empirical study (Hallberg 2017). A detailed discussion of the literature supporting the topic will be presented in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Introduction**

A literature review encompasses a comprehensive synthesis of prior research pertaining to a specific subject. This review delves into scholarly articles, books, and pertinent sources pertaining to a distinct investigation area. It is aimed at enumerating, delineating, summarizing, objectively evaluating, and clarifying the existing body of research. This endeavour establishes a theoretical foundation for the ongoing research, thus guiding its trajectory. Moreover, the literature review acknowledges the contributions of previous researchers, thus assuring the reader of the meticulous conceptualization of the current study (Alzahrani 2020: 12). It is presumed that by referencing prior works within the field, the researcher has absorbed, analysed, and integrated that knowledge into the current undertaking (Aveyard 2023: 5).

In essence, a literature review constructs a conceptual landscape for the reader, furnishing a comprehensive comprehension of the progressions within the domain. This intellectual terrain conveys to the reader that the researcher has diligently assimilated the significant works within the field, culminating in the present study (Arshed and Danson 2015: 31). The writing of the literature review is not confined to merely presenting a catalogue of available material or a series of summaries (Snyder 2019: 334). Instead, it serves the purpose of imparting to the reader the established knowledge and ideas pertaining to the subject, including their strengths and limitations. The literature review is driven by a guiding principle, which may encompass the research objective, the discussed problem or issue, or an argumentative thesis. It transcends mere description and transforms into a meaningful exploration (Snyder 2019: 336).

In alignment with the aims and objectives of the research, it was evident that an approach was warranted to bridge the gap between scientific research and the prevalent personal beliefs, opinions, and practices that are reflected in mainstream literature or promoted by membership and training organizations. To realize this objective, a comprehensive review of research on equine-based therapy was undertaken, utilizing an array of databases including PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES,

PubMed, CAB Abstracts, Psychiatric Online, Psychological and Behavioral Sciences Collection, the Social Sciences Citation Index, Nursing and Allied Health Collection, Physical Therapy and Sports Medicine Collection, EBSCO Academic Search, EBSCO SPORTDiscus, EBSCO Educational Research Complete, EBSCO HealthSource, and VetMed.

The search employed specific keywords such as equine-assisted therapy, hippotherapy, therapeutic riding, equine-assisted psychotherapy, equine-facilitated psychotherapy, equine-assisted counselling, equine-assisted learning, and equinefacilitated learning. Supplementary terms were integrated in conjunction with these keywords, encompassing at-risk youth, spirituality, nature-based therapy, and social work.

Chapter two of the study will concentrate on a comprehensive literature, representing the current findings regarding equine-based therapy as a therapeutic modality. This exploration encompasses peer-reviewed journals, book chapters, and e-books. The chapter delves into literature concerning the definitions of equine-based therapy, the historical trajectory of equine-based therapy and animal-assisted therapy, the underlying principles, and theories of equine-based therapy, as well as the significance of equine-based therapy within social work practice and other mental health disciplines.

### **2.1.1. Animal-assisted therapy**

As Tedeschi, Fitchett, and Molidor (2006: 59) emphasized, effective social work requires a keen awareness of the diverse societal and cultural factors that shape our communities and families. The relationship between individuals and animals holds significant relevance within the realm of social work. Recent research, including studies by Carter and Porgess (2016: 89), Riggs et al. (2018: 4226), Young et al. (2018: 330), and Fine and Weaver (2018: 132) has illuminated both the positive and negative connections between humans and their pets or other animals. These findings highlight how companion animals can provide emotional security and unconditional love to both children and adults (Risley-Curtiss et al. 2006: 257), contribute to children's cognitive and linguistic development (Melson and Fine 2015: 181), and enhance the daily functioning of elderly individuals (Raina et al. 1999: 323). Additionally, service animals

play a vital role in enhancing independence and quality of life for individuals with ambulatory and other disabilities (Duncan and Allen 2000: 305).

Laurent-Simpson (2017: 586) and Jegatheesan et al. (2020: 3116) underscore the existence of strong bonds between humans and companion animals, with most pet owners considering these animals as integral family members. Taylor and Fraser (2019: 343), as well as Pease, Allan, and Briskman (2020: 2006), further corroborate the notion that the field of social work should possess a deep understanding of these relationships and be skilled in integrating companion animals into their professional practice. Nevertheless, an analysis of social work literature by Laing and Maylea (2018: 224) and Matsuoka et al. (2020: 55) reveals that companion animals have historically been overlooked as significant entities within clients' environments, both in standard textbooks and in the context of social work education and practice. Moreover, recent research, as highlighted by Hoy-Gerlach, Delgado, Sloane, and Arkow (2019: 220) and Arkow (2020: 573), indicates that the integration of companion animals into current social work practices may still be insufficient. A study exploring collaboration between child welfare and humane society professionals found that some child welfare workers downplayed the importance of cross-reporting, resisted incorporating animal welfare considerations into their assessments, and did not adequately address concerns for animal well-being (Zilney and Zilney 2005: 48).

Risley-Curtiss (2004: 1) discovered that only a minority of the 230 surveyed social work schools included substantial content about the human–companion animal bond in their curriculum, primarily focusing on aspects related to animal-assisted therapy. Finally, Ascione (2005: 5) asserted that the positive role of pets and animals in children's lives has been largely overlooked by developmental psychology and related fields, including social work.

Research suggests that an overwhelming majority of clinicians (91.7%) are familiar with Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT), which involves incorporating animals into clinical treatment for clients, and they view it as a valid therapeutic approach (Hartwig and Smelser 2018: 43). While there is a growing body of research highlighting the benefits of animal-assisted therapy in clinical practice, many clinicians remain uncertain about the mechanics and implementation of this approach with their own clients (Hartwig and Smelser 2018: 45). In alignment with a core value of social work, which underscores the significance of human relationships (Workers 2008), animals often contribute to the establishment, enhancement, and nurturing of interpersonal connections among

humans (Compitus 2019: 119). Looking back from an evolutionary perspective, humans have coexisted and collaborated with animals for thousands of years, resulting in well-established mutual advantages within the human–animal relationship (Freedman et al. 2015: 73). Given humans' inherent social nature, the act of caring for or cooperating with animals may instinctively provide a sense of gratification (Compitus 2019: 119). Including animals in clinical treatment planning could tap into this enduring reciprocal bond in a manner that enriches therapeutic healing for humans.

According to Compitus (2019: 1), animal-assisted therapy operates on multiple levels, functioning as both a means of building skills and an emotionally corrective intervention. Holmes, Lewith, Newell, Field, and Bishop (2017: 246) have noted that introducing a therapy animal into clinical practice offers various advantages that enhance patient outcomes. Furthermore, Flynn, Zoller, Gandenberger, and Morris (2022: 193) emphasized that the primary benefit lies in the therapeutic alliance; a therapy animal can facilitate engagement and reinforce the rapport between therapist and client. The presence of a therapy animal may create the perception of a secure holding environment, potentially alleviating patient anxiety regarding treatment and increasing adherence to the treatment protocol (Beggs and Townsend 2021: 40). Moreover, the presence of a therapy animal can illuminate the parallel processes between the animal and therapist, as well as between the therapist and client. Observing the trust between the animal and therapist may imbue the client with a greater sense of safety and security in their therapeutic journey. This notion is supported by the perspectives of Wesley et al. (2009: 137), Germain et al. (2018: 141), and Waite et al. (2018: 49), particularly, in trauma therapy or when addressing substance use disorders.

Given the adaptive nature of animal-assisted therapy, research has predominantly focused on the outcomes of this approach (Maujean, Pepping, and Kendall 2015: 23; O'haire Guérin and Kirkham 2015: 1121). However, less attention has been devoted to exploring the procedural aspects of implementing animal-assisted therapy or integrating it into existing therapeutic models.

### **2.1.2. The benefits of animal-assisted therapy integration**

The primary role of animal-assisted therapy is to foster the development of a therapeutic alliance; however, it also serves additional functions such as initiating an exploration of the client's psyche, addressing cognitive distortions, or imparting behavioural skills (Chandler 2012; Medicus, Alleyne, Graves, and Figliolini 2022: 23). Initially, introducing a therapy animal into sessions can expedite the establishment of rapport between the therapist and the client. This is achieved through an initial verbal exchange which is centred around a shared positive attitude towards the therapy animal. According to Hartwig and Smelser (2018: 50), the therapeutic alliance constitutes a multifaceted component of therapeutic practice, frequently serving as a key determinant of treatment quality and the client's motivation to engage in the therapeutic process. Van Fleet and Faa-Thompson (2017: 64), along with Lopez and Cepero (2020: 985), elaborate that the therapeutic alliance involves collaborative goal setting for each session, and fostering an emotional bond between therapist and client.

Fine (2019: 18) highlights that incorporating a therapy animal into treatment can expedite the client's trust in the therapist, as the client observes the trusting relationship between the therapist and the therapy animal. Eaton-Stull, Beall, Hutchins, Mariono, and Zinn (2020: 759) further suggest that as the therapy animal places trust in the therapist, and the client witnesses the positive interactions between the therapist and the animal, the client may perceive the therapy animal as a reliable indicator of the therapist's character. Tangible benefits encompass diminished anxiety levels for both the therapist and client, as well as a decrease in physiological stress indicators like cortisol levels (Beetz et al. 2012: 234; Hoagwood, Acri, Morrissey, and Perth-Pierce 2017: 9). The tactile stimulation that transpires when the client interacts with the therapy animal contributes to cortisol reduction, lower blood pressure, and even decreased cholesterol levels (Beetz et al. 2012: 234; Hoagwood, Acri, Morrissey, and Perth-Pierce 2017: 9).

Compitus (2019: 120) asserted that stroking the animal can also offer a sense of reassurance, reminiscent of a child comforting themselves by touching a favourite blanket or stuffed toy. Additionally, clients may find solace in hugging the therapy animal for support, particularly, in situations where hugging the therapist might not be appropriate. In this context, as emphasized by Winnicott (1986: 254) and Avila-Alvarez

et al. (2020: 1220), the therapy animal may serve either as a transitional object or as a reparative relationship for the client.

Andreasen et al. (2017: 12) observed other benefits of animal-assisted therapy, including the development of empathic skills, the facilitation of learning in interpersonal relationships, the modelling of skills like distress tolerance and mindfulness, and the enhancement of clients' confidence. Clients felt more at ease discussing challenging situations, such as a history of trauma, when they perceived the therapeutic environment as safe; the presence of a therapy animal heightened the clients' feelings of safety and security (VanFleet and Faa-Thompson 2017: 8). Oxytocin has been established as a hormone that promotes a positive emotional state, increasing an individuals' sense of well-being (Thielke and Udell 2017: 378). This hormone is well known for fostering bonds between individuals and between mothers and their children. Research demonstrated that oxytocin levels increased in both humans and non-human animals during interactions, providing a biopsychological explanation for the heightened well-being experienced by people when spending time with animals (Thielke and Udell 2017: 379).

Social isolation, recognized as one of the "grand challenges" in social work due to its associated risks, including potential fatality (Peretti 1990: 151; Johnson and Bibbo 2015: 252), was mitigated by animals serving as social lubricants. Animals bridged social isolation by creating an immediate shared interest and topic of conversation among people. Acting as "social lubricants," animals fostered connections between individuals and their communities. Veterans often reported that having a posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) service dog was comforting because they were never alone and had a constant companion looking out for them (similar feelings were reported by older adults) (Bleiberg et al. 2005: 278).

### **2.1.3. The importance of animals in social work**

The fundamental understanding of systems within social work and the central focus on the person-in-environment perspective have significantly influenced both the structure of the social work curriculum and its practice. The enduring relationship between humankind and animals has been a notable aspect of numerous families, households, and communities. Throughout history, the significance of animals in

people's lives has been widely acknowledged (Bustad 1996: 1). It has been approximated that the United States hosts more than 2,500 animal-assisted programs (Benda and Lightmark 2004: 31). Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is characterized as a purposeful intervention where a specially trained and safety-vetted animal becomes an integral component of the clinical healthcare treatment process ("About animal-assisted activities," n.d.). The delivery or administration of animal-assisted therapy involves a professional health or human service provider with expertise in the clinical implementation of human-animal interactions (Tedeschi, Fitchett, and Molidor 2006: 65).

#### **2.1.4. Animal-Assisted Social Work (AASW) and the Mission of Social Work Education**

Rauktis and Hoy-Gerlach (2020: 571) highlighted that the significant rise in animal-assisted interventions was primarily rooted in the well-established positive impact that animals exerted on human health, well-being, and motivation. These noteworthy effects were evident across various dimensions, including age, race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and life circumstances. Yesikayali and Ofluogu (2018: 1874) emphasized that depictions of animals permeated literature, arts, celebrations, dreams, fables, folklore, language, medicine, music, religion, work, and recreation. Furthermore, Muela et al. (2017: 01485) contended that animals themselves held a pervasive presence across virtually every facet of life. Social work educators bore the responsibility of assessing the relevance of this topic to support the educational objectives of social work programs.

Fine (2018: 145) illustrated an instance of animal-assisted therapy in the context of the academic mission of social work education at the Graduate School of Social Work (GSSW) at the University of Denver. The school introduced a course titled "Integration of Animals into Therapeutic Settings" six years ago and subsequently added an advanced course titled "Animal-Assisted Social Work Practice." Originating from a suggestion by GSSW students, these courses offered first-year students the chance to explore the therapeutic potential of human-animal interactions. The courses exposed students to practice guidelines for animal-assisted activities (AAA) and animal-assisted therapy (AAT), incorporating national standards of care, safety protocols, ethical considerations for both animals and clients, experiential and

alternative therapy theories, as well as essential knowledge and skills within the framework of students' core clinical training. The mission of the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work was to promote social responsibility and enhance quality of life through equality for all individuals, achieved through excellence in teaching, scholarship, and leadership. The school's philosophy and core values, which informed curriculum development and program planning, embraced progressive ideals of social and economic justice, cultural diversity, and freedom ("Our mission," n.d.).

Walker, Aimers, and Perry (2015: 24) acknowledged that the guiding principles of the Graduate School of Social Work empowered graduates to analyse the dynamics of social problems in individuals, families, organizations, communities, and social policies. Animal-assisted social work naturally lent itself to interdisciplinary collaboration within each of these domains and could be integrated into various therapeutic settings, including individual, group, and family contexts, across diverse communities. Rosing et al. (2022: e5074) noted that individuals often receiving social work services were those who had encountered limited positive experiences in their lives. In a straightforward sense, when properly introduced into a therapeutic environment, animals evoked positive feelings, enhanced quality of life, and contributed to the healing process.

Kourkouta, Georgopoulou, Kourkouta and Tsaloglidou (2019: 1898) suggested that for individuals with a history of challenging human interactions, an animal-assisted therapy animal could serve as a non-threatening partner in the treatment and support process, creating an initial foundation of trust that might later extend to the professional relationship. Mims and Wadell (2016: 452) further explained that the tranquil, soothing presence of an animal in therapeutic settings for individuals who had experienced trauma could mitigate the effects of traumatic episodes, thus enabling more effective intervention outcomes. Additionally, Ward, Hovey, and Brownlee (2022: e4920) pointed out that an animal's loyalty and genuine non-judgmental demeanour made our connections with them some of the most enduring and secure interactions possible. Jones, Rice, and Cotton (2019: e0210761) asserted that animal-assisted social work was a potent therapeutic approach with diverse impacts, contributing to physical, social, and emotional healing through dynamic relationships and connections with others.

Tedeschi, Fitchett, and Molidor (2006: 60) along with Craig (2020: 643) contended that contemporary culture has revived the recognition of animals as significant contributors to our lives. This rekindled acknowledgment is reinforced by a robust array of multidisciplinary endorsements affirming the therapeutic efficacy of animals in human health, thereby establishing the legitimacy of including animals in therapeutic settings. The potential contribution of animals to human health and well-being presents an avenue to transcend an excessive reliance on Western culture and embrace valuable cross-cultural diversity (Serpell 2012: 17; Frakas and Romaniuk 2020: 67). The utilization of animal-assisted therapy enables social workers to engage with individuals experientially, surpassing mere reliance on verbal communication. This holds particularly true when understanding families, individuals, and groups where nuances may become lost, quite literally in translation (Tedeschi, Fitchett, and Molidor 2006: 67; Fine, Beck, and Ng 2019: 3997).

Ratschen and Sheldon (2019: 367) emphasized that within the client-social worker relationship, animals could enhance and expedite rapport-building and trust, and transcend cultural, gender, and lifespan considerations. Acquardo, Caapitanelli, Cortese, Ilesami, Giano, and Curico (2022: 383) underscored that the presence of animals has been shown to facilitate communication and catalyze conversations among individuals who might otherwise face social marginalization, isolation, or disenfranchisement. Walker and Tumility (2019: 163); Chandler (2022: 453); and Beetz (2017: 139) examined the psychosocial benefits of animal companionship. Their findings concluded that integrating animals into therapy can address cognitive and perceptual deficits, assist clients in self-regulation, cultivate empathy for animals and humans, inspire and motivate, facilitate socialization, maintain focus and attention, diminish aggressive behaviours, enhance self-esteem, and contribute to stress reduction. Serpell, McCune, Gee, and Griffin (2017: 223) also posited that animal care can mitigate feelings of dependency and learned helplessness while promoting optimism, a sense of mastery, and control over one's life. Fine, Beck, and Ng (2019: 3998) elucidated that animal-assisted social work operates as an empowerment based approach which is applicable across diverse settings and populations.

Furthermore, Stapleton and Grimett (2021: 4) asserted that mounting evidence compels both social work practitioners and educators to thoroughly explore the significant role of the human-animal bond. They advocate for the therapeutic integration of animals as educators, therapists, and companions, contributing to the

advancement of social responsibility and an enhanced quality of life for all individuals. According to Arkow (2020: 573), social workers who prepare to work with families, children, adults, child welfare, communities and organizations, as well as their clients, can benefit from adding animal-assisted therapy to their repertoire of intervention techniques.

According to White-Lewis (2019: 5), social workers often engage with individuals and families who have companion animals. Consequently, it seems appropriate to incorporate these animals into both social work practice and research as a natural progression of the field's work with humans. This expansion would encompass understanding challenges, coping strategies, and factors contributing to resilience. However, the social work literature lacks a comprehensive exploration of social workers' involvement in this realm (Risley-Curtiss 2010: 40). Flynn, Gandenberger, Mueller, and Morris (2020: 632) pointed out that the overarching global mission of the social work profession revolves around enhancing people's well-being. The profession falls short of realizing its full potential in achieving this goal if it fails to broaden its scope to encompass companion animals within social work research, education, and practice.

As numerous studies have demonstrated (Barker and Dawson 1998: 797; Martin and Farnum 2002: 657; Morrison 2007: 51; Bachi and Parish-Plass 2017: 3; Yap, Scheinberg, and Williams 2017: 47; Cakici and Kok 2020: 117; Flynn, Xoller, Gandenberger, and Morris 2022: 188), animal-assisted therapy effectively contributes to the treatment of individuals across various age groups and abilities who grapple with mental and/or physical illnesses. A growing facet of animal therapy is equine-based therapy, and the present study specifically delved into the value of incorporating horses (equines) into therapy and the advantages they offer to the realm of social work practice.

### **2.1.5. Clinical Social Work Practice and animal assisted therapy**

Clinical social workers recognize their clients' interactions with animals by discerning attachments and issues relating to the animals in their environments. Additionally, they may introduce animals for therapeutic purposes to enhance the bond between the client and practitioner. In one of the earliest discussions on the intersection of social

work and human-animal interactions, Netting, Wilson, and New (1987: 60-64) outlined seven ways in which social workers could contribute to strengthening human-animal bonding:

1. Providing sensitive and supportive counselling for clients facing issues related to their pets.
2. Identifying and understanding clients' connections with their animals, assisting in locating support services inclusive of animal care.
3. Staying informed about policies affecting pet ownership, like restrictive housing conditions, and advocating for clients' interests related to animals.
4. Evaluating clients to gauge their willingness to embrace animal-related interventions.
5. Offering a discerning perspective on the development of animal-related programs and collaborating with animal professionals.
6. Recognizing the potential benefits and challenges associated with animal-related initiatives.
7. Facilitating connections between veterinarians and the human services referral network.

More recently, Silverman (2018) released a concise guide outlining how social workers can effectively incorporate animals as a conduit between therapists and patients in private practice. Animals have the potential to expedite the establishment of rapport, particularly, for patients who are contending with attachment disorders. This can lead to heightened motivation to attend sessions, subsequently enhancing retention rates and treatment outcomes. Animals can also serve as surrogates for therapists, allowing for an ethical therapeutic touch, which may serve as a corrective experience for individuals with histories of trauma. Nurturing the connection between humans and animals could assist patients in identifying enduring, sustainable support to manage symptoms and sustain functionality beyond the conclusion of their therapeutic engagement with a clinical social worker. Silverman identified four distinct categories of animals employed in supportive roles:

1. Service animals are meticulously trained to perform specific tasks for individuals with physical or sensory disabilities. Clinical social workers may suggest that a patient explore the possibility of having a service animal and help identify resources for obtaining one.

2. Emotional support animals are a more recent and less defined category. These animals extend emotional benefits to individuals diagnosed with mental health disorders, and with impaired or limited functioning across various life domains.
3. Comfort dogs are introduced in disaster responses to offer a calming presence to survivors and first responders.
4. Animal-assisted therapy animals are subjected to a professional evaluation for inclusion in treatment plans that involve purposeful, goal-oriented activities that complement traditional interventions.

Animal-assisted therapy and equine-based therapy represent therapeutic approaches that involve interactions with animals to enhance physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. While animal-assisted therapy is a comprehensive term encompassing a range of animals, equine-based therapy is a distinct subset within this framework, concentrating specifically on interactions with horses. The subsequent section elucidates the connection between equine-based therapy and the field of social work.

## **2.2. The link between social work practice and equine-based therapy**

### **2.2.1. Social work practice**

A comprehensive grasp of the social work profession originates from a deep appreciation for the individuals served by the social worker (Sheafor and Horejsi, 2008). This understanding underscores that humans, being inherently social beings, necessitate the nurturing and protective guidance provided by those around them for their growth and development. The bedrock of social work as a profession lies in the interconnectedness and interdependence of individuals within the social environment. The context in which a person resides significantly shapes how a social worker applies knowledge and guidance (Coulshed and Orme 2018: 1).

A social worker engages directly with individuals, families, or groups of people. The initial encounter can take various forms, such as in moments of crisis, voluntary interactions, or involuntary engagements. This first meeting holds pivotal importance in establishing a strong and effective helping relationship. Thus, a social worker should

be prepared for any type of initial contact, allowing them to establish the most optimal connection with the client (Sheafor and Horejsi, 2008; Cox 2020: 39).

Social work operates at the intersection of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary realms, drawing upon a diverse range of scientific theories and research. In this context, 'science' refers to its fundamental meaning of 'knowledge'. Social work relies on its continuously evolving theoretical foundation and research, as well as theories from various other human sciences. These include, but are not limited to community development, social pedagogy, administration, anthropology, ecology, economics, education, management, nursing, psychiatry, psychology, public health, and sociology. The distinctive aspect of social work research and theories is their application and emancipatory nature. A significant portion of social work research and theory is co-constructed through an interactive, dialogic process involving service users, and thus informed by specific practice environments (Germain and Knight 2021: 110).

### **2.2.2. Core purpose of social work**

As stated by Vakharia and Little (2016: 66) as well as Payne (2020: 12), the fundamental mandates of the social work profession encompass the advancement of social change, social development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of individuals. In accordance with Germain and Knight (2020: xi), social work functions as both a practical field and an academic discipline, acknowledging the intricate interplay of historical, socio-economic, cultural, spatial, political, and personal factors that either facilitate or impede human well-being and progress. The presence of structural barriers contributes to the persistence of inequalities, discrimination, exploitation, and oppression. Reflecting on the insights of Thompson (2020), the cultivation of critical consciousness through the examination of structural sources of oppression or privilege, taking into account criteria such as race, class, language, religion, gender, disability, culture, and sexual orientation, as well as devising strategies for addressing both systemic and individual hindrances, constitutes a pivotal aspect of emancipatory practice, wherein the ultimate objectives are the empowerment and liberation of individuals. Furthermore, as highlighted by Healy (2022), the profession actively aligns itself with those who are marginalized, striving to

alleviate poverty, emancipate the vulnerable and oppressed, and foster social inclusion and cohesion.

### **2.2.3. Significance of equine-based therapy in social work**

As highlighted by Green and Bennet (2018: 261), social work practices are dedicated to fostering social change and development through the cultivation of therapeutic relationships that evolve over time, involving the identification of needs, goals, and resources unique to each client. These relationships are commonly conceptualized as dyads that involve two parties, which is characterized by attributes such as trust, empathy, honesty, respect, sensitivity, responsibility, patience, active listening, negotiation skills, and responsiveness (Hasenfeld 2010: 150). However, in equine-assisted social work (EASW), therapeutic relationships take on a distinct form involving a horse, resulting in a triad.

Past research has primarily focused on assessing the effectiveness of equine-assisted social work as a method (Anestis et al. 2014: 1115), rather than delving into the intricate process that involves the role of the third party within the therapy. Considering the variability in outcomes observed in efficacy studies for clients, there has been a growing interest in exploring the process itself (Carlsson 2016), particularly, regarding the therapeutic relationship that unfolds between the client and the staff—a relationship of paramount significance in therapy and social work (Bickman et al. 2004: 124; Duncan et al. 2003: 8; Lundberg et al. 2015: 471; Kim et al. 2007: 161). Acri, Hoagwood, Morrissey, and Zhang (2016: 605) emphasize the importance of acknowledging and recognizing the multifaceted roles assumed by both clients and staff, which go beyond traditional notions of professionalism.

### **2.2.4. Education in equine assisted psychotherapy within the field of social work**

Acri, Hoagwood, Morrissey, and Zhang (2016: 603) contended that the strategies "providing different levels of structure" and "offering objective observation to restructure clients' beliefs" align with various theories in the realm of social work

education. Social workers tailor the level of structure based on clients' ages; a practice informed by Piaget's cognitive development theory. This approach guides equine assisted psychotherapy practitioners in devising activities suitable for children at different stages of development (such as egocentrism). Similarly, social workers adapt the level of structure to clients' functional levels, drawing inspiration from Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which aids in prioritizing clients' concerns.

The utilization of objective observations is to reshape clients' beliefs and heighten their awareness of maladaptive beliefs and attributional styles from cognitive therapy theory. Consequently, the theories imparted in social work education can be ingeniously applied to the domain of equine assisted psychotherapy. Such creative applications enable novices and students to employ their foundational knowledge in formulating pertinent strategies within equine assisted psychotherapy practice.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) emphasizes that "social workers' continuing education and staff development should encompass current knowledge and emerging developments pertaining to social work practice and ethics" (NASW 2016:17). Moreover, it stipulates that "social workers should critically examine and stay abreast of emerging knowledge which is pertinent to social work. Routine perusal of professional literature and participation in continuing education germane to social work practice are vital" (NASW 2016:18). As one of the prominent professional groups engaging in equine assisted psychotherapy practice (McConnell 2010: 30; Notgrass and Pettinelli 2015: 162), social workers bear ethical responsibilities to continually enhance their competencies and explore emerging developments.

In tandem, trainers and educators are ethically obligated to furnish comprehensive equine assisted psychotherapy training to novices, ensuring quality standards are upheld.

#### **2.2.5. Research on equine assisted psychotherapy within the realm of social work**

As per Lee and Makela (2018: 120), social workers are engaged in research informed by practice. The understanding among social workers is that evidence that informs practice is drawn from diverse disciplines and various ways of comprehension (Council on Social Work Education 2015: 8). Equine assisted psychotherapy, executed in

collaboration with a multidisciplinary team, encompasses a mental health practitioner and an equine specialist. Equine specialists play a co-facilitating role in equine assisted psychotherapy sessions, possessing extensive knowledge concerning equine behaviour and psychology (EAGALA 2012: 1). The three strategies equine specialists would contribute to equine assisted psychotherapy involve 'risk management', 'selection of an appropriate environment', and 'integration of specific horses to provide varying levels of challenges for clients'. Hence, potential future research might delve into their cognitive processes, aimed at comprehending and enhancing collaborative relationships. Acquiring insight into equine specialists' metacognition could further advance the development and enrichment of equine assisted psychotherapy through 'social worker-equine specialist matching', as underscored by Abrams (2013: 10) and Lee et al. (2016: 225).

Lee and Makela (2018: 122) highlighted the ethical obligation of social workers to remain updated with innovative knowledge which is pertinent to their practice. Instructors within the realm of social work education are encouraged to acknowledge equine-based therapy as an emerging intervention. Consequently, being open to directing their students toward field placement agencies specializing in equine assisted psychotherapy might potentially broaden career prospects and foster professional growth within the social work domain.

Furthermore, Johns, Bobat, and Holder (2016: 200) underscored the Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy Institute in South Africa (EAPISA) as the leading provider of equine assisted psychotherapy, delivering ongoing professional development for all its members. DeMilander, Bradley, and Fourie (2016: 37) proposed that at the very least, therapist members should participate in annual workshops for continuous professional growth to enhance theoretical and practical knowledge. This approach ensures that members continually receive support and training, thus enabling effective interventions. Such interventions encompass the therapist's ability to adeptly select an appropriate horse that is tailored to a client's needs or presenting challenges.

#### **2.2.6. Training for social workers in equine-based therapy**

The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) is a non-profit organization that is dedicated to establishing and maintaining the standards for

professionals engaging in therapeutic work with horses. They offer comprehensive training and have implemented a specialized certification process for individuals who are seeking recognition and training as equine-assisted therapy professionals (EAGALA 2010: 1).

Apart from EAGALA, there exist other programs devoted to ensuring proper training and upholding standards for practitioners working with clients in the realm of equine facilitated psychotherapy (Acri, Hoagwood, Morrissey, and Zhang 2016: 606).

Whether one is practicing equine-assisted therapy or not, conducting therapy requires reaching out to the state regulatory board to understand the educational and clinical prerequisites which are necessary to become a licensed professional counsellor or therapist in the respective country (Trotter, Chandler, Goodwin-Bond, and Casey 2008: 254).

Equine-assisted therapy is a specialized approach within the psychotherapy field, necessitating clinicians to pursue specialized training and certification in the practice of equine assisted psychotherapy (Acri, Hoagwood, Morrissey, and Zhang 2016: 606).

Craig (2020: 644) observed a significant growth in the field of animal-assisted therapies, with equine-assisted therapy being particularly prominent. For social workers who are interested in integrating equines into their therapeutic approach, there are various avenues to explore, including certification as an equine specialist, equine-assisted counsellor, or equine psychotherapist. Harvey, Jedlicka, and Martinez (2020: 665) argued that while all these certifications involve working with equines, they each draw from slightly different perspectives, and professionals must consider these nuances to align the certification with their professional orientation and practice goals.

According to Lee and Makela (2018: 122), choosing the appropriate certification involves considering factors like program requirements (such as exams or coursework), prerequisites (many programs require at least a degree or state licensure, while others, like the Gestalt Equine Institute of the Rockies, accept applicants in the process of earning a master's degree in human services), prior horse experience, program costs, ongoing membership fees, and opportunities for continuing education.

Green and Bennet (2018: 265) pointed out that there is a range of certification programs available to inform social work practice. Despite comprehensive efforts, one

limitation of this endeavour is the potential omission of existing programs either due to oversight by experts or lack of inclusion in online searches. Lee, Dabelko-Schoeny, Jedlicka, and Burns (2020: 230) noted that the field has faced criticism for lacking standardized nomenclature, which may have impacted research.

Few higher education institutions offer equine-assisted therapy programs alongside their equine offerings, despite the documented benefits of such therapy (Scott 2005). Even though many programs exist in occupational therapy, clinical psychology, occupational safety and health, and special education, equine-assisted therapy is rarely mentioned as an alternative (Colston, Shultz, and Porr 2015: 189).

Mental health professionals, including social workers, should heighten awareness about the potential advantages of psychotherapy involving horses for their clients. Their comprehension and engagement in equine-assisted psychotherapy are vital so that long-term care providers or clinical practices can implement or refer to these services as necessary. Aside from providing social work clinicians with education on equine-assisted psychotherapy, it is crucial to train equine specialists to be proficient in working with older adults. This training should encompass information about the distinct health and well-being needs of older adults and appropriate engagement strategies. A strong potential exists for collaboration between providers serving older adults and equines, leading to mutual benefits. Such partnerships can diversify programs, offer a wider range of appealing services to older adults, and enhance the well-being of participants (Lee et al. 2020: 405).

The subsequent section will provide an in-depth understanding of equine-based therapy.

### **2.3. An understanding of equine-based therapy**

Equine-assisted therapy constitutes a component of the broader field referred to as "equine-assisted activities and therapies." These services are categorized into nontherapy "activities," such as adaptive riding or equine-assisted learning, and "therapies," where horses are integrated into physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, or mental health services provided by licensed professionals.

Geason (2019), Hari (2021), and Kendrick (2022: 28) highlight the considerable ambiguity surrounding terms like Equine-Assisted Therapy (EAT), Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL), Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), and Equine-Facilitated Learning (EFL). Despite the growing number of research studies investigating the integration of equines into mental health, educational, and organizational contexts, there remains inconsistency in defining the terminologies employed (Hemingway 2019: 236, Young and Horton 2019, Nieforth and Craig 2021: 1656, Acri et al. 2021: 2461, Ward, Hovey, and Brownlee 2022: e4920, Hojgaard-Boytler and Argentzell 2022: 1, Punzo, Skoglund, Carlsson and Jormfeldt 2022: 10, and Bradshaw et al. 2022: 5). Notably, confusion persists among both the public and practitioners regarding the definition of "equine-based therapy" (Debusse et al. 2005: 219, Smith-Osborne and Selby 2010: 291, Thompson et al. 2019, Brandt 2013: 30, Angsupaisal et al. 2015: 1151, Lentini and Knox 2015: 280, Pham and Bitonte 2016: 412).

Equine-assisted therapy is commonly provided by licensed healthcare professionals, including physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, mental health professionals, nurses, and occasionally medical doctors. These practitioners typically undergo additional training, education, supervision, and certification (when available) before incorporating equine-assisted techniques into their practice (Cook 2017: 536, ACA 2016, APA 2017: 1, NASW 2016: 1).

Licensed healthcare professionals generally do not view equine-assisted therapy as a distinct or separate service or profession (Ekholm Fry 2013: 255, Pham and Bitonte 2016: 414, AHA 2020: 1). Instead, they continue to deliver conventional healthcare services within their licensed scope of practice—such as physical, occupational, and speech therapy, or psychology, counselling, social work, or marriage and family therapy—while integrating horses and farm environments into their patients' treatment plans. Irrespective of the setting and horse involvement, these professionals adhere to the same legal and ethical standards that are associated with their respective licensed professions.

The term "therapy" in equine-assisted or equine-facilitated contexts encompasses certified professional therapists, including those licensed or certified in physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, psychology, psychotherapy, social work, and counselling (Lac 2016: 194). In casual conversation, phrases like "equine-based therapy" or "equine-assisted learning" encompass a wide array of services, including therapeutic riding for children on the autism spectrum, interventions for

veterans with PTSD, mental health support involving horses, and team building and leadership training (Trotter and Baggerly 2018: 5).

#### **2.4. Historical emergence of equine-based therapy**

The earliest documented instance of utilizing animals for therapeutic purposes dates to the 9<sup>th</sup> century in Gheel, Belgium. During this period, animals were integrated into therapy sessions to teach individuals with disabilities on how to care for farm animals as part of their daily routine (Serpell 2000: 10). In 1792, The Retreat in England, founded by the Quakers, introduced therapeutic use of animals. This establishment, known for its compassionate treatment of the mentally ill, incorporated activities like gardening, courtyard exercise, and caring for animals such as birds and rabbits into its therapy program. Similarly, in 1867, animals were integrated into the treatment of epileptic patients in Germany, allowing patients to interact with and care for animals like birds, cats, dogs, and horses.

The historical roots of animal-assisted therapy extend over a century, with Florence Nightingale observing the positive impact of animal companionship on long-term hospital patients (Nightingale 1969). Nightingale emphasized the value of pets as companions for the sick and noted the comfort they brought to invalids. This tradition of animal companionship continues throughout history, with evidence of animals serving as companions since ancient times. Cave drawings depict humans alongside wolves, while ancient Egyptians were buried with pets like cats. Greek history reveals dogs licking the wounds of the sick, that is attributed to their perceived medicinal properties (Hughes et al. 2020: 365).

The ancient Greeks regarded horseback riding not only as a mode of transportation but as a means of improving health for the disabled (Hallberg 2008: 12). Hippocrates recognized the therapeutic benefits of horses, coining the term "hippotherapy" to describe treatment with the aid of a horse (Hardy 2011). In the modern era, the term "equine-assisted activities and therapies" (EAAT) emerged in the 1990s, though these activities had been gaining popularity for decades (Kersten and Thomas 2005, Anderson and Meints 2016: 3344; Miller 2020: 12).

While the contemporary field of equine-assisted teaching and learning continues to develop, historical records highlight the long-standing utilization of human-animal interactions for therapeutic purposes (Morrison 2007: 53). The formal inclusion of animals in therapeutic treatment plans gained documented recognition in the 1960s (Levinson and Mallon 1969), leading to a growing body of literature that explored the psychosocial and health benefits of animal-assisted interventions (AAI). AAI encompasses intentional interventions that involve animals as part of the therapeutic process (Kruger and Serpell, 2010: 33) across diverse populations and conditions (e.g., Hooker et al. 2002: 17; Kamioka et al. 2014: 371; Nimer and Lundahl 2007: 227; Selby and Smith-Osborne 2013: 418).

Horses offer unique qualities in therapeutic encounters due to their nature as prey animals and their finely tuned sensitivity to human behaviour. This responsiveness allows horses to provide valuable feedback that facilitates the equine-assisted teaching and learning process (Burgon, Gammage, and Hebden 2018: 4-5).

The incorporation of horses into therapeutic processes contributes to growth and change among individuals with diminished function in various domains. Equine-assisted therapy has been associated with improvements in social functioning, empathizing, behaviour, coping, well-being, sensory seeking, attention, and physical skills (Bass et al. 2009: 1261; Boshoff et al. 2015: 87; Gabriels et al. 2012: 578; Hyun et al. 2016: 286; Pendry et al. 2014: 281). Horses have historically played a significant role in Western society's social, cultural, and economic aspects (Vincent and Farkas 2017: 9). Numerous stories and films have underscored the human-horse bond, capturing its emotional resonance (Pickel-Chevalier 2017: 119).

Equine-assisted psychotherapy supports individuals facing emotional and mental health challenges by facilitating personal exploration of feelings and behaviours. It necessitates an ongoing therapeutic relationship with well-defined treatment goals and objectives. An example involves a client observing and discussing behavioural dynamics in a horse herd, allowing for the exploration of internal experiences (Bachi, Terkel, and Teichman 2012: 298; Bachi 2012: 365).

## **2.5. The therapeutic value of horses within the context of mental health professions**

The therapeutic efficacy of horses can be attributed to several factors. Horses possess a remarkable ability to sense and respond to human emotions, functioning as mirrors for human feelings. This sensitivity allows them to detect shifts in body language and emotional states of individuals (Schultz, Remick-Barlow, and Robbins 2007: 265). Unlike humans, who rely on both verbal and nonverbal cues, animals such as horses predominantly employ non-verbal communication to express their intentions (Prothmann, Ettrich, and Prothmann 2009: 161). When utilized in therapeutic contexts, horses can facilitate client self-awareness of their interpersonal approach and its impact on the interactions with others (Boshoff et al., 2015: 88).

Experts in behavioural and evolutionary biology have highlighted shared mechanisms that underlie social behaviour in both humans and animals. These mechanisms contribute to the evolution of relationships and subsequently influence human social interactions (Beetz, Kotrschal, Uvnas-Moberg, and Julius 2011: 7). Universal mechanisms such as biophilia, the innate human tendency to connect with other living entities, and attachment, a reciprocal bond between humans and animals, both play a role in the effectiveness of therapy involving horses (Acri et al., 2016: 608; Miller 2020: 13).

### **2.5.1. The role of horses in therapy**

Throughout history, horses have maintained a significant connection with humans, even being recognized as agents of healing, as seen in the derivation of the term "chiropody" from the Greek centaur Chiron, the God of healing (Barclay 1980). In recent times, horses have found their way into therapy programs, supported by organizations like the Equine-Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFHMA) and the Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), which have been dedicated to establishing standards, integrating research, and implementing models in practice (Burgon 2011: 170, Tseng, Sung-Hui, Hung-Chou Chen, and Ka-Wai Tam 2015: 90).

While many advantages of equine-based therapy overlap with animal-assisted therapy, the horse's distinctive qualities are emphasized, partly due to its size, strength, and vulnerability, as well as its unique characteristics (Viridine et al. 2002: 587; Karol 2007: 77). As a prey animal, horses have developed a sophisticated system of communication primarily rooted in body language, making them adept at sensing human emotions and intentions. Horses exhibit strong social bonds, and their herd behaviour centres around cooperative living, with a leader—often an older, wise mare—guiding the group (Rees 2009).

Clients engaging in equine-based therapy can identify with the horse's innate fear and need for safety, establishing a metaphor for their own emotions (Karol 2007: 79). Effectively working with horses necessitates displaying behaviours that resonate positively with them—qualities such as calm, confident, and fair leadership (Rashid 2004; Rees 2009), enabling opportunities for learning new behaviours and boosting feelings of self-efficacy.

Equine-based therapy which is aimed at enhancing mental health and fostering positive development, employs an experiential approach to drive therapeutic transformation (Karol 2007: 78). This approach, tailored to equine-based therapy, moves beyond the conventional client-therapist dyad by integrating the horse as a co-therapist. In contrast to domesticated animals like dogs or cats, horses are attuned herd animals that offer immediate feedback within their environment (Bachi, Terkel and Teichman 2011: 300).

This interplay of interaction between client and horse forms the foundation for therapeutic change. The therapist guides clients to use the horse as a mirror to gain insight into their emotions and behaviour (Brandt 2013: 35). The experiential approach focuses on the present moment for self-discovery and learning. The horse can also function as a symbolic representation for the client. Personal experiences, past behaviours, or emotional processing can be projected onto the horse (Klontz et al. 2007: 257). The objective is to develop the ability to perceive, process, and manage emotions and behaviour, with the resulting personal growth extending beyond therapy into the client's life.

While horses possess unique personalities shaped by their individual life experiences (Hausberger, Bruderer, Le Scolan, and Pierre 2004: 434), they are also receptive to the projections of individuals who engage with them. Mills and Redgate (2017: 169)

proposed that this projection process is a constant in any relationship, but within a therapeutic context, it can be examined more explicitly, offering opportunities for clients to gain self-awareness. Additionally, Sheade (2020: 195) observed that during a client's initial session, an attraction to a particular horse is often expressed. Participants are naturally drawn to horses with personalities or life histories that mirror their own experiences.

## **2.6. The use of a non-traditional therapeutic setting in equine-based therapy**

Given its substantial size, equine facilitated psychotherapy naturally unfolds in a nontraditional therapeutic setting, often outdoors or within an indoor barn or arena. Unlike the approach of introducing an animal like a cat or dog into the client's space, clients must be willing to encounter the horse within its own environment (Schultz et al. 2006: 265; Harper and Dobud 2020: 20). Activities involving the horse(s) frequently occur in natural outdoor settings, where clients are often perceived as more soothing and secure compared to conventional therapeutic locales (Bachi et al., 2012: 308; Heginworth and Nash 2019; Pryor, Harper and Carpenter 2021: 125). Furthermore, equine facilitated psychotherapy may mitigate apprehensions and increase engagement by eliminating the stigma associated with clinical treatment and therapy attendance. This reframe allows clients to perceive therapy as interactive and positive rather than daunting (Bachi et al. 2012: 308; Dell et al, 2011:319; Priest 2022: 114).

This shift in perspective leads to reduced resistance and reservations, thereby fostering more profound engagement in the therapeutic process and facilitating meaningful change (Miller and Rollnick 2002: 70; Harper, Fernee, Gabrielsen 2021: 5117).

Participating in equine activities, particularly outdoors encourages the use of both verbal and non-verbal communication. Clients must remain attuned to their surroundings and their own presence in relation to the horse, necessitating mindfulness of both body language and non-verbal cues (Bachi et al., 2012: 298; Friend et al. 2023: 104455). By attending to and validating the horse's non-verbal cues, clients develop heightened self-awareness and a better understanding of their own bodily expressions. This is especially impactful for individuals who are grappling with mental health challenges, trauma and eating disorders, who often feel disconnected

from their own physical bodies (Jacques 2020). Equine facilitated psychotherapy sessions effectively guide clients toward reconnecting with their bodies. Over time, individuals learn to identify, acknowledge, and manage their non-verbal cues and emotions rather than suppressing them through maladaptive behaviours (Davis and Hayes 2011: 198; Stauffer 2006; White and Scott 2020: 108).

Despite the manifold benefits of conducting therapy in an unconventional setting, clinicians must also remain vigilant about the risks and constraints inherent in outdoor environments. Upholding client confidentiality remains paramount, and adherence to professional standards is essential (APA 2012: 1; Cepeda 2011: 1; PATH 2012: 4; Harper, Fernee, Gabrielsen 2021: 5117). Additionally, prioritizing the safety of all involved parties is imperative, given that equine facilitated psychotherapy transpires in an environment where accidents and injuries are possible (Cepeda 2011: 1; Rothe et al. 2005: 373; Craig, Nieforth and Rosenfeld 2020: 400). Furthermore, horses must undergo thorough training and screening to ascertain their suitability for equine facilitated psychotherapy sessions. Horses possess distinct personalities and requirements, and not all may tolerate the stresses and demands of being a therapy horse (PATH 2012: 1; Rothe et al. 2005: 374; Trotter 2012: 5; Kalmbach, Wood and Peters 2020: 230). When integrated into treatment by adept and qualified mental health professionals, equines bring forth unique attributes that enhance the therapeutic journey and contribute to fostering client transformation (Karol 2007: 80; Rothe et al. 2005: 375; Mickelsson 2019; Wheeler et al. 2020: e0241763).

## **2.6.1. The connection between nature, spirituality, and equine-based therapy**

### **2.6.1.1. Nature therapy in its context**

At its fundamental essence, nature therapy, often termed as ecotherapy, revolves around the recuperative and psychological advantages of immersing oneself in natural surroundings. The term 'ecotherapy' was initially introduced by Clinebell, who introduced the notion of 'ecological spirituality.' This concept encapsulates the comprehensive bond with nature, encompassing both nature's capacity to nurture individuals through their engagement with natural landscapes and spaces, and people's potential to reciprocate this healing connection by nurturing nature in return. Consequently, ecotherapy inherently maintains a close affiliation with ecopsychology

– positioning humans within a dynamic, healing (as well as disconnected and detrimental) interrelationship with the natural world. Equine-based therapy is intrinsically tied to these therapeutic modalities.

Buzzell (2009: 51) expounded upon various facets of ecotherapy, encompassing horticultural therapy, green exercise, animal-assisted therapy, wilderness therapy, natural lifestyle therapy, eco-dreamwork, community ecotherapy, addressing ecoanxiety and eco-grief, and an array of other approaches.

Plume (2016: 34) asserted that the natural environment holds significant potential as a complementary aid to the mental well-being of both clients and treatment providers. It has been demonstrated that nature-based stimuli elicit positive emotional states, induce behavioural relaxation, and lead to reduced stress levels. Furthermore, according to Wilson, Buultjens, Monfries, and Karimi (2017: 16), equine assisted counselling, occurring in outdoor settings, stands to benefit from the profound psychological and physical connection that clients forge with the natural surroundings.

O'Hanlon (2021: 176) remarked that when counselling ventures beyond the confines of traditional indoor settings into the expansive outdoors, an intangible but palpable shift occurs in the counselling dynamic. This transformation holds true whether the session takes place in a horse arena, on a mountainside, or amidst a serene garden setting (Trotter 2012: 2). The outdoor context elicits heightened client responsiveness, contributing to holistic client development by offering hands-on learning experiences and exposure to a slightly more daring atmosphere (Horn 2021: 45). Harper, Fernee, and Gabrielsen (2021: 5117) proposed that the outdoors serves as a natural realm that presents unique opportunities, reshaping clients' responses to self, others, animals, and the world. Conducting counselling outdoors also fosters situations in which counsellors and clients become more attuned to the relational aspects of the counselling process. This increased sensitivity results, in part, from spontaneous reactions to unpredictable moments that can unfold during outdoor counselling (Duncan 2018; Harper, Rose and Segal 2019: 95; Claxton 2021; Delaney 2022: 3).

Being situated in a slightly unfamiliar or discomfiting environment that demands instinctive reactions to unforeseen situations engenders a state of pure engagement an elevated emotional state through which the counsellor can adeptly guide the client. This facilitates a profound bond between client and counsellor, unencumbered by the

confines and conventional atmosphere of the standard counselling room (Harper, Rose and Segal 2019: 96). Escobar (2021: 23) emphasized that outdoor counselling necessitates counsellors to embrace direct experiential learning, which is enabled by fostering an environment of trust and support. It is undeniable that outdoor counselling is demanding, at times immersing counsellors in the realm of uncertainty. Facing challenges, dilemmas, and difficulties becomes a potent supplement to the counselling process. The counsellor's ability to navigate these moments and provide support during such instances defines the potency of equine assisted counselling within the natural environment (Burgon 2014: 154).

Burgon (2014: 155) contended that the natural environment holds a vital place in the perceptions of many equine-based therapy clients. Coleman (2006) asserted that the natural environment provides an ideal arena for mindfulness practice, as "being outdoors provides mental space and clarity, allowing our body to relax" (2006: xv). Advocates of Biophilia theory posit that humans possess an intrinsic connection to nature, akin to the Gaia hypothesis that underscores interconnectedness (Harper and Dobud 2020: 33). Through this connection, one may attain a state of "ecological groundedness," reflecting a state of flourishing (Harper and Dobud 2020: 34).

Burgon (2014: 160) suggested that horses, uniquely positioned within this context, offer clients a pathway to experiencing the purported benefits of the natural world. As creatures innately intertwined with nature and heavily influenced by instincts, horses provide an unparalleled opportunity for people to establish a connection with the natural environment, unlike other animals. This uniqueness arises because horses are intermediary beings, bridging the gap between the domesticated pets found within homes and the agricultural animals raised for consumption, separated by intricate cultural processes (Philo and Wilbert 2000). Horses potentially offer a glimpse into the realm of wild creatures while remaining approachable and inquisitive enough to forge partnerships with humans. By immersing oneself in the world of horses, riding on their backs, and mastering the art of communication through body language, individuals delve into distinct states of consciousness (Brandt 2013: 24). Hallberg (2017) asserted that the convergence of these factors can potentially provide opportunities for experiencing qualities and advantages akin to those described in the literature on mindfulness and nature therapy, such as being fully present in the moment and cultivating a profound connection to the natural world.

### 2.6.1.2. Current perspectives on spirituality

Discourse on spirituality in the psychological context has generated various perspectives. For example, Pargament (1999: 3) defined *spirituality* as the search for the sacred, namely, the human motivation to discover and connect with the sacred. The term *sacred* refers not only to concepts of higher powers and God but also to significant objects and/or relationships that take on spiritual character and meaning by virtue of their association with the divine (Murray-Swank, Pargament and Mahoney 2005). Pargament et al. (2013: 17) provides a general conceptual framework for understanding spirituality resting on the assumption that people are motivated to discover something sacred in their lives, hold on to or conserve a relationship with the sacred, and, when necessary, transform their understanding of the sacred.

Other scholars underscore the centrality of meaning in these processes, referring to spirituality as involving the human desire to find meaning within the reality of their own mortality (Piedmont 1999: 985). For many people, religious and spiritual beliefs are at the core of their meaning systems, informing their beliefs about self and the world (Park, Edmondson, and Hale-Smith 2013: 9). From this perspective, spiritual and religious belief structures are held as one of the most common and comprehensive meaning frameworks that helps people to make sense of their lives and experiences by sustaining a sense of higher purpose and direction while maintaining a sense of sacredness and value (Pargament and Cummings 2010: 193). Researchers and professionals have shown how these frameworks are incorporated to help individuals cope and derive meaning, especially in stressful circumstances (Aldwin, Park and Spiro 2007: 68; Davis et al. 2018: 87), although they may also engender conflicts and struggles (Pargament et al., 2013: 18).

For many, this process will involve a meaningful connection with something greater, beyond oneself (e.g., relationships with others, the transcendent, nature, or the universe), (Steinhauser et al. 2017: 428). Miller and Ewest (2015: 305) underscored the importance of this notion, defining spirituality as a human, inborn perceptual and intellectual faculty allowing us to feel (or not feel) part of something larger. According to Miller, this non-verbal dimension of knowing may be developed through experiencing a relationship with a guiding, and ultimately loving higher power (e.g., God, nature, spirit, the universe, the creator, etc.).

From a relational perspective (Mahoney 2013: 365), “spirituality involves the person’s search for a sense of meaning by actualizing fulfilling relationships between oneself, other people, the encompassing universe, and the ontological ground of existence” (Canda 1990: 13). Conceptual analyses and qualitative research support these notions, emphasizing the significance of connectedness as central to spirituality whereby spirituality may be perceived as the way humans actualize the universal human yearning and potential to experience deep connection with self, others, nature, and the transcendent (De Jager Meezenbroek et al. 2012: 336).

These perspectives underscore the centrality of the experience of sacredness and something greater than oneself in spirituality and the sense of meaning, purpose, and acceptance, as well as connectedness, which are often associated with them. Notwithstanding the difficulty of spiritual struggles (Pargament et al., 2013: 16), many studies (i.e., over 3,000 empirical studies and dozens of meta-analyses) link spirituality to a variety of favourable physical and mental health benefits (Baumeister 2002; Koenig, McCullough, and Larson 2001; Shafranske and Sperry 2004). Spirituality is thus understood as a human resource by which meaning can be discovered, healthy coping can be enhanced, and human suffering might be alleviated (Piedmont and Leach 2002: 1888). These perspectives reveal the centrality of spirituality as a significant human aspect, organizing principle, or perceptual framework by which the human motivation and potential for meaning, purpose, and connection with the sacred and divine are actualized. One avenue by which this human faculty may be experienced and developed is through nature.

### **2.6.1.3. Spirituality in equine-based therapy**

Spirituality is an innate element of being, related to “sensing and perceiving the outer world” (De Souza 2009: 1132). “Spirituality refers to a person’s ultimate values and commitments, regardless of their content to the values to which we subscribe which give meaning and orientation to people’s lives (Kourie 2008: 23). “Spirituality entails the ongoing harmonious integration of the whole human person” (Kourie 2007: 26). It is also “the capacity of persons to transcend themselves through knowledge and love” (Kourie 2007: 23). The “ultimate belonging or connection to the transcendental ground

of being” (Vaughan 2002: 17) is a kind of subtle inner power that people are often not aware of (Kohanov 2007).

The equine assisted therapy is like a kind of transformational learning that was inspired by Escobar (2021: 26). The equine assisted therapy applies the three aspects of being from De Souza (2008) (1) Thinking, (2) Feeling, and (3) Intuiting. Horses facilitate the reflection from the person’s “centre” (Choe and McFarland 2023: 181; Kourie 2007: 23; Zohar 2012: 162), also called the soul (Zohar and Marshall 2000; Vaughan 2002: 16; Almasloukh 2021), the non-conscious mind (De Souza 2009: 1133), and links to the right side of the brain (Agayev 2022: 31; Goldman Schuyler 2010: 21; Hamilton 2011; Taylor 2002: 291). This starting point of reflection uses an intuiting process in the way of “sensing and perceiving the outer world” (De Souza 2009: 1131). It comes before the emotional resonance. Starting firstly with intuition, this intuitive learning process provides an objective and non-judgmental approach of what people are learning in the present moment. It facilitates the advancement process for feeling and thinking. Horses push humans in this subconscious potential of learning called “the intuitive way of knowing” (Takacs 2022: 82). Bennet (2022: 243) wrote that equine assisted therapy teaches participants to tap into their observation senses, to experience silence with horses, to look in their inner world to find solutions in a noncontextual situation, and finally to co-create new behaviours and knowledge around their experiences with their four-legged partner.

Finally, the study of spirituality is invested in everything that gives meaning to human growth and flourishing and is therefore interdisciplinary intersecting with sociology, psychology, philosophy, theology, social sciences, and health care among other fields. Scholars hold that all spiritualities involve some practices aimed at bringing about an inner transformation and are often practiced communally (Carey 2018: 262).

#### **2.6.1.4. The interconnectedness between spirituality, humans, and horses**

Davis and Maurstad (2016) indicated that the profound and enduring spiritual bond between horses and humans defies easy description yet resonates deeply with many individuals. Escobar (2019: 217) underscored that this connection often forms through

the act of interacting with and tending to horses and can be further fortified by engaging in activities like riding, grooming, and simply sharing time in their presence.

Furthermore, Escobar (2021: 26) observed that horses possess a heightened sense of intuition and attunement to their surroundings, allowing them to perceive the emotions and energy emanating from those around them. Approaching horses with an open heart and mind allows them to grasp our intentions and respond in kind. This engenders a reciprocal comprehension and connection that possesses profound spiritual dimensions. The spiritual link shared between humans and horses is frequently marked by mutual understanding and respect. Horses can adopt roles as spiritual guides and mentors, aiding individuals in forging connections with their inner wisdom and achieving personal growth. Nurturing this spiritual bond between humans and horses can lead to an enriched sense of meaning, purpose, and interconnectedness in one's existence (Bennet 2022: 245).

Takacs (2022: 88) expounded that horses, as wise and intuitive beings, serve as profound instructors in matters of spirituality and personal development. In various indigenous cultures, horses were revered as sacred beings, bearers of profound wisdom, and bestowers of valuable insights to humanity. Those who collaborate with horses often find them to be exceptional tutors in mindfulness, being present, and nonverbal communication. A pivotal lesson horses offer is the significance of embracing the current moment.

Horses, renowned for their remarkable sensitivity and attunement to the environment, embody the essence of the present moment. In the company of horses, clients are guided toward shedding distractions and immersing themselves fully in the immediate experience. This practice stands as a potent tool for nurturing mindfulness and presence (Plume 2016: 34; Bennet 2022: 245).

Moreover, Bennet and Woodman (2019: 1043) emphasized that horses possess the capacity to effect profound and transformative changes in the human spirit. Many individuals discover that being in the company of horses and engaging in activities with them imparts a sense of tranquillity, serenity, and lucidity to their lives. Horses excel in grounding clients in the present instant and fostering a connection to something larger than themselves (Wara-Goss 2020).

Scientists, environmentalists, theologians, and writers from various spiritual traditions acknowledge the positive effects of performing activities in outdoor settings to

reconnect with the natural world and contribute to health and well-being, reawaken attention, foster wonder and creativity to enrich one's spirit and life, encourage shared experience, and promote ecological ethics (Chase 2011: 1; Louv 2016; Spencer 2013: 24; Witte 2023: 334). Burgon (2014: 179) raises the idea that in addition to interacting with horses, EAT performed in nature can support mind-body work and that nature can act as a bridge between people and fulfil a person's basic need to connect with the natural environment. Studies support the healing effects of nature therapy such as those conducted in forests, urban green space, and with plants indicating benefits to a person's physiology and stress hormone cortisol level. Research suggests that these types of therapies will continue to play an increasingly important role in preventive medicine in the future (Beil 2018: 78; Berger 2020: 244; Hart 2006: 177; Song, Ikei, and Miyazaki 2016: 781; Stigsdotter et al. 2018: 404; Swank, Shin, Cabrita, Cheung, and Rivers 2015: 440; Shaffer 2017: 49). Studies also confirm the complex relationship between nature-based recreation and spirituality and submit that participating in outdoor recreation may lead to outcomes of spiritual experiences, spiritual well-being, and spiritual coping (Heintzman 2010: 72).

Considering horses are large animals, equine facilitated psychotherapy usually takes place outside or in an indoor barn or arena due to their very nature. Rather than bringing an animal, such as a cat or dog, to the client's environment, the client must be willing to meet the horse in its environment (Schultz et al. 2006). Activities with the horse(s) are frequently conducted in natural, outdoor settings, which may be more readily viewed by the client as a relaxing and safe environment over traditional therapeutic settings (Bachi et al. 2012: 298). Additionally, equine facilitated psychotherapy may be less threatening and more engaging as the stigma associated with treatment clinics and attending therapy is removed. Clients can reframe their initial negative concepts of therapy into engaging, interactive, and positive experiences (Bachi et al. 2012: 302; Dell et al. 2011: 319). In doing so, resistance and reservations are lessened, allowing for deeper participation in the therapeutic process and enabling change to occur (Miller and Rollnick 2002: 67). Participating in equine activities, particularly, when outdoors, also encourages the use of both verbal and non-verbal communication, as clients need to maintain awareness of themselves in relation to their surroundings. To accomplish this, clients must be present in the moment and mindful of the body language of both themselves and the horse (Bachi et al. 2012: 310). Through attending to and validating the horse's non-verbal cues, clients gain a

better awareness and understanding of their own bodies. Often individuals with mental illness, specifically those suffering from trauma, eating disorders feel disconnected with their physical bodies (Kehle et al. 2012: 42). Equine facilitated psychotherapy sessions help clients to reconnect with their bodies. Over time, individuals can identify, validate, and attend to their non-verbal cues and emotions rather than suppress them with maladaptive behaviours (Davis and Hayes 2011; Stauffer 2006).

Within the nature-based therapy context, spirituality emerged as involving an actual and tangible experience of the spiritual in physical form-nature as an embodiment of spirituality (Russo-Netzer and Mayseless 2017: 5). This form of spiritual experience is linked to significant therapeutic effects, including the experience of nature's immensity, which contributes to an expansive perspective; experiencing interconnectedness, which elicits a sense of belonging to the vast web of life; and the reflection of internal nature and truth by external nature as an accepting setting, which contributes to the discovery of an authentic self (Sahlin et al. 2019: 4929; Naor and Mayseless 2019: 201).

The natural environment offers various opportunities to experience the mysterious and ultimate aspects of existence, commonly described as the sacred, transcendental, and spiritual dimensions of life (Pargament 2007: 39). These qualities are experienced in nature through boundless and beautiful landscapes, the powerful forces of nature, and extraordinary forms of life (Ashley 2007). Although common to nature experience, the potential beneficial effect of experiencing spirituality in nature has yet to be studied empirically in therapeutic contexts (Naor and Mayseless 2019: 203).

## **2.7. The benefits of equine-based therapy**

There exists evidence that lends support to the effectiveness of equine-based therapy in aiding the management of various conditions (Green 2019: 4). The therapy's impacts pertaining to several mental health issues are elaborated upon in the subsequent sections.

### **2.7.1. Anxiety**

Given the vigilance and sensitivity of horses towards behaviour and emotions, they possess the ability to detect danger and respond with heightened awareness, often resulting in changes in their behaviour and attempts to distance themselves (Hallberg

2008: 3). This capacity to sense danger cues and react in an intensified manner resonates with clients grappling with anxiety (Bailey and Bailey 2018: 51). Addressing challenges through the behaviour of a horse can be more accessible for certain clients than directly discussing their own experiences with anxiety (Norcross and Wampold 2011: 98).

Equine-assisted psychotherapy offers an additional advantage in managing anxiety by enabling clients to practice vulnerability within a secure environment (Selby and SmithOsborne 2013: 418). As clients engage with the horse and embark on new endeavours, they are encouraged to step beyond their comfort zones, supported by both the therapist and the horse. Subsequently, clients can process their encounters, encompassing fears, challenges, and moments of insight, revelation, or triumph within the therapy setting (Bailey and Bailey 2018: 55).

As outlined by Acri et al. (2021: 2464), mastering the appropriate response to emotions is a vital skill for nurturing healthy relationships, effective problem-solving, and regular functioning. Anxiety, however, can undermine these essential everyday controls for an individual. Romaniuk, Evans, and Kidd (2018: e0203943) emphasized that exposure to anxiety-inducing triggers can aid in constructing a reservoir of experiential knowledge to manage and regulate behaviours and decisions, thus fostering a sense of well-being and equilibrium when confronting the pervasive stresses of daily life. Additionally, according to Wilson, Buultjens, Monfries, and Karimi (2017: 18), equine assisted counselling (EAC) presents a resource for confronting, traversing, and processing the emotions of an anxious client. The metaphors and symbols which are inherent in the interactions serves to guide an individual through the process of conquering paralyzing anxiety.

Ghahremani (2021: 62) pointed out that the uncertainty associated with anxiety can be profoundly incapacitating. The presence of the unknown can trigger heightened symptoms, evoking detrimental emotions and diminished self-esteem. Anxiety serves as a biological purpose that is deeply rooted in our intrinsic functioning. To yield a positive outcome from this emotion, engagement and exploration are necessary, rather than avoidance and fear.

Trotter (2012) articulated that equine assisted counselling serves as a therapeutic framework to assist individuals in confronting their fears and overcoming immobilizing

anxiety that hampers sound decision-making. It offers an opportunity to introduce clients to stressors in a controlled and secure setting. These interactions may subsequently provide a more affirmative model for processing complex emotional states that are often suppressed.

### **2.7.2. Post-traumatic stress disorder**

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is characterized by heightened arousal and reactivity, intrusive memories, nightmares, and avoidance symptoms following a traumatic event. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (AADA) estimates that approximately 7.7 million individuals aged 18 and above grapple with PTSD (Klontz, Bivens, Leinart, and Klontz 2007: 258).

Post-traumatic stress disorder can affect children, adolescents, and adults alike. While a range of traumatic experiences can contribute to the development of this disorder, certain populations, such as survivors of sexual assault and veterans exposed to combat, tend to exhibit elevated rates of PTSD (Corey 2013).

Equine-assisted psychotherapy is progressively being employed in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder among veterans. Cloitre et al. (2011: 615) observed that numerous clients have expressed that following their struggles with PTSD and depression, they never envisioned the possibility of forging new bonds or experiencing personal connections again. Yet, the interactions with horses have enabled them to establish that connection. This newfound connection extends beyond therapy and permeates their lives and relationships.

### **2.7.3. Addiction Treatment**

Equine-assisted psychotherapy presents a distinctive strategy for addressing addiction and co-occurring conditions. Co-occurring conditions, formerly termed dual diagnosis, pertain to individuals who are contending with both addiction and other mental health ailments (Dell et al. 2011: 321; Cody et al. 2011: 198).

The primary objective of addiction treatment is to guide clients toward a life marked by sobriety, well-being, and productivity. Often, within the context of addiction treatment, clients concurrently navigate the process of addressing relational wounds, whether

within family dynamics or with their significant other. Cultivating trust, embracing vulnerability, and mastering effective communication can pose challenges during this therapeutic journey (Green 2019: 13). Equine-assisted psychotherapy, as highlighted by Tsantefski et al. (2017: 1247), serves as a tool for clients to cultivate trust through interactions with horses, thereby fostering a sense of security and establishing a bond. This engagement facilitates clients' willingness to be vulnerable, as they learn, interact, and grow alongside the horse.

#### **2.7.4. ADHD**

Equine-assisted psychotherapy has proven valuable in addressing attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Stiltner (2013: 22), Lac (2017: 9), and Shelton (2022: 27) highlighted that equine-assisted psychotherapy appeals to both adults and youth with ADHD due to its engaging, active, and hands-on nature.

Taylor (2019) elaborated on the structure of equine-assisted therapy sessions, which typically involve a trained therapist, an equine specialist, and a horse. Unlike conventional assumptions, riding is not a central component of equine-assisted psychotherapy. Instead, the emphasis lies in cultivating presence, attention, mindfulness, establishing boundaries, deciphering social cues, and more.

Trotter (2019), a licensed professional counsellor, author, and founder of Equine Partners in Counselling (EPIC) Enterprises was a pioneer in researching the efficacy of equine-assisted psychotherapy. Trotter (2012; 2019) conducted groundbreaking research that revealed that the integration of horses into the therapeutic process significantly enhanced positive behaviours while diminishing negative ones. Her study, published in the *Journal for Creativity in Mental Health*, marked one of the earliest investigations into the effectiveness of equine-assisted psychotherapy. The study underscored a spectrum of benefits clients can gain from this approach, including:

- Heightened self-esteem
- Enhanced self-respect
- Improved adaptation to routines and guidelines
- Enhanced focus

- Less stressful friendships
- Reduced aggression

For individuals contending with ADHD, the sense of accomplishment derived from an equine-assisted psychotherapy session can prove highly advantageous. As expressed by Muellner (2016: 116), a licensed clinical social worker, clients perceive their achievements because of their own efforts, rather than complying with directives from parents or educators.

Taylor (2019) posited that a 1,500-pound animal responds as intended due to the individual's focus. This sense of achievement stems from fulfilling one's personal aspirations, in contrast to conforming to external expectations. Such a feeling of accomplishment holds profound significance, especially for those grappling with ADHD. Numerous authors have observed that these moments provide immediate feedback from the horse, nurturing the development of trust, effective communication, and the pursuit of personal goals or milestones (Jang et al. 2015: 546; White et al. 2020: 101101; Perez-Gomez et al. 2021: 1079).

### **2.7.5. Autism**

Equine-based therapy extends its benefits to individuals with autism spectrum disorder as well. Tantum (2012: xxiv) proposed a distinctive characterization of the autism spectrum disorder, portraying it as "a disorder of the unconscious linkage between people, mediated by non-verbal communication." Consequently, Kalmbach et al. (2020: 230) emphasized that many individuals with autism spectrum disorder can derive advantages from counselling interventions. However, conventional counselling methods may present challenges for this group due to their proclivity to interpret things literally (Craig 2020: 643). Metaphorical language, which often proves efficacious with other cohorts in equine-assisted therapy (EAT), might prove less effective with teenagers and children with autism spectrum disorder, who require explicit and concrete instructions.

Equine-assisted therapy holds promise for children and adults who are grappling with autism spectrum disorder for several compelling reasons. Firstly, an increasing body of research underscores the receptivity of individuals with autism spectrum disorder toward animals (VanFleet and Coltea 2012: 193). Secondly, equine-assisted therapy

obviates the necessity for individuals with autism spectrum disorder to engage in verbal exchanges. Thirdly, the subtleties of human facial expressions, which can confound individuals with autism spectrum disorder, do not pose a challenge in equine-assisted therapy. Fourthly, individuals with autism spectrum disorder often excel in comprehending overt body movements that is exhibited by animals. Lastly, these individuals tend to derive sensory pleasure from tactile interactions with fur (Thompson 2019).

## **2.8. Benefits of using equine-based therapy in a conventional therapeutic setting**

While diverse animals can participate in the psychotherapeutic journey, horses possess distinctive attributes that position them as a premier selection for animal-assisted therapies. Zasio (2021) delineated the distinct elements that horses contribute to the therapeutic process.

### **2.8.1. Providing a safe therapeutic space**

As highlighted by Weibly (2021), despite the concerted efforts of humans, particularly therapists, to create a secure environment for clients to delve into profound emotional wounds and distressing encounters, clients often encounter discomfort when it comes to openly disclosing their inner thoughts. Cultivating therapeutic rapport can be a gradual process, involving participants in the endeavour to establish trust and embrace vulnerability during sessions (Holmes et al. 2012: 111). The presence of a horse can introduce a calming element, as horses merely respond to the client's behaviour and emotions, devoid of any inclination toward bias or judgment of their emotional journey (Clarke 2022: 1).

### **2.8.2. Horses provide feedback and mirroring.**

Horses possess a sharp observational acumen, displaying attentiveness and a heightened sensitivity to both movement and emotion. Frequently, they reflect a client's demeanour or sentiments, communicating a profound comprehension and

establishing a sense of rapport that fosters the client's feeling of security (Merkies, McKechnie and Zakrajsek 2018: 61; Scotland-Coogan 2023: 65). This dynamic also empowers clients to maintain a heightened self-awareness, utilizing the horse's conduct and interactions as a source of feedback and opportunities to engage in introspection and process the ongoing experience (Carlsson, Nilsson Ranta and Traeen 2015: 335; Clarke 2022: 2).

### **2.8.3. Managing Vulnerability**

Given the challenges clients may encounter when attempting to open up about emotional struggles, past events, or life transitions, the presence of a horse can serve as a focal point for exploration and processing (Holm et al 2014: 938). Nicholas (2019: 15) contended that if discussing something feels overwhelmingly painful, clients might find it somewhat easier to process their emotions by using the horse's experiences as a parallel or by relating their own experiences to those of the horse in the present moment. This approach of externalizing the content can facilitate a more approachable and manageable means of processing (Ward, Hovey and Brownlee 2022: e4923). Furthermore, Clarke (2022: 3) highlighted the additional potential advantages of equine-based therapy, which encompassed enhancements in adaptability, distress tolerance, emotional acumen, self-reliance, impulse management, self-worth, interpersonal sensitivity, and social connections.

## **2.9. Benefits of equine-based therapy for other mental health challenges**

Numerous authors have proposed that equine facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) offers a promising approach for clients with a history of trauma (Bennet and Woodman 2019: 246; Young and Horton 2019; Jensen and Rostosky 2021: 251; Bradshaw et al. 2022):

1. This holds particularly true for individuals grappling with attachment issues, as equines have the capacity for relational attunement, as outlined by Perry (2006: 38). Staudt and Cherry (2017: 406) emphasized the clinician's belief that clients who have experienced posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can discover value and healing through collaboration between a qualified mental health professional and equines in mental health therapy.

Trotter (2012: 45), meanwhile, expounded on how equine assisted counselling provides an avenue for battered women to navigate trauma and reclaim a sense of empowerment. Silver (2016: ii) underscored the significance of such healing, enabling women to reshape their identity and liberate themselves from the vulnerabilities that often perpetuate a cycle of returning to an abuser. Horses possess an extraordinary ability to restore confidence, freedom, and a feeling of security (Yorke, Adams and Coady 2008: 17), facilitate the process of reconnecting with our innate wisdom and fostering greater emotional intelligence (Naste et al. 2018: 289). Collaborating with horses serves as a poignant experience, offering women an opportunity to rediscover themselves and observe the emergence of enhanced self-worth, self-confidence, and self-respect.

The therapeutic dynamic between animals and humans holds intrinsic value in the healing journey. Perry (2006: 38) noted that "initiating the process of recovering from relational neglect can start with animals." As a facet of this recovery, equine assisted or facilitated psychotherapy sessions provide a secure setting for clients to commence addressing the traumatic events, or series of events, that have rattled their ability to function and feel, generating negative belief systems about themselves, others, and the world (Mueller and McCullough 2017: 1164).

Equine partners, according to Bennet and Woodman (2019: 1043), possess the ability to draw clients, typically young women who have experienced sexual trauma, out of their shells. They foster communication while simultaneously providing comfort (Kemp et al. 2014: 558). For adolescents, forging a bond with an equine partner often assists them in transcending initial unease and cultivating trusting relationships (Wycoff and Murphy 2018: 84), a process that may feel awkward when connecting with human facilitators (Wilke et al 2016). The confidence and enhanced sense of empowerment gained by clients within a historically disempowering world was highlighted by Young and Horton (2019).

The nuanced language of equines, conveyed through body language, offers clients immediate feedback regarding their emotional states and functioning (Buck et al. 2017: 390). This feedback equips clients to better recognize the interplay between their body and mind, enabling a new embodiment experience. Such feedback-driven processing also grants clients insights that facilitate a more constructive and healthier expression of their emotions.

Fry (2018: 142) expounded on how constructing equine interactions and activities that nurture attachment, attunement, competency, mastery, challenge, and cognitive reframing contribute to the healing process. Incorporating self-soothing techniques, symptom management, social and emotional learning, and physical movement generates an environment conducive to client recovery. Bennet and Woodman (2019: 1046) endorsed the implementation of creative, goal-directed equine therapeutic sessions, designed to equip clients with skills and self-regulation, and facilitate relational regulation. This, in turn, nurtures client-driven behavioural change and motivation for positive transformation.

DePrekel (2012: 59) highlighted that working with equines facilitates improved communication skills in clients, steering them away from punitive methods and promoting the development of relationships instead of resorting to a "power over" approach to achieve their desires. Many times, clients can openly share their emotions with the equines, engaging in a shared experience of mutual gaze by looking into a horse's eye and practicing calming breaths (Earles, Vernon and Yetz 2015). Malinowski et al. (2018: 17) further emphasized that clients can display compassion and nurturance towards other living beings through energy-based interactions, such as gentle touches like hair slides and ear slides, eliciting feedback as a horse responds by lowering its head or backing away.

According to Wharton, Whitworth and Macauley (2019: 268), this impactful therapeutic work fosters a sense of mastery as clients acquire new skills and knowledge. Individuals on the journey of trauma recovery frequently express a lack of self-worth or struggle to acknowledge positive aspects about themselves. For these clients, engaging in acts of care towards another living being challenges the cognitive belief that they are inherently unworthy or flawed.

In psychotherapy groups aimed at aiding young women who are survivors of sexual trauma, equine partners prove instrumental in drawing clients out of their shells. The presence of horses motivates these women to communicate while simultaneously providing comfort. Drawing from my experience leading groups across various treatment settings, adolescents often find it challenging to connect with human group facilitators (Schlote 2017).

However, Törmälehto and Korkiamäki (2020: 1707) argued that building a relationship with an equine partner often enables adolescents to transcend initial discomfort and

cultivate trusting relationships. Clients, especially those who historically feel powerless, can experience enhanced confidence and a more positive sense of agency within a world where their influence has been limited. These specific clients often benefit from acquiring skills in self-regulation, boundary setting, assertiveness, problem-solving, and cooperation. Jennings (2018) emphasized that an equine partner can play a pivotal role in developing these skills. In group settings which is tailored for trauma survivors, collaborative riding fosters peer trust-building, seeking assistance, offering support, and demonstrating empathy. Additionally, the rhythmic movement of the horse can be harnessed to teach clients how to breathe, embrace risk, and move forward both on the horse and in their personal lives.

Furthermore, as highlighted by Craig (2020: 650), the dynamics of social skills and communication within relationships are subject to restructuring through life interactions. While such restructuring aims to benefit those involved, it can sometimes lead to disruptions and unhealthy entanglements. Nieforth and Craig (2021: 1656) underscore the role of equine assisted counselling (EAC) as an alternative approach to conventional counselling. This approach integrates humans and horses within an experiential counselling framework, offering interactive insights and experiences that can reshape beliefs about communication, implied meanings, and responsible reactions. These transformative experiences contribute to enhancing valuable social skills within the participating community.

Additionally, Fry (2021: 94) contends that social and communication skills can be valid targets for alteration and reframing through equine assisted counselling activities. The conditioned responses developed by both humans and horses within their respective communities can foster dysfunctional interactions (Nicholas 2019). Thus, Sauer and Gill (2020: 372) assert that equine assisted counselling, operating within an experiential counselling model, has the potential to shape relational interactions for the improvement of social skills and communication levels.

In the assessment of Craig, Nieforth, and Rosenfeld (2020: 400), equine assisted counselling not only brings underlying issues to the surface for resolution but also facilitates individuals in finding greater fulfilment and wholeness. The shared need for stable and secure community is evident in both horses and humans, presenting opportunities for learning, growth, and the transformation of stagnant interactions and skills (Arnon et al. 2020: e557). Horses offer insights into establishing bonds within

cohesive social groups, guiding individuals on a path toward restoring humanity and fostering healthy membership within our human herd. As Trotter and Baggerly (2019: 42) succinctly express, "Through unconsciously identifying with the horses, individuals come to understand their own basic drives and the value of developing self-control. Working with a horse, they gain a new sense of self-mastery."

## **2.10. Benefits of equine-based therapy with substance abuse**

Equine-assisted mental health has emerged as a valuable supplementary intervention in the journey of alcoholism recovery. The objectives of this therapeutic approach vary based on the different phases of sobriety and may encompass tasks such as recognizing core emotions, mastering grounding and relaxation techniques, honing relationship skills, cultivating self-forgiveness, and fostering self-assurance (Trotter and Baggerly 2019: 54). It is essential to acknowledge and address challenges which are related to reduced frustration tolerance and impulse control, which stem from the brain's detoxification process and ingrained ineffective responses to life's adversities. Providing patience, support, and reinforcement becomes paramount, particularly, in the early stages of recovery, where clients are grappling with these issues. Notably, these qualities are epitomized by horses, making them well-suited companions (Buzel 2019).

Stapleton and Grimmet (2021: 3) further emphasize the uniqueness and potency of equine-based therapy as an experiential approach that aids individuals in addiction recovery. Through interactions with horses, individuals can learn to trust both themselves and others, acquire fresh coping strategies, and gain profound insights into their behavioural patterns. Atherton et al (2020: e103877) suggest that equine-based therapy bestows several advantages upon those in addiction recovery. This therapeutic modality facilitates the development of self-trust and trust in others, the acquisition of novel coping mechanisms, and a deeper comprehension of one's behavioural dynamics (Diaz et al. 2022: 1).

Marchand et al. (2022: 101660) underscore that working with horses offers additional benefits to individuals recovering from addiction. Equine-based therapy can serve as a platform for exploring boundaries, bolstering self-esteem, and refining communication skills. Moreover, this therapeutic approach affords individuals in

recovery, and the opportunity to engage in outdoor activities, partake in physical exercise, and immerse themselves in the presence of animals.

### **2.11. General benefits of equine-based therapy**

Various modalities of equine-assisted animal therapy (EAAT) have been shown to contribute to enhanced cognitive outcomes, encompassing improvements in mental health and functioning (Pendry et al. 2014: 80), ameliorated behaviour among children with behavioural challenges (Boshoff et al. 2015), enhancements in sensory-seeking behaviour and reduced inattention-distractibility (Bass et al. 2009: 1261), as well as enhanced social communication and increased verbalizations (Bass et al. 2009: 1261). Equine-assisted therapy also correlates with advancements in memory comprehension, equine knowledge, safety awareness, eye contact, self-assurance, mastery of control, and behavioural management (Gabriel 2012: 586).

Moreover, equine-assisted therapy extends its influence to foster improved outcomes in psychological and emotional domains. The therapeutic setting, combined with equine interaction, facilitates the cultivation of empathy, patience, relationship-building skills, effective communication, and self-awareness. Programs centred around equine-assisted therapy significantly elevate participants' subjective well-being and enhance their problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and dysfunctional coping strategies (Brenna 2013: i; Ewing et al. 2007: 59; Trotter, Chandler, Goodwin-Bond and Casey 2008: 254). As noted by Brenna (2013: ii), equine-assisted therapy programs enhance problem-focused coping and furnish a source of emotional support for program participants. The study conducted by Trotter, Chandler, Goodwin-Bond, and Casey (2008: 254) demonstrated substantial enhancements in coping skills resulting from participation in an equine-assisted therapy program. Horses offer valuable opportunities for growth within therapeutic contexts, serving as a personal resource that clients can tap into while honing their coping skills (Boshoff, Grobler, and Nienabar 2015: 86; Rothe et al., 2005: 373; Johansen 2008: s122; Johns, Bobat, and Holder 2016: 199). Notably, equine-facilitated psychotherapy stands out as particularly advantageous for young individuals who are grappling with social, emotional, and mental health difficulties (Harris and Williams 2017: 776).

According to Fine and Mackintosh (2016: 68), youth dwelling in violent homes or neighbourhoods while also facing poverty are especially susceptible to barriers

hindering socioemotional development. Although some children may have access to clinical support services, not all derive the same benefits from such services as a primary preventive measure, as highlighted by Hoy- Gerlach and Wehman (2017). Additionally, many youths and families may internalize stigma or apprehension when seeking clinical social work assistance (Dunlop and Tsantefski 2017: 16). Thus, Burgon (2011: 165) suggests that equine-facilitated psychotherapy serves as an auxiliary source of support for youths who may find it challenging or uncomfortable to seek clinical support in isolation. The perspective put forth by Vincent and Farkas (2017: 7) asserts that equine-facilitated psychotherapy holds the potential to reach the most vulnerable youths more effectively than clinical social work alone, this is attributed to the allure of a novel experiential approach combined with therapeutic treatment.

Confidence and self-esteem are pivotal in terms of resilience and are closely intertwined with the theme of a sense of mastery and self-efficacy. Clients could experience a sense of mastery by embodying confident leadership traits to establish trust and cooperation with the horses (Burgon 2011: 166). Moreover, Vincent and Farkas (2017: 10) argue that recognizing the ability to effectively confront and surmount challenges through personal effort, known as self-efficacy, is essential for nurturing a positive outlook on the future.

## **2.12. The principles of equine based therapy**

Burgon, Gammage, and Hebden (2018: 6) presented a set of fundamental principles derived from therapeutic and equine encounters, underscoring the following essential core principles for effective implementation:

- Establishing a secure environment, both emotionally and physically.
- Prioritizing client and horse autonomy and decision-making.
- Embracing acceptance and refraining from judgment toward both client and horse.
- Recognizing the centrality of relationship dynamics.
- Facilitating learning through modelling and, when necessary, instruction, with a foundation of respect and empathy.
- Prioritizing a process-oriented approach over a task-oriented one.

- Embracing the "being" mode as opposed to the "doing" mode.

EAGALA (2018: 1) further expounded upon the following guiding principles that underpin the practice of equine-based therapy:

- Collaborative Approach: Equine-based therapy employs a collaborative model, uniting a licensed mental health professional and a qualified equine specialist in a joint effort. Horses and clients become equal partners in an experiential process that facilitates transformative outcomes.
- Dedication to Innovation: Equine-based therapy involves horses that possess heightened sensitivity and awareness, providing a secure environment for clients to explore their inner selves and uncover their own insights.
- Solution-Oriented: The EAGALA approach is founded on the belief that clients hold the most effective solutions for themselves. Instead of prescribing solutions, clients are empowered to experiment, problem-solve, embrace risk-taking, harness creativity, and discover solutions tailored to their unique needs.
- Grounded Focus: All therapeutic work within the arena takes place on the ground, with horses placed prominently at the forefront. These horses remain unhindered and are never ridden, allowing them to interact with clients naturally. This setup enables clients, with the guidance of professional facilitators, to introspect, project, and cultivate profound connections.

### **2.13. Professional organizations linked to equine-based therapy.**

According to various sources, equine facilitated psychotherapy is still in its early stages as a therapeutic approach, lacking a comprehensive theoretical framework, standardized terminology, and established guidelines (King and Davidson 2016: xiii; John, Bobat and Holder 2016: 201; Lee et al. 2016: 226; Mackechnie-Guire et al, 2018: 84; Dunlop and Tsantefski 2018: 16; Hood and Wilson 2021: 153; Jayne 2023: 150). To ensure the appropriate utilization of equines within therapeutic contexts, several organizations have developed and implemented standards of practice in this field. Currently, four primary organizations offer training and certifications for professionals in both equine and mental health disciplines who incorporate horses into their therapeutic practices (Esposito and Fournier 2023).

**2.13.1. PATH** - The Professional Association for Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH), formerly known as North American Riding for the Handicap (NARHA), was established in 1969. It played a pioneering role by setting the initial safety standards and certification requirements for professionals who are involved in equine-based therapy (PATH, 2012: 1). PATH is a global nonprofit organization with a mission to advocate for diversity and opportunities in equine-assisted activities and therapies (para. 1). Emphasizing the horse's vital role in the therapeutic process, PATH prefers the term "equine-facilitated psychotherapy," recognizing it as a form of psychotherapy where the equine element holds significant importance. Equine-facilitated psychotherapy involves mounted and un-mounted equine activities that are guided by a qualified mental health and equine professional or a mental health professional who are duly trained and certified to work with horses therapeutically (PATH 2012: 1; Krueger and Serpell, 2006: 21).

In response to the increasing popularity of equine-facilitated psychotherapy, the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA) emerged in 1996 to exclusively address mental health-related needs and services. In a move to streamline models and guidelines, PATH absorbed the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association in 2010. The approach developed by the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association has been integrated into PATH's ethical, safety, and professionalism standards for mental health professionals and equine specialists who administer equine-facilitated psychotherapy (Tetreault 2006: 13; PATH 2012: 3).

**2.13.2. EAGALA** - Established in 1999, the Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) is a global non-profit organization. EAGALA (2012: 4) is dedicated to furnishing education, standards, innovation, and comprehensive support to professionals who are engaged in equine-assisted psychotherapy and learning (EAP/L) worldwide. EAGALA primarily employs the term "equine assisted psychotherapy" to describe the integration of horses into therapeutic processes. Equine assisted psychotherapy, as defined by EAGALA, involves a collaborative endeavour between a licensed therapist and a horse professional, working together with clients and horses to address treatment objectives (para. 1). This approach is recognized as an experiential therapeutic method as characterized by its brevity and solution-oriented focus (EAGALA 2012: 4; Tetreault 2006: 14).

Central to the EAGALA model is the emphasis on groundwork activities, which serve as a catalyst for emotional growth and healing. Unlike mounted work, which is excluded from treatment, EAGALA contends that equine assisted psychotherapy does not aim to develop riding or horsemanship skills. Instead, activities are meticulously tailored to cater to the mental health needs of each individual client (EAGALA 2012: 4; Tetreault 2006: 14). EAGALA takes pride in its rigorous ethical standards and practice guidelines, ensuring that certified members and clinics deliver competent care to clients while adhering to the highest standards of practice (EAGALA 2012: 5).

**2.13.3. CBEIP** - In 2006, the Certification Board for Equine Interaction Professionals (CBEIP) was established as a division of the Delta Society, now known as Pet Partners (Pet Partners 2012: 1). The CBEIP, a non-profit organization, is dedicated to enhancing credibility and professionalism within the EFP field. This includes advocating for consistent credentials across various organizations and models (CBEIP 2012: 2; Trotter 2012: 2). The primary mission of the Certification Board for Equine Interaction Professionals (2012) is to establish the highest standards of best practices, knowledge, safety, effectiveness, and uniformity in equine interaction therapy for all participants, including horses. Additionally, their mission aims to foster trust and credibility among the public in this practice. Through these efforts, the Certification Board for Equine Interaction Professionals aims to address the significant variations observed in current EAAT models. Furthermore, the organization underscores the importance of collaborative development among organizations to establish a universally accepted and standardized theoretical framework for the field (2012).

**2.13.4. EPONA** - Introduced in 1997, the EPONA approach came into existence (EPONA 2012). Tailored primarily for equine specialists, it also extends its training to mental health professionals. The training sessions and workshops place a strong emphasis on adopting a comprehensive perspective, centring around leadership, personal growth, equestrian proficiency, and the attainment of instructor certification. Within the EPONA model, particular attention is dedicated to nurturing the bond

between individuals and horses, recognizing the interplay between mind and body, achieving emotional harmony, and establishing clear boundaries (EPONA 2012).

In the EPONA model, the terminology of choice is equine experiential learning (EEL), as the methodology abstains from introducing psychotherapy into its sessions. Despite its distinctive focus, the EPONA approach is less commonly employed compared to alternative equine assisted therapy models. Criticized for its perceived ambiguity and lack of clarity, the approach still finds its elements frequently adopted or integrated into other therapeutic frameworks (Dorotik 2011).

## **2.14. Implementing equine-based therapy in practice**

Advancements in equine assisted psychotherapy unfold through a diverse array of engagements; a significant proportion of these endeavours do not encompass horseback riding. As clients make progress in their therapeutic journey, the activities within equine assisted psychotherapy progressively escalate to complexity. The initial phases typically involve acquiring skills that foster trust and establish secure boundaries with the horse (Ewing et al. 2007: 65). Commonly featured activities encompass tasks like feeding, equipping, grooming, and leading the horse. As clients grow more at ease in the equine environment, opportunities arise for their involvement in groundwork, vaulting, and horseback riding during sessions of equine facilitated psychotherapy (Frewin and Gardiner 2005: 13; Karol 2007: 79; Klontz et al. 2007: 260).

**2.14.1. Groundwork** - Porter-Wenzlaff (2007: 529) provided a description of groundwork encompassing feeding, tacking, and grooming- fundamental skills that serve as an introduction. These tasks afford clients the opportunity to observe the behaviour of horses, acquire safe handling techniques, and enhance their comfort level when dealing with these large and potent animals. Multiple sessions are typically dedicated to hone these foundational skills. If a client experiences anxiety, tension, or a lack of presence while engaging in grooming and tacking, the process becomes notably challenging. The horse detects the individual's unease and responds unfavourably, turning away from the halter or resisting when asked to lift its hoof (Shultz et al. 2007). As clients gradually comprehend the impact of their actions on the

horse's behaviour, they work towards approaching the horse in a more relaxed state. When the handler exudes calmness and receptiveness towards the horse, the process of tacking and grooming transforms from a struggle into a collaborative effort (Karol 2007: 77).

Following the establishment of a client's comfort with introductory skills, the concept of leading is introduced. Leading involves utilizing a halter rope to guide the horse's movement. Throughout this process, the handler walks alongside or slightly ahead of the horse (Rothe et al. 2005: 370; McCormick and McCormick 1997). Rothe et al. (2005: 370) and Yorke et al. (2008: 20) highlighted that the leading process often triggers various emotions within the client when the horse fails to cooperate, creating an opportunity for transference. Rothe et al. (2005: 377) observed that clients might lead either too tightly, attempting to restrain the horse, or too loosely, aiming to grant the horse freedom. In response, the horse reacts accordingly – either resisting the constraint or seizing the rein and leading the client. These actions mirror the client's quest for equilibrium in their life.

According to Brandt (2016), leading frequently serves as a catalyst for engaging in more intricate activities. Leading employs a rope attached to the horse's halter as a tool to guide the horse's movements alongside the clients, whether they are navigating an outdoor arena or manoeuvring through a maze. Iwachiw (2017: 32) expanded on this notion, indicating that groundwork presents a greater challenge in equine facilitated psychotherapy, given that it is conducted without the use of a lead line. Within a confined arena, the client instructs the horse to perform specific tasks or movements using both verbal and non-verbal communication. Porter-Wenzlaff (2007: 530) emphasized the necessity for the client to exhibit a commanding presence while communicating with the horse. Unclear or hesitant requests are typically ignored by the horse. In contrast, confident and explicit requests are met with attentive and enthusiastic responses. Groundwork poses a considerable challenge within equine facilitated psychotherapy for many clients.

Individuals grappling with various behavioural and mental health disorders often encounter difficulty in expressing their emotions, often striving to maintain a sense of numbness. Effective interaction with horses compels clients to confront these suppressed emotions (McCormick and McCormick 1997; Sexauer 2011: 49). Although this can be a distressing, and yet an indispensable process, addressing these

emotions and their associated memories enables clients to become more receptive to forming emotionally intimate connections with other living beings (McCormick and McCormick 1997; Porter-Wenzlaff 2007: 535).

**2.14.2. Mounted activities** – As noted by Karol (2007: 81), exercises conducted while mounted (involving skills and activities performed while on the horse's back) are less prevalent within equine facilitated psychotherapy compared to activities carried out on the ground. These mounted exercises are designed for clients who exhibit comfort in the presence of horses and possess the capability to handle them. According to Marchand, Andersen, Smith, Hoopes, and Carlson (2020: 247), it is customary for clients to undergo several sessions of equine facilitated psychotherapy before engaging in mounted exercises. However, when integrated appropriately, these mounted skills exert a meaningful influence on self-identity and confidence. A horse symbolizes a blend of power, grace, and vulnerability (Peters, Wood, Hepburn, and Bundy 2020: 190). By riding a horse, an individual connects with these traits, fostering a sense of empowerment and self-assuredness in the rider. While the horse serves as a supportive presence, the rider can explore novel emotions within a non-judgmental setting. Through mounted exercises, individuals who may initially feel guarded and make uncertain progress toward becoming self-assured and confident (McCormick and McCormick 1997; Schultz et al. 2006: 270; White, Zippel, and Kumar 2020: 101101).

## **2.15. Therapeutic techniques and interventions**

Research substantiates the concept that employing a multidisciplinary approach to treatment yields optimal outcomes for individuals who are facing mental illness or dual diagnoses (Kleber et al. 2007: 68). Authors such as Ratliffe and Sanekane (2009: 38), Naste et al. (2018: 289), as well as Wharton, Whitworth, Macauley, and Malone (2019: 268), have conveyed that equine facilitated psychotherapy possesses a versatile and complementary nature, making it a suitable companion to evidence-based practices (EBPs) that cater to the distinctive requirements of each client. Equine facilitated psychotherapy easily adapts to individual, group, and family therapy sessions, with

activities that are meticulously aligned with the client's personalized treatment plan and objectives (Ratliffe and Sanekane 2009: 40; Schultz et al. 2006: 268; Trotter et al. 2008: 77).

Within the rapidly expanding realm of equine assisted learning and therapy, an array of diverse styles, philosophies, and methodologies have flourished. This spectrum encompasses approaches which are rooted in cognitive behavioural techniques, psychoanalytic frameworks, person-centred models, and experiential gestalt methodologies (Frewin and Gardiner 2005: 13; Lentini and Knox 2009: 51). The various styles of equine-based therapy resonate with person-centred, humanistic, gestalt, and experiential philosophies. The practitioner often possesses training in core process psychotherapy with a Buddhist orientation (Rogers 1951; Kurtz 1990; Mearns and Thorne 2000; Gammage 2008: 5; Sills 2009).

## **2.16 The process of equine-based therapy in a therapeutic setting**

Within a conventional therapeutic (office) environment, the client and therapist usually conduct an initial evaluation, establish treatment plans and goals, and discuss the format of future sessions. Considering the client's previous experiences and comfort level with animals, especially horses, is essential (Rothe et al. 2005: 377; Yorke et al. 2008: 17). It is essential to avoid rushing the integration of equine activities, especially if clients exhibit fear or lack experience with horses. Additionally, safety considerations in horse-related work are addressed prior to the initial equine facilitated psychotherapy session and are periodically revisited throughout the course of treatment (Beebe 2008: 1; Rothe et al. 2005: 375). Following the initial session(s), clients are introduced to the horse(s), engage in introductory activities such as observing herd dynamics, grooming and stable tasks, and groundwork (Cepeda 2011: 40). As clients build upon acquired skills, equine activities become progressively more challenging, potentially encompassing both mounted and groundwork exercises. Therapy sessions frequently include brief check-ins before and after each session, as well as occasional complete sessions within a traditional therapeutic context. During the final stages of equine facilitated psychotherapy, therapists need to be mindful of clients ending their therapeutic relationship with both the therapist and the horse. Therefore, addressing both types of losses with care is important (Cepeda 2011: 45; Chandler 2012: 38; Trotter et al. 2008: 4).

Throughout the treatment process, therapists frequently integrate techniques which are based on evidence-based practices into equine facilitated psychotherapy sessions. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Gestalt therapy, person-centred techniques, and play therapy are commonly employed during EFP (Rothe et al. 2005: 373; Schultz et al. 2006: 267). These are discussed in the subsequent sub-sections:

- **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT):** CBT is a therapeutic approach that centres on transforming maladaptive or unhealthy thoughts, beliefs, and behaviours. This is achieved through recognizing and reframing unrealistic or distorted thoughts, as well as altering associated maladaptive behaviours (Beck 2011: 25). CBT has consistently demonstrated efficacy in treating various mental health disorders and enhancing outcomes in equine facilitated psychotherapy (Beck 2011: 25; Muñoz-Solomando, Kendell, and Whittington 2008: 335). Given the behaviour-oriented nature of equine facilitated psychotherapy, CBT techniques are heavily incorporated into sessions (Krueger and Serpell 2006: 30).

According to Matthews and Yelvington (2022: 260), equine facilitated psychotherapy entails engaging clients in physical, psychological, and emotional exercises. As emotions surface through interactions with or observations of horses, they are promptly addressed. Brandt (2013: 30) highlighted that mindfulness and distress tolerance are nurtured during equine facilitated psychotherapy sessions, particularly, when the horse's response doesn't align with the client's expectations (Chandler et al. 2010: 355). Clients must learn to identify and regulate their emotions while working with horses. If clients react too strongly or their emotions are inconsistent with their verbal and non-verbal cues, the horse might either distance itself or decline to comply with the client's requests (Chandler et al. 2010: 354; McCormick and McCormick 1997). Confronting challenging emotions in real-time allows clients to self-monitor and recognize how they respond to specific feelings. As clients address fearful or suppressed emotions, they come to realize that these emotions are not as harmful as initially perceived. This newfound comfort in identifying and expressing emotions paves the way for other cognitive and behavioural changes in various aspects of the clients' lives (Whitely 2009: 24; Yorke et al. 2008: 19). Psychoeducation, an essential component of CBT, is frequently employed in equine facilitated psychotherapy sessions (Beck 2011: 6).

Burton, Gammage, and Hebden (2018: 12) recommended that therapists educate clients about equine behaviour and safety, providing feedback during equine activities. Moreover, therapists have ample opportunities to model social and communication skills, appropriate touch, and boundaries (Chandler et al. 2010: 356; Sexauer 2011: 33). Homework, a significant element of cognitive behavioural therapy, is often assigned following equine facilitated psychotherapy sessions. Tailored to individual client goals, homework frequently involves behavioural experiments, mindfulness, and relaxation practices, monitoring automatic thoughts, and journaling (Beck 2011: 10). Through homework assignments, clients can extend their acquired skills to other areas of their lives, fostering enduring positive changes in self-perception (Allen 2003: 236; Beck 2011: 12).

- **Gestalt Therapy:** Gestalt therapy underscores self-awareness, including internal emotions, needs, and desires, within a relational context (Kirby 2010: 62). Given that non-verbal understanding and communication can be challenging in a highly verbal culture, Gestalt therapy is particularly beneficial for clients who are struggling to align their body language with their emotions (Kirby 2010: 62; Schultz et al. 2006: 265; Whitely 2009: 30). Similar to CBT, Gestalt therapy incorporates mindfulness techniques to promote the use and development of non-verbal cues and body language. Establishing effective interaction with horses necessitates syncing the mind with the body. Horses respect and trust individuals who display behaviours that are congruent with their emotions. Conversely, horses become unsettled and hesitant around individuals whose emotional and behavioural states are incongruent (McCormick and McCormick 1997; Porter-Wenzlaff 2007: 529). The horse responds to the client genuinely and without judgment, providing a secure environment for emotional exploration (Kirby 2010: 60). Gestalt therapy also underscores the relational interpretation of all experiences. In equine facilitated psychotherapy, the client's interactions, and relationship with the horse offers opportunities to address and work through transference (Kirby 2010: 60; Whitely 2009: 20).
- **Person-Centred:** Person-centred techniques are frequently woven into equine facilitated psychotherapy sessions. Similar to Gestalt therapy, person-centred

approaches revolve around the healing potency of secure, supportive, and nonjudgmental relationships (Kirby 2010: 65; Chandler et al. 2010: 355). Despite being a collaborative endeavour, person-centred therapy places the client in a central role within the therapeutic process. While therapists guide sessions, clients are empowered to arrive at their own insights. This process fosters the client's self-assurance and confidence in themselves and their abilities (Chandler et al. 2010: 355; Whitely 2009: 63). In equine facilitated psychotherapy, therapists frequently allow clients to independently navigate activities, offering support or suggestions only when prompted. Similarly, horses afford clients opportunities to be assertive but respectfully direct activities, thereby fostering confidence and adeptness in expressing needs and emotions within relationships (Chandler et al. 2010: 354).

- **Play therapy** - In the context of equine facilitated psychotherapy sessions, play therapy can be integrated, particularly, when working with children and occasionally adults (Sexauer 2011: 3). Clients are prompted to share narratives about the thoughts or feelings that the horse might be harbouring. These stories often mirror the client's own emotional landscape and perspective on life. Subsequently, the therapist can employ these horse-related narratives as a catalyst to initiate discussions about concealed experiences and emotions that necessitate exploration and resolution (Rothe et al. 2005: 373). In select equine facilitated psychotherapy sessions, games and obstacle courses are introduced to assist clients in cultivating teamwork, honing problem-solving skills, and refining social interactions (Whitely 2009: 55). Moreover, art therapy can be interwoven into equine facilitated psychotherapy sessions. In the realm of art therapy, clients are encouraged to channel their emotions, aspirations, and challenges into creative expressions by painting or embellishing the horse. Therapists might also encourage clients to utilize body paint to label the horse's anatomy, fostering discussions around labelling and stereotypes (Chandler 2012; Klontz et al. 2007: 257).

## **2.17 Challenges associated with implementing equine-based therapy.**

Several factors warrant consideration when contemplating the exploration of equine-assisted therapy. The subsequent challenges are linked with the implementation of equine-based therapy:

### **2.17.1. Timing**

As stated by Clarke (2022), the appropriateness of equine assisted psychotherapy timing hinges on the specific challenges which confront the client. For instance, in cases involving addiction, individuals would require adequate time for detoxification and adherence to a suitable treatment regimen before potentially integrating equine-assisted therapy services.

### **2.17.2. Fear**

In accordance with Kern-Godal et al. (2016: 31636), while equine-assisted therapy has demonstrated efficacy in addressing anxiety, a client might experience apprehension towards being in the presence of a sizable horse, potentially leading to a lack of motivation to engage in this form of treatment. Additionally, the reluctance to participate could stem from a traumatic memory involving animals, preventing the client from participating in the interaction.

### **2.17.3. Cost**

As outlined by Ballard, Vincent, and Collins (2020: 657), it is important to note that due to its relatively recent surge in popularity and recognition as an effective approach for treating mental health and substance abuse, equine-assisted psychotherapy may not be encompassed by insurance benefits. The costs associated with equine-based therapy services are contingent on the geographical location and can span a range of prices.

## **2.18. Conclusion**

This chapter reviewed literature in the field of equine-based therapy. It outlined the history and emergence of equine-based therapy from its inception to its current state. It provided definitions of the various types of equine-based therapy and their characteristics. It also provided a summary of the benefits of equine-based therapy for the different mental health conditions and clients. The chapter also focussed on the emergence of equine-based therapy within a social work context. The chapter then provided an overview of the organisations that are associated with equine-based therapy. The following chapter outlines the research methodology that was adopted for the study, the data collection process and well as the process analysis.

## CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

***“The essential joy of being with horses is that it brings you in contact with the rare elements of grace, beauty, spirit and freedom” Sharon Ralls Lemon***

### **3.1. Introduction**

According to Kabir (2016: 168), the term "research" finds its roots in the ancient French word "recherchier," which denotes the act of repeatedly searching and exploring. In other words, the previous exploration was not all-inclusive and thorough, suggesting that there were still some improvements to be made (Snyder 2019: 333). Mishra and Alok (2022: 25) articulated that research encompasses the pursuit of knowledge, and is characterized as a methodical and systematic exploration of relevant information concerning a particular subject or domain. In essence, research constitutes the skill of scientific inquiry.

Research is both a systematic and creative process of gathering information and a means of answering questions or creating knowledge to advance and increase an existing body of knowledge (Inglesi-Lotz 2017: 80, Masukume, Makaka and Mukumba 2018: 6). It needs to be emphasised that the value of a research study is entirely dependent upon how it is designed. Consequently, the formulation of an appropriate research design represents a crucial factor for conducting meaningful research (Chivanga and Monyai 2018: 11).

Kabir (2016: 170) highlighted that systematic research in any domain of study encompasses three fundamental operations:

1. Data Collection: This involves the process of observing, measuring, and documenting information.
2. Data Analysis: This pertains to the arrangement and organization of the compiled data to facilitate the extraction of their significance and enable generalizations.

3. Report Writing: A report's purpose is to provide readers or the audience with the enclosed information. It is an integral part and result of a research undertaking.

This chapter will present the rationale for the selected research design as well as a discussion of the research methods being used. A discussion of the data collection process and the data collection tools are also presented in this chapter. Furthermore, the sampling process, the population sample, and the procedure for data collection and data analysis are also explained in this chapter.

### **3.2. Qualitative research approach**

The roots of qualitative research design can be traced back to anthropology and sociology, and it encompasses various terms to describe its approach. These terms include cultural investigations, constructivist paradigm, natural inquiry, phenomenological investigation, postmodernism, post-positivism attitude, and poststructuralism (Schwandt 2001: 2). In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research is known for its rigour, systematic nature, and often serves as a practical alternative to quantitative methods (Randy and McKenzie 2011: 12). Qualitative approaches all share two fundamental characteristics: a primary focus on phenomena that is occurring in natural, real-world settings, and a commitment to exploring these phenomena in all their intricacy, setting them apart from the quantitative methodology (Leedy and Ormrod 2010: 10).

Qualitative research is a research methodology that delves deep into real-world issues and offers profound insights (Moser and Korstjens 2107: 273). Instead of the numerical data collection or the implementation of interventions typical in quantitative research, qualitative research generates hypotheses and delves deeper into quantitative data (Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger 2020: 1). It revolves around gathering information about participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviours, delving into the questions of "how" and "why," as opposed to the mere quantification of "how much" or "how many" (Hammarberg, Kirkman, and de Lacey 2016: 498). Qualitative research can stand alone as an independent study and relies solely on qualitative data or can be integrated into mixed-methods research, combining both qualitative and quantitative data (Queirós, Faria and Almeid 2017: 370).

At its essence, qualitative research revolves around open-ended inquiries that do not readily yield numerical responses, with a primary focus on understanding the "how"

and "why" (Cleland 2017: 61). Because of the inherent open-endedness of these inquiries, the design of qualitative research often follows a nonlinear path compared to quantitative research (Cleland 2017: 65). One of the notable strengths of qualitative research lies in its capacity to elucidate complex processes and patterns of human behaviour that prove challenging to quantify (Tenny, Brannan and Brannan 2022: 1). Phenomena such as experiences, attitudes, and behaviours can be elusive when quantified, whereas a qualitative approach empowers participants to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, thus shedding light on the "how," "why," or "what" during specific times or events of interest (Hammarberg, Kirkman and de Lacey 2016: 498). While it is feasible to quantify qualitative data, the essence of qualitative information lies in the identification of themes and patterns that might resist quantification. Thus, it remains vital to retain the contextual and narrative elements of qualitative work, avoiding attempts to quantify aspects which are inherently resistant to quantification (Moen and Middlethorpe 2015: 321).

Qualitative research aligns with the constructivist or naturalistic paradigm, originating as a counterpoint to the positivistic paradigm that characterizes quantitative research. While positivism assumes an ordered reality that is open to an objective study, constructivism posits that reality has multiple interpretations, with research aiming to comprehend how individuals construct reality within their inherent contexts (Polit and Beck 2017: 18; Firdaus, Zulfadilla, and Caniago 2021: 10). Characterized by its investigation of phenomena in depth and holistically, qualitative research collects rich narratives to unearth insights (Polit and Beck 2017: 25). Its primary objective lies in providing profound comprehension of real-world issues. In contrast to quantitative research, it refrains from manipulating, quantifying predefined variables, or introducing treatments (Moser and Korstjens 2022: 9).

Denzin and Lincoln (2018: 87) elaborated that qualitative inquiry seeks to narratively uncover and describe individuals' everyday actions and the significance that these actions hold for them. Mills and Birks (2017: 8) noted that it identifies meaningful categories of elements in the world—varieties of people, actions, beliefs, and interests, thus emphasizing distinctions in elements that contribute to meaning. Qualitative research encompasses various designs, such as a case study, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative research, sharing pivotal characteristics (Merriam and Tisdale 2016: 22). These include situating research within the natural

context of individuals or groups, aiming to grasp deeper understandings of their experiences, perceptions, behaviour, and processes, along with the meanings that are attributed to them. Researchers adopt an "emerging design" approach to maintain flexibility in adapting to context. The processes of data collection and analysis are iterative, occurring simultaneously as the research unfolds (Moser and Korstjens 2017: 272).

### **3.2.1. Researchers' justification for the use of a qualitative research approach**

Equine-based therapy is a complex intervention that involves human-animal interaction in a therapeutic context. Qualitative research is well-suited to explore the intricacies of such complex phenomena, allowing researchers to capture the depth and richness of experiences, interactions, and processes involved (Hennick, Hutter and Bailey 2020: 29). Qualitative research methods, such as interviews, observations, and open-ended surveys, enable researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the principles, processes, and experiences which are associated with equine-based therapy. This depth is essential for uncovering nuances and context-specific factors that quantitative research may overlook (Given 2008: xxix). Furthermore, qualitative research prioritizes the voices and perspectives of participants (Harper 2011: 83). In the case of equine-based therapy, this means that the mental health practitioners can share their experiences, perceptions, and insights, providing a holistic view of the therapy's benefits and processes.

Qualitative research also allows for a deep exploration of the therapeutic context, including the role of the horse, the therapeutic environment, and the interactions among participants. Understanding the context is crucial for appreciating the unique aspects of equine-based therapy. In essence, using qualitative research for the exploration of equine-based therapy is justified because it allows researchers to delve deeply into the phenomenon, understand the perspectives of participants, and explore the contextual factors that influence therapy outcomes. Qualitative research provides a valuable means to uncover the intricacies and nuances of equine-based therapy, contributing to both the practice and theoretical understanding of this therapeutic approach (Cropley 2019: 56).

For the purpose of this study, a case study approach was adopted. Case studies are a common research method within the realm of qualitative research (Starman 2013:

29). Qualitative research focuses on understanding and exploring complex social phenomena through non-numerical data such as interviews, observations, and textual analysis (Starman 2013: 30). Case study design is one of the methodologies that qualitative researchers frequently use to delve deeply into a specific context or situation (Stake 2011: 12). Both qualitative research and case studies aim to provide in-depth insights and understanding of a particular phenomenon or context. Qualitative research methods, including case studies, allow researchers to explore the richness and complexity of the subject matter (Tetnowski 2015: 39).

Qualitative research emphasizes the importance of understanding the context in which a phenomenon occurs, and case studies are well-suited for this purpose because they provide a detailed examination of a specific case within its real-life context (Liamputtong 2020: 66). Qualitative research, including case studies, frequently employ an inductive approach, allowing themes, patterns, and insights to emerge from the data rather than starting with predefined hypotheses. This aligns with the exploratory nature of qualitative research. Qualitative research also values rich, descriptive data (Suryani 2008: 118). Case studies are designed to provide extensive information about the case under investigation which can be valuable for qualitative researchers to seek to understand complex phenomena (Flyvbjerg 2011: 301). Case studies are often used to examine real-life situations or practical problems, making them particularly relevant for qualitative research that is aimed at addressing realworld issues (Ellinger and McWhorter 2016: 2).

Qualitative research and case study design work well together because case studies are a qualitative research method that aligns with the principles and goals of qualitative research (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, and Murphy (2013: 55). They provide a means to explore, understand, and contextualize complex phenomena, generate in-depth insights, and contribute to theory development while maintaining a focus on real-world applications. Researchers often choose case study designs when they need to investigate a specific case or context in detail within the qualitative research paradigm (Flyvbjerg 305).

### **3.3. Research Design**

Grant (2022: 81) indicated that the research design aims to establish a fitting structure for a study. Furthermore, Asenahabi (2019: 1) observed that the accomplishment of

successful research hinges on the adoption of an appropriate research design. This design serves as a pre-data collection blueprint which is employed by researchers to attain the research objectives in a credible manner (Huntington-Klein 2021: 12). Mello (2021: 30) affirmed that the core purpose of a research design is to transform a research problem into data that can be analysed, thus providing pertinent responses to research inquiries.

In the context of the research design process, Sileyew (2019: 7) emphasized that a pivotal choice revolves around selecting a research approach. This choice holds the key to how pertinent information for a study will be acquired. However, it's important to note that the research design process encompasses numerous interconnected decisions. Broadly, three distinct research approaches exist: (1) quantitative, (2) qualitative, and (3) mixed methods. This study opted for the qualitative research approach as discussed above, the study also adopted the case study design and qualitative exploratory design which is elaborated upon below.

### **3.3.1. The case study design**

Bogdan and Biklen (2003: 54) outlined a case study as "an exhaustive examination of a particular setting, individual subject, repository of documents, or a specific event" (Yin 2003: 84). This description allows the case to stand on its own without reference to other comparable cases. Hagan (2006: 240) succinctly defined the case study method as "thorough, qualitative investigations of one or a few illustrative cases." This perspective considers the case as illustrative of a broader concept.

Merriem and Tisdale (2016: 77) characterized a case study as an extensive depiction and examination of a limited system. The complexity around case studies arises from the confusion between the actual process of conducting a case study, the subject under examination (the case), and the outcome generated by this form of inquiry. According to Yin (2014: 1), a case study is an empirical investigation that delves into a contemporary phenomenon within its authentic context, especially when the distinction between the phenomenon and its context isn't distinctly evident. Yin (2014: 3) also highlighted that the case study design is particularly apt for scenarios where it's challenging to detach the variables of the phenomenon from their context.

Furthermore, Schoch (2020: 245) expounded on case study as a method that involves systematically collecting sufficient information about an individual, social context, event, or group to enable the researcher to comprehend how the subject operates or functions. Verleye (2019: 549) stated that these diverse definitions and explanations suggest that the case study approach is adaptable enough to analyse both simple and complex phenomena, with units of analysis ranging from individuals to large institutions to transformative global events. It incorporates a variety of data collection techniques and can significantly contribute to theory application (Creswell 2007: 238; Yin 2003: 87).

According to Ary et al. (2002: 27), “a case study is an in-depth study of a single unit, such as one individual, one group, one organisation, one programme and so on.” In this study, the focus is on a one specific group (i.e., mental health practitioners using equine-based therapy). Employing a case study for research proves advantageous as it furnishes the researcher with a comprehensive depiction of the situation and topic under scrutiny. This aligns well with the goals of qualitative research design. Moreover, Johnson and Christensen (2008: 406) stated that “a case [study] is defined as a bounded system”. The definition of a bounded system is further expanded by Gillham (2000: 1): A case can be an individual; it can be a group – such as a family, or a class, or an office, or a hospital ward; it can be an institution – such as a school or a children’s home, or a factory; it can be a large-scale community – a town, an industry, a profession. In this study, the case is a group of mental health practitioners using equine-based therapy.

Using a case study offers several advantages. Firstly, it can provide in-depth insights into a specific phenomenon, offering a wealth of detailed information (Given 2008: 24). Secondly, as pointed out by Stake and Trumbull in (2005: 446), readers of a case study can derive naturalistic generalizations that are based on personal or vicarious experiences. In simpler terms, it enables individuals to share and comprehend others' social experiences. The third notable strength is that a case study allows for a comprehensive interpretation and always considers the social context (Bennet 2004: 45). Moreover, it avoids the need for treatments, experiments, or manipulated social settings. Consequently, the data will be considered as natural phenomena in people’s real lives (Bennet 2004: 45). Some disadvantages of using a case study include case studies which often rely on subjective data, such as the participants’ statements or the

researchers' observations, because most case studies focus on human experiences. Consequently, data will vary based on the participant's description, opinion, and feeling (Zainal 2007: 5). According to Yin (2003: 368), there are some limitations of a case study approach. First, people may think that case study researchers do not follow systematic procedures and may have biased views that probably influence the findings and the conclusions. Kekeya (2021: 28) proposed that case studies can be categorized into three types: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective.

### **3.3.1.1. Instrumental case study**

In this study, the chosen type of case study is the instrumental case study. Instrumental case studies are widely used in various disciplines, including social sciences, education, business, and healthcare to explore complex issues, theories, or concepts in real-world contexts (Baxter and Jack 2008: 544). They offer a valuable method for researchers to bridge the gap between theory and practice by using a specific case as a lens through which to examine broader phenomena (Patnaik and Pandey 2019: 163). An instrumental case study design is a research approach that uses a specific case (an individual, group, organization, event, or entity) as a tool or instrument to gain insights into a broader phenomenon, theory, or issue. In instrumental case studies, the primary focus is not on understanding the case itself but rather on how the case can help researchers investigate, illustrate, or test a theoretical concept or research question (Zainal 2007: 4).

According to Ridder (2017: 288), the case's particulars establish a backdrop against which broader research interests unfold. Green, Price, and Spears (2023: 12) added that instrumental case studies typically undergo comprehensive investigation, detailing all aspects and activities, not solely to elaborate on the case itself. Instead, the objective is to provide the researcher with enhanced insight into an external theoretical query, issue, or problem. In this study, the researcher was interested in understanding equine-based therapy, the principles that guide its practice, its benefits and process of equine-based therapy from the perspectives of the mental health practitioners. The case is a group of mental health practitioners who are involved in equine-based therapy, and they serve as a vehicle to understand equine-based therapy, with the primary importance on its principles, processes and how it can enhance social work practice.

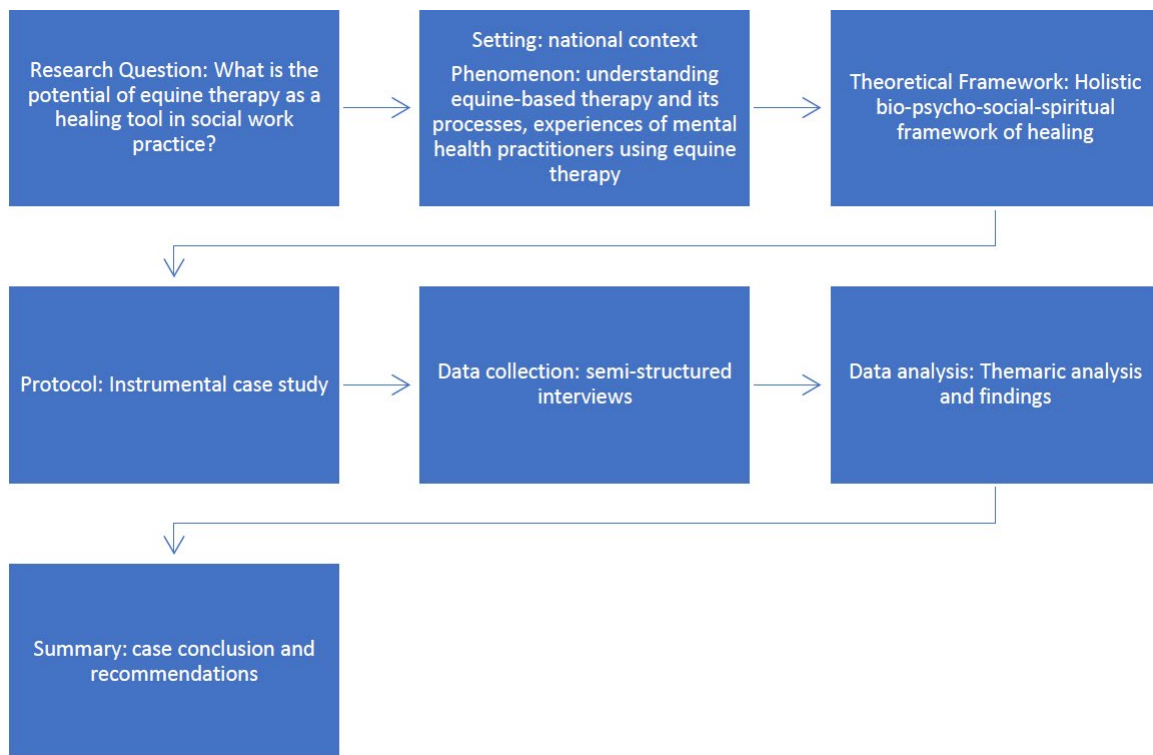
A case is made up of the subject and analytical frame or object (Lune and Berg 2017: 171). In the current study, the case is a group of mental health professionals involved in equine-based therapy. The researcher gained insights from the mental health practitioners involved in equine-based therapy, so that the researcher could understand the nature and processes of equine-based therapy. The study also looked at equine-based therapy's contribution to social work, however, equine-based therapy specialists from various backgrounds were recruited due to their years of experience in the field of equine-based therapy. This inquiry served a particular purpose, with the mental health practitioners using equine-based therapy acting as an instrument or as a tool. Hence, substantiating this as a case study.

According to Njie and Asimiran (2014: 37), an instrumental case study is a research design that focuses on a particular case to gain insights into a broader phenomenon. In this context, conducting a study on understanding equine-based therapy using an instrumental case study approach involves selecting a specific case (in this case, mental health practitioners involved in equine-based therapy) to investigate and understand the potential benefits, principles, and processes involved.

In essence, an instrumental case study was used because the research was qualitative in nature. An instrumental case study was conducted to explore the understanding of equine-based therapy, the principles that guide equine-based therapy, the socio-emotional benefits of equine-based therapy to clients and the processes involved in using equine-based therapy. It was expected that the instrumental case study would examine a phenomenon through the perspectives of mental health practitioners using equine-based therapy.

The instrumental case study was appropriate for the topic of this study because it was expected that the information and data gathered from the perspectives of the mental health practitioners would uncover the understanding, principles and processes that are involved in equine-based therapy. It also sought to gain insights from the perspective of mental health practitioners regarding how equine-based therapy could potentially enhance social work. A case study schematic is illustrated below for this instrumental case study.

Figure 3.2.1. A case study schematic of the current study



### 3.3.2. Exploratory research design

Polit and Beck (2017: 78) briefly touched upon exploratory research, suggesting its purpose is to shed light on the manifestation of a phenomenon, particularly valuable in comprehending little-known occurrences. Reid-Searl and Happell (2012: 1998) concurred, noting that a qualitative exploratory design permits researchers to delve into topics with limited existing literature, enabling participants to contribute to new knowledge development in the field. This study adopted a qualitative approach to gather in-depth data and extract authentic participant experiences and viewpoints. Alongside the exploratory design, a case study tradition was chosen due to the focus on mental health practitioners engaged in equine-based therapy (Hunter, Howes, and McCallum 2019: 3).

Stebbins (2021: 67) defined exploratory research as "a comprehensive, purposeful, systematic, prearranged endeavour aimed at maximizing the discovery of generalizations for describing and understanding a social or psychological area.

Depending on one's perspective, this exploration is a distinct scientific approach, a scientific process, or a specialized methodological approach." Hunter, Howes, and McCallum (2019: 7) added that explorative research delves into a phenomenon of interest, beyond mere observation and recording, employing a descriptive element to gain insight. Exploratory research designs suit scenarios where a new interest or social phenomenon is under examination, such as the role and process of equine-based therapy (Bless et al. 2006: 49; Fouché and De Vos 2011: 35).

The rationale behind using this combined approach was the dearth of information on the research topic and the intention to explore the potential for equine-based therapy as a therapeutic modality in social work. The chosen research method aligns with the qualitative approach (Creswell 2014: 66; Rubin and Babbie 2007: 92). The empirical study, detailed in Chapter 4, elucidates participants' experiences, their understanding of equine-based therapy, processes, and principles of equine-based therapy through qualitative interviews (refer to appendix C). The exploratory research aspect involves questions like "what principles and values guide your equine-based therapy practice?" or "How can equine-based therapy enhance social work?" The descriptive design prompts inquiries such as "how do you describe the implementation of equine-based therapy in a social work context?" and "how does equine-based therapy benefit emotional and social issues?"

### **3.4. Study Setting**

The study setting is situated within a national context, and it focused on mental health practitioners using equine-based therapy. The study included participants from the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Gauteng, and KwaZulu-Natal. Participants were interviewed in their work settings, which included their office spaces where they conducted their therapeutic sessions, as well as the paddocks and outdoor environment where sessions were conducted with clients and the horses. The participants included in the study were from psychology, social work, wellness coaching and equine-facilitated learning disciplines.

### **3.5. Study Population**

In research methodology, the notion of a population expands beyond its everyday definition which typically pertains to "every person residing in a specific country, town, state, or province." Within research methodology, the term "population" alludes to "each individual who meets the criteria set by the researcher for potential research participants" (Saumure and Given 2012: 644). The study's population constitutes the broader assembly of individuals from which your sample is drawn (York, 2020: 324). Vogt (2011: 239) further characterized a population as a "cluster of individuals, one aims to describe or from which generalizations are sought." Additionally, Palichev (2011: 853) defined a population as "the entirety of units of analysis, such as individuals, social groups, organizations, or social artifacts, from which a researcher draws conclusions." Moreover, the attributes of a population are regarded as parameters (Palichev 2011: 835). For the purposes of this study, the population refers to the total number mental health practitioners who are involved in equine-based therapy. The population consisted of approximately 40 participants. This takes into consideration that mental health practitioners who are using equine-based therapy are not widely known, and it is difficult to provide an exact estimate of practitioners nationally.

Hence, this information is not known to the researcher.

### **3.6. Sampling Strategy**

According to Unrau et al. (2007: 279), "a sample comprises elements or a subset of the population that is considered for actual inclusion in the study or it can be viewed as a subset of measurements that are drawn from a population in which we are interested." A sample can also be referred to as a target population (Vogt 2011: 239). In research, a sample consists of those persons from whom data is collected. The sample is selected from a designated study population (York, 2020:324). There are two major categories for sampling viz. probability and non-probability sampling (Strydom 2011: 222). The quantitative approach focuses on using probability techniques for sampling, whereas the qualitative approach focuses on the use of nonprobability sampling techniques (Strydom 2011: 222).

Due to this study being a qualitative inquiry, non-probability sampling has been selected as the sampling technique. It is important to note that non-probability sampling consists of 4 main techniques viz. convenience, quota, snowball, and purposive sampling (Strydom 2011: 231). However, for the purpose of this study, purposive sampling and snowball sampling were selected. Purposive sampling, also referred to as purposeful sampling, encompasses a set of sampling methods that are commonly employed in qualitative research. The fundamental concept underlying purposive sampling involves the deliberate selection of instances that hold significant information, aligning with the goal of addressing the research question (Schreier, 2018: 88). An instance of qualitative sampling technique is purposive non-probability sampling. Within this approach, researchers opt for participants whom they believe can offer the information they seek (Van Wyk, 2016; Whitehead and Whitehead 2020: 119). It is sometimes termed judgmental or authoritative sampling. The advantage of a non-probability purposive sampling technique lies in its ability to exclude participants who won't provide pertinent data, reduce research costs, and focus on participants deemed especially suitable for the research objectives (Whitehead and Whitehead 2020: 118; Chivanga 2021: 13).

The selection of purposive sampling for this study stems from the necessity for participants engaged in equine-based therapy, as this forms the central theme of the research. The researcher had to recruit mental health practitioners from other allied fields as there were a limited number of social workers known to be using equinebased therapy. Hence, the researcher started recruiting members from a national organisation called South African Equine Facilitated Intervention Association (SAEFIA). The members from the organisation were purposefully selected as the study called for mental health practitioners using equine-based therapy. A total number of nine participants were purposefully selected. However, data saturation was not reached, and more participants had to be recruited. In qualitative research, the criterion that is commonly employed to signal the conclusion of the sampling process is saturation. Saturation indicates the point at which further sampling no longer adds novel insights into the established concepts and their dimensions (Schwandt, 2001:111; Schreier, 2018: 90-91).

Hence, snowball sampling was also employed as a sampling strategy in the study. Snowball sampling is a form of convenience sampling. This approach is utilized when

it becomes challenging to reach individuals possessing the desired characteristics. Within this method, existing study participants enlist prospective participants from their circle of acquaintances. The sampling process continues until data saturation is achieved (Parker, Scott, and Geddes 2019: 3-4).

As indicated by TenHouten (2017: 58), this technique which is also known as the "chain method," is efficient and cost-effective in accessing individuals who might otherwise be elusive to locate. In this approach, the researcher queries the initial few samples. The initial few samples are often chosen through convenience sampling because of the current participants knowledge of anyone sharing similar perspectives or situations who could partake in the research. The snowball method not only requires minimal time but also facilitates enhanced communication between the researcher and the participants, given their acquaintance with the initial sample which serves as a connection point to the researcher (Woodly and Lockard 2016: 321). Snowball sampling was selected in conjunction with purposive sampling due to there being few practitioners available in the field of equine-based therapy. Hence, the participants that the researcher started recruiting from the organisation were requested to refer the researcher to other mental health practitioners who were practicing equine-based therapy. A further six participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Hence, a total sample consisted of fifteen participants. This included participants who were purposefully selected and those who were selected through snowball sampling. Out of the fifteen participants, only three were social workers that were recruited for the study as there were only a few known social work practitioners who were involved in equine-based therapy. Social work as a discipline is closely allied with other disciplines such as psychology and hence generalisations related to its benefits for mental health can be made. This is because equine-based therapy is still a growing field within social work. The Table (3.5.1) below includes the number of participants per province as well as the disciplines that each participant specialises in.

**Table 3.5.1. Table indicating number of participants per province and their disciplines/roles.**

<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>Participant discipline or role</b>	<b>Professional registration body</b>	<b>Province</b>
2	Social work	EAGALA (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association)	Western Cape
5	3 – Psychology 2 – Equine facilitated learning specialist	EAGALA	Gauteng
7	2 - Wellness coach 2 – Psychology 3 – equine facilitated learning specialist	EAGALA	KwaZulu-Natal
1	Social work	PATH International (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International)	Eastern Cape

### **3.7. Sampling Process**

#### **3.7.1. Inclusion criteria**

Inclusion criteria are specific characteristics that the person, population, or elements must possess to be eligible for a study topic. These are likely to range from quite broad requirements i.e., age and/or gender to more specific criteria i.e., have a specific disorder (Whitehead and Whitehead 2020: 121).

The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows:

- Mental health professionals who are practicing equine-based therapy.
- These included psychologists, social workers, equine facilitated learning specialists and wellness coaches.
- Voluntary participation.

### **3.7.2. Exclusion criteria**

Exclusion criteria are characteristics that have been identified as irrelevant to the study and which lead to the exclusion of a potential participant from the study. For example, a study with a focus on mothers' experiences of childbirth would necessitate the exclusion of fathers (Whitehead and Whitehead 2020: 121).

The exclusion criteria for this study were as follows:

- Mental health professionals who do not practice equine-based therapy.
- Horse professionals who are involved in equine-based therapy.

## **3.8. Data Collection Process**

### **3.8.1. Interviews**

Interviews stand as the primary avenue for gathering qualitative data (Majid, Othman, Mohamad, Lim, and Yusof 2017: 1073). Spoken narratives form the bedrock of qualitative data, which is often acquired through direct interactions between researchers and participants, whether in the form of in-depth interviews or in the form of focus group discussions (Roulston and Choi 2018: 236). Nowadays, interviews can be carried out through diverse mediums such as telephone, email, and emerging platforms like Microsoft Teams and Zoom (Hawkin 2018: 493; Oliffe et al. 2021: 1609).

According to Brooks, Horrocks, and King (2018: 15), a qualitative interview serves as a research method that is employed in qualitative studies to unearth profound insights, perspectives, and experiences from participants. It involves engaging in one-on-one or group dialogues between researchers and participants to navigate through specific topics, phenomena, or research inquiries. Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger (2020: 2) added that the goal of qualitative interviews is to plunge into participants' viewpoints, emotions, motivations, and personal interpretations, resulting in data that is both comprehensive and nuanced.

Hamilton and Finley (2019: 112516) said that qualitative research interviews can adopt different modes: unstructured, structured, or semi-structured approaches. Unstructured interviews lack preordained questions or predefined sets of potential responses. Siedlecki (2022: 78) added that these interviews encourage informality and conversation, fostering a natural mode of communication among participants.

Conversely, structured interviews adhere to a predetermined list of questions, that are delivered in a particular sequence. Semi-structured interviews utilize an interview guide with pre-planned questions to steer conversations (Adhabi E. and Anozzi 2017: 86).

Brinkmann and Kvale (2018: 1) characterizes a qualitative research interview as an effort to grasp the world through the lens of research subjects. The dialogues aim to unfold the significance of participants' experiences and reveal their lived realities (Sewell 2009: 55). In contrast to everyday exchanges that entail mutual sharing, professional interviews involve an interviewer who orchestrates and guides the process of questioning (Sewell 2009: 57). Brinkmann and Kvale (2018: 57) emphasizes that a qualitative interview is a conversation where a researcher raises questions while simultaneously listening to participants' responses.

Turner and Hagstrom-Schmidt (2022: 8) viewed qualitative interviews as conversations in which a researcher gently steers a conversational partner into a prolonged discussion. In this context, the researcher's position is evident as they shape the trajectory of the conversation. On a different note, Hamilton (2019: 112516) considered the interview, with its diverse attributes as the most adaptable research method. They asserted that interviews are a flexible and powerful approach that is applicable to a wide array of research projects. Given this adaptability, researchers must fully comprehend how and why interview techniques are pertinent to their specific study. For the purpose of this study, semi-structured interviews were selected.

### **3.8.2. Semi-structured interviews**

The semi-structured interview is an exploratory technique that is commonly employed in the realm of social sciences for qualitative research objectives or when gathering clinical data. A semi-structured interview generally adheres to a guide or protocol developed before the interview, focusing on a central theme to provide a foundation for the conversation. It allows room to follow conversational paths as they naturally unfold (Magaldi and Berler 2020: 4825).

Within semi-structured interviews, follow-up questions, also known as probes are shaped in response to the insights shared by interviewees. Researchers strategically

arrange questions to encourage organic discussions about research subjects that are steered by the participants' contributions. This qualitative interview style finds extensive use across disciplines as a primary research approach (Roulston and Choi 2018: 233). Semi-structured interviews are the favoured data collection method when the researcher's aim is to deeply comprehend the participant's distinct viewpoint, as opposed to seeking a generalized understanding of a phenomenon. A key advantage of the semi-structured interview lies in its ability to maintain focus while also granting the researcher the flexibility to explore relevant ideas that arise during the interview process (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik 2021: 1360).

Various modes of conducting semi-structured interviews exist such as in-person interactions, phone conversations, or video conferencing (Harrell and Bradley 2009: 6). Researchers must decide whether to audio-record the interviews, a practice often recommended to capture data effectively for subsequent analysis (DeJonckheere and Vaughn 2019: 4). Additionally, recording facilitates the interviewer's active engagement during the interviews, thus enabling the conversation to naturally flow (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik 2021: 1365).

Husband (2020: 206) noted that semi-structured interviews are characterized by open-ended questions and employ an interview guide that outlines broad areas of interest, occasionally including sub-questions. Low, Saks and Allsop (2019: 123) added that the topics predefined in the interview guide can be drawn from literature, prior research, or initial data collection methods like document analysis or observations. This topic list is typically adapted and refined at the beginning of the data collection process as the interviewer gains deeper insights into the field.

Semi-structured interviews are a versatile and widely used qualitative research method that offers several advantages for researchers seeking in-depth insights into participants' perspectives, experiences, and meanings (Ahlin 2019: 2). Semistructured interviews are well-suited for exploratory research where the researcher is interested in discovering new insights and generating hypotheses or theories. The open-ended nature of the interviews facilitates exploration. (Bearman 2019: 6) said that semi-structured interviews strike a balance between structured and unstructured formats. While they provide a set of predetermined questions, researchers have the flexibility to explore participants' responses in more depth and follow-up on interesting points

that arise during the conversation. This flexibility allows for a natural and dynamic exchange of information.

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews generate rich and detailed data. Participants can provide elaborated responses, anecdotes, and narratives, which can lead to a deeper understanding of their experiences, emotions, and motivations (Roulston and Choi 2018: 240). Semi-structured interviews also prioritise participants' viewpoints and experiences. Researchers can tailor questions to participants' unique perspectives and allow them to express themselves in their own words, contributing to more authentic and nuanced data (Petrescu, Lazar, Cioban and Doroftei 2017: 37). Moreover, researchers can explore the social, cultural, and contextual factors that influence participants' perspectives. This helps in capturing the complexity of participants' experiences within their specific settings. This type of interview often involves more open-ended and conversational interactions which can help build rapport between the researcher and the participant (Brown and Danaher 2019: 76). A comfortable environment encourages participants to share more openly. They also allow participants to take an active role in shaping the conversation. Participants feel empowered to share their thoughts and contribute to the research process, thus enhancing their sense of ownership (Magaldi and Berler 2020: 4825).

Goonewardene et al. (2018: 101) noted that the semi-structured format enables researchers to compare responses across participants, identifying patterns, similarities, and differences in their experiences. This can lead to insightful analyses and new understandings. Husband (2020: 206) said that for sensitive topics, semi structured interviews provide a gentle approach. Researchers can introduce challenging questions gradually, allowing participants to become comfortable before delving into more personal or sensitive aspects.

In essence, semi-structured interviews offer researchers the flexibility to engage participants in meaningful conversations while still maintaining some structure for data collection. This method encourages participants to share their unique perspectives, emotions, and experiences in their own words, providing valuable insights for qualitative research (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018: 98).

While semi-structured interviews offer many advantages, they also come with certain disadvantages that researchers should consider when using this qualitative research

method. Ruslin et al (2022: 22) said that conducting semi-structured interviews can be time-consuming, as researchers need to invest time in planning, conducting, transcribing, and analysing the interviews. This can be particularly challenging when dealing with many participants. Furthermore, Adhabi and Anozie (2017: 90) added that the richness of data obtained from semi-structured interviews can lead to complex and time-intensive data analysis. Transcribing, coding, and identifying themes from open-ended responses can be laborious.

Alamri (2019: 65) said that the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews can introduce subjectivity into the research process. Researchers' interpretations and biases may influence question phrasing, probing, and analysis. While semi-structured interviews aim to create a comfortable environment, some participants might still feel uncomfortable discussing personal or sensitive topics, potentially affecting the quality and depth of their responses. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019: 74) asserted that the depth of insights gained from semi-structured interviews might limit the generalizability of findings to broader populations. Findings may be specific to the context and participants of the study. As participants share personal stories and experiences, researchers must navigate ethical considerations which are related to confidentiality, informed consent, and potential emotional distress. Lancaster (2017: 93) noted that the open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews can lead to unexpected tangents or diversions from the research focus, making it challenging to maintain control over the interview process.

In summary, while semi-structured interviews offer rich and in-depth data, researchers must carefully consider the potential disadvantages, including data analysis complexity, subjectivity, participant comfort, and challenges in generalization. Balancing the benefits and drawbacks is crucial in determining whether semistructured interviews are the appropriate method for a given research project (Siedlecki 2022: 80).

### **3.9. Data collection tool used.**

The research used an interview guide to conduct the interviews. The interview guide (refer to Appendix C) was used to collect data for the sample. As opposed to unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews often entail having an interview guide with questions aimed at addressing the research objective. The guide is not

meant to be read verbatim, and in the same order as each interview. Rather, it is meant to provide structure and focus to the natural flow of conversation for each unique interview. A semi-structured interview guide often includes main open-ended questions with follow-up probe questions for the interviewer to refer to throughout the interview. This contrasts with closed-ended (e.g., yes/no, multiple choice) questions that are typically found on a survey instrument used in quantitative analysis (AdeoyeOlatunde and Olenik 2021: 1362).

The interview guide is necessary for conducting interviews as it gives the interview process direction. It is therefore important to draw up an interview guide before conducting interviews (Kennedy 2006: 1). An interview guide is commonly used as a data collection tool as it creates a platform for the researcher to ask follow-up questions, elaborate on the original set of questions and it promotes probing (Morgan and Guevara 2008: 470). In addition to providing a basic framework for the interview, the interview guide allows the researcher freedom and flexibility to ask questions (Morgan and Guevara 2008: 470).

An interview guide is related to the research questions that guide the study; however, the researcher must acknowledge that the interview questions are not the same as the research questions (Kennedy 2006: 1; Mason 2011: 518). It focuses on aspects that need to be covered in a semi structured interview, to produce an effective interview (Mason 2011: 518). Question one in the interview guide allowed participants to share their understanding and thoughts of what equine-based therapy is viz. definitional and conceptual issues. To gather more detailed information about the researcher's experiences and knowledge obtained while working with horses as a tool for healing, subsequent questions were posed and probed. This was required to fulfil the other objectives of the study.

The interview guide, no matter how extensive its preparation, should still be considered a work in progress. Due to this reason, it will be subject to change in the field as feedback accumulates (Galletta 2013: 75). Perhaps the sequence of questions will have to be re-thought, the way certain issues are posed will have to be re-cast, and some unanticipated issues will emerge that seem sufficiently important that they should be added to all subsequent interviews. Agile researchers will exploit these new insights to rapidly refine the interview guide and will have planned for this possibility at three stages i.e., after the first interview, after the first round of interviews, and

periodically thereafter. After the first interview, re-assess everything. What works well, and what needs to be modified? Some questions and topics may need to be added or subtracted, expanded, or condensed, re-cast or re-ordered.

Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2022: 111) expounded that an interview guide is a valuable tool in qualitative research that balances structure and flexibility. It guides researchers and interviewers in conducting meaningful and insightful interviews while allowing participants to share their unique perspectives and experiences in a conversational manner. Moser and Korstjens (2018:9) said that while interview guides are valuable tools in qualitative research, they also have certain disadvantages that researchers should be aware of. Interview guides, even though semi-structured, still provide a level of structure that might limit the flexibility of the interview. Researchers may miss out on unexpected insights or overlook important avenues of exploration due to the pre-determined nature of the questions. Achieving consistent standardization across interviews can also be challenging. Different interviewers might ask questions slightly differently or emphasize different aspects, potentially affecting the reliability of data collection.

### **3.10. Procedure for data collection**

In this study, participants were selected prior to data collection, because permission was obtained from them before data collection began. Moreover, permission had to be sought from the Durban University of Technology Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) to conduct interviews with the participants, and the ethics number IREC 065/20 was assigned. The researcher started the interview process with the members of the South African Equine Facilitated Intervention Association. These participants were purposefully selected as they were mental health practitioners who were directly involved in the facilitation of equine-based therapy.

The participants were informed of this study by the secretary of the association, with whom the research liaised with regularly via email and WhatsApp. The secretary assisted in setting up the interviews with each participant from the association. The interviews were conducted in October 2020 with participants at each of their respective farms and offices. The research visits were undertaken in Eastern Cape, Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Gauteng.

Once the necessary arrangements were made, data collection proceeded. Before each interview, a letter of information (refer to appendix A) and informed consent (refer to Appendix B) was given to each participant. Participation was voluntary. All interviews were recorded, with permission from the participants. An interview guide (refer to Appendix C) was used to guide the interviews. A total of nine interviews were conducted in this initial round of interviews. However, after the interview, recordings and transcripts were reviewed, a second round of interviews had to be conducted as the data had gaps and data did not reach saturation.

Hence, the recruitment of participants was expanded through snowball sampling. The participants from the initial round of interviews referred the researcher to other participants. A further six participants were recruited. These participants were based in Gauteng, Western Cape, and Kwa-Zulu Natal. The participants were contacted via email from the details provided by other participants. Arrangements were made to collect data during the period October 2022 to December 2022. The interviews were conducted at their respective farms and offices.

Once the necessary arrangements were made, data collected proceeded. Before each interview, a letter of information (refer to appendix A) and informed consent (refer to appendix B) was given to each participant. Participation was voluntary. All interviews were recorded, with permission from the participants. An interview guide (refer to Appendix C) was used to guide the interviews. The data was reviewed again for gaps, data reached saturation. Data saturation is a concept used in qualitative research to determine when enough data has been collected to thoroughly understand and explore a particular phenomenon or topic. The researcher collected sufficient data to thoroughly explore the research question and reach a deep understanding of the phenomenon.

### **3.10.1. The interview setting**

In qualitative research, an appropriate interview setting is essential for data collection. The participants involved in the research study must feel a sense of comfort and security (Edward and Holland 2013: 43-52). For this reason, the offices or the paddock area of the mental health practitioners was adopted as the venue for conducting interviews. In this setting, the participants were comfortable, as their place of work was

a familiar environment for them. Presenting the participants with an environment familiar to them decreased feelings of intimidation and hostility. This enabled participants to express their views clearly and comfortably during the interview which resulted in the data elicited being rich and in-depth in nature. The interviews were conducted during the period of October 2020, and then again between October 2022 and December 2022. The dates for data collection were arranged through consistent liaison between the researcher and the participants. The dates and times had to be negotiated as they had to suit the availability of all participants.”

### **3.10.2. The interview process**

The interview process was considered when conducting interviews for the sample. The process of interviewing requires that various steps and procedures be undertaken before the actual conversation between the researcher and participants can take place. Before an interview can be conducted, proper protocols must be followed to enable the interview process to occur (Brinkmann 2008: 471-472). Firstly, the researcher had to liaise with the participants to get permission to be involved in the study. The researcher had to explain the purpose of the study and what was required of the participants.

Once the formalities were completed, the dates and venue were then discussed for data collection. Upon agreement of the dates and venue, the actual interviews were conducted. A specific set of participants were required for the study. In the initial stage of the interview, the researcher had sent a letter of information (refer to Appendix A) and a letter of informed consent (refer to Appendix B) to each participant. Only once the participants understood the purpose of the study and voluntarily signed the consent form did the researcher commence with the interview questions. Each interview proceeded for a duration of approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview data was captured on a tape recorder. However, before using the recorder the researcher had obtained permission from the participants to be involved in the research study.

### **3.11. Data capturing and analysis**

#### **3.11.1. Data capturing**

Data was captured using a tape recorder for the interviews. Consent was sought from the participants to record the sessions before the sessions began. Once the data was recorded, the audiotapes were labelled so that the data was in order and was easily accessible (Schurink, Fouche<sup>o</sup> and De Vos 2011: 404). The recordings were clearly labelled with a non-personalized identifier as soon as possible after the recording had been made (Bloor and Wood 2006: 16). The recordings were then stored in a secure file and in a secure and safe location as the data was confidential. The interview data was transcribed word-for-word as accurately as possible by the researcher. This was done by the researcher with rigour to ensure that the exact wording of the participant was captured. Although this process was time consuming, it ensured accuracy in reflecting the interview data. After transcribing the data from the interviews, the recordings were listened to again and the written transcripts read simultaneously. This process enabled the researcher to become familiar with the data and to get a sense of the interview and focus group data.

#### **3.11.2. Data analysis**

Data analysis refers to data that is classified in a meaningful manner. Researchers transform voluminous data into comprehensible and insightful analysis through analytic processes. This is a fundamental requirement for a qualitative inquiry (Liamputtong 2009: 161). Mihas (2019: 23) added that qualitative data analysis possesses several distinct characteristics that sets it apart from quantitative data analysis. These characteristics reflect the nature of the data and the methodologies that are used in qualitative research. Qualitative data analysis deals with non-numeric data, such as text, images, audio recordings, and video. It focuses on the meaning, context, and richness of the data, rather than quantifying it (Saldana 2020: 50).

Moreover, Akinyode and Khan (2018: 163) stated that it is subjective and interpretive. Researchers actively engage with the data to uncover patterns, themes, and insights. Multiple interpretations are possible and researchers' perspectives can influence the analysis.

According to Akinyode and Khan (2018: 163), qualitative analysis is suited for the indepth exploration of a research topic. It allows researchers to dig deep into the data to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Lester, Cho and Lochmiller (2020: 95) said that it also emphasizes understanding data within its context. Researchers consider the social, cultural, historical, and environmental factors that shape the data. Qualitative analysis often takes an inductive approach, meaning that researchers don't start with predefined hypotheses or categories. Instead, they allow themes and categories to emerge from the data itself. It is flexible and adaptive (Kalpokaite and Radivojevic 2019: 45). Researchers can adjust their approach as they gain a deeper understanding of the data. This adaptability is crucial for exploring complex and evolving topics (Mihas 2019: 30)).

According to Elliot (2018: 2855), qualitative analysis involves data reduction, where the large volumes of qualitative data are condensed into manageable themes, categories, and patterns. This process makes the data more understandable and accessible. Elliot (2018: 2850) added that coding is a fundamental component of qualitative data analysis. Researchers systematically label and categorize segments of data to identify recurring themes and concepts. According to Archer (2018: 1), it is also an iterative process. Researchers continually revisit and refine their analysis as they collect more data, seek input from peers, and gain deeper insights. Qualitative research seeks to provide context for findings, explaining not only what was discovered but also why and how it is relevant to the research question (Lester, Cho and Lochmiller 2020: 97). Qualitative studies may involve emergent design, where the research process evolves based on the emerging findings rather than following a fixed plan from the outset (Mezmir 2020: 15).

Creswell (1998: 143) further described the inductive analysis of qualitative data as a "data analysis spiral". A case study with inductive reasoning supports the premise of this study, which was aimed at understanding equine-based therapy through interview questions provided by the researcher. Butin (2010: 53) noted that questions must be intertwined with the research purpose. Butin (2012: 77) also advised that in linking research purpose to research method, the practitioner must realize that all are integrally connected, and this includes the type of data. In an instrumental case study, all types of qualitative questions are used to obtain data to analyse. This study explored the views and understanding of equine-based therapy from different mental health practitioners such as psychologists, social workers, wellness coaches and

equine facilitated learning practitioners in order to gain an understanding of equine-based therapy and its potential as a healing tool in social work practice.

Qualitative data analysis has various approaches that can be used for analysing data viz. narrative analysis, semiotic analysis, discourse analysis, and thematic analysis (Liamputtong 2009). For the purpose of this study, a thematic analysis approach has been adopted.

According to Braun and Clarke (2019: 590), thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It is described as a descriptive method that reduces the data in a flexible way that dovetails with other data analysis methods. Moreover, Braun and Clarke (2021: 328) emphasised that it is used commonly because of the wide variety of research questions and topics that can be addressed with this method of data analysis. Thematic analysis of open-ended responses from surveys or transcribed interviews can explore the context of teaching and learning at a level of depth that quantitative analysis lacks, while allowing flexibility and interpretation when analysing the data (Keiger and Varpio 2020: 850), but it should be undertaken with special care and attention to transparency of the method to ensure confidence in the findings (Castleberry and Nolen 2018: 807).

The following phases were used to analyse the data:

### **Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with the data.**

Common to all forms of qualitative analysis, this phase involves *immersing* oneself in the data by reading and re-reading textual data (e.g., transcripts of interviews, responses to qualitative surveys), and listening to audio-recordings or watching video data. The researcher listened to the recordings, as well as read the transcripts numerous times. Making notes on the data as the researcher read or listened is part of this phase. Reading data means not simply absorbing the surface meaning of the words on the page, the researcher read the words actively, analytically, and critically.

## **Phase 2: Generating initial codes.**

Christou (2023: 1) noted that phase 2 begins the systematic analysis of the data through coding. Codes are the building blocks of analysis. Codes identify and provide a label for a feature of the data that is potentially relevant to the research question. Coding can be done at the semantic or the latent level of meaning. A code can summarize a portion of data or describe its content, such as descriptive or semantic codes, which tend to stay very close to the content of the data.

## **Phase 3: Searching for themes.**

In this phase, the analysis started to take shape, and the codes are shifted to themes. A theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set” (Braun and Clarke 2019: 589). Searching for themes is an active process, meaning they are generated or constructed themes rather than being discovered.

This phase involves reviewing the coded data to identify areas of similarity and overlap between codes: identify any broad topics or issues around which codes cluster (Kieger and Varpio 2020: 846). The basic process of generating themes and sub-themes, which are the subcomponents of a theme, involves collapsing or clustering codes that share some unifying feature together so that they reflect and describe a coherent and meaningful pattern in the data (Christou (2023: 6).

## **Phase 4: Reviewing potential themes.**

This phase involves a recursive process whereby the developing themes are reviewed in relation to the coded data and entire dataset. The first step is to check the themes against the collated extracts of data and explore whether the theme ‘works’ in relation to the data. Some themes needed to be discarded or relocated under another theme.

Once there was a distinctive and coherent set of themes that work in relation to the coded data extracts, then the researcher reviewed the themes in relation to the entire dataset. This involved one final re-read of all the data to determine whether the themes meaningfully capture the entire dataset.

### **Phase 5: Defining and naming themes.**

This involves developing a detailed analysis of each theme, working out the scope and focus of each theme and determining the story of each. It also involves deciding on an informative name for each theme. The researcher further analysed each theme and refined them. Each theme was then labelled accordingly.

### **Phase 6 - The write up.**

Writing up involves weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts and contextualising the analysis in relation to existing literature. Using actual quotations from participants, the researcher described how the themes and sub-themes were interrelated.

### **3.12. Rigour in qualitative research**

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is a means for reassuring the reader that a study was of significance and value. A research study's quality is usually judged after it has been completed (Birks, 2017: 221).

The term trustworthiness refers to an overarching concept used in qualitative research to convey the procedures researchers employ to ensure the quality, rigour, and credibility of a study while (re)establishing congruence of the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the researcher with the design, implementation, and articulations of a research study. Hence, trustworthiness is both an aim and a practice (Morgan and Ravitch 2018: 1729).

Early efforts to create standards for judging non-quantitative and emergent-paradigm inquiries elicited the trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria deemed “trustworthiness criteria” indicate increased confidence in the rigorousness of findings and are used in tandem to the four criteria of conventional research (Lewis-Beck, Bryman and Futing-Liao, 2011: 1145).

According to both Cope (2014: 89- 90) and Lincoln and Guba (1994: 105).

Rigour in qualitative research must involve the following criteria:

### **3.12.1. Credibility**

Credibility pertains to the plausibility of an account, such as a case study. Questions include: Is it plausible? Can those who have lived the experience find the report to be a faithful representation? Guba and Lincoln (1989: 245) contended that the credibility of a study is affirmed when co-researchers or readers encounter the experience and find it recognizable. Credibility focuses on the alignment between respondents' perspectives and how the researcher portrays them (Tobin and Begley 2004: 388).

To enhance credibility, Lincoln and Guba (1985: 330) proposed several strategies, including sustained engagement, persistent observation, employing data collection from multiple angles, and involving multiple researchers for cross-validation. They also recommended peer debriefing to introduce an external review of the research process, thereby bolstering credibility. Additionally, examining referential adequacy can serve as a mechanism to cross-check initial findings and interpretations against the raw data.

The researcher ensured credibility throughout the research process by maintaining an audit trail, so the researcher kept a detailed record of the research process, including decisions, data collection procedures, coding, and analysis steps. This will allow other researchers to follow the thought process and decisions. The researcher also used member checking, preliminary findings or interpretations were shared with participants and feedback was given. This process allows participants to validate the accuracy and resonance of the interpretations.

### **3.12.2. Transferability**

Transferability relates to the applicability of the research findings to different contexts. In the context of qualitative research, this specifically pertains to the ability to transfer insights from one case to another (Tobin and Begley 2004: 388). Although the researcher cannot predict the specific settings where the findings might be applied, they are responsible for offering comprehensive descriptions. These detailed descriptions allow those seeking to apply the findings in their own contexts to assess the potential transferability (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 330). Transferability signifies the extent to which the findings can be relevantly utilized or applied in a setting akin to the

original case's environment. The researcher maintained transferability by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and the phenomena under investigation. This enables readers to understand the context and determine whether the findings can be relevant to their own context. The researcher also compared the findings with existing literature and studies conducted in different contexts. This provided insights into the potential transferability of the findings.

### **3.12.3. Dependability**

Dependability pertains to the consistency, traceability, and coherence of the employed research approach. It is evaluated through a process audit that scrutinizes the methodological choices made and validates their appropriateness. To establish dependability, researchers can ensure that their research process is coherent, traceable, and meticulously documented (Tobin and Begley 2004: 388). By enabling readers to assess the research process, its dependability becomes more discernible (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 330). One way a research study can exhibit dependability is by subjecting its process to an audit (Koch 1994: 976). The researcher ensured dependability by keeping a detailed record of how the data was collected, how themes and categories were derived and how decisions were made (as presented in this chapter) so that other researchers would be able to follow similar methods to produce similar results. The researcher also ensured dependability through data saturation. Data collection continued until data saturation is achieved, meaning that no new themes or insights emerged from the data. This ensured that the findings are stable and comprehensive.

### **3.12.4. Confirmability**

Confirmability concerns the establishment of a clear link between the researcher's interpretations and findings and the data itself, necessitating the demonstration of the path leading to conclusions and interpretations (Tobin and Begley 2004: 389). As per Guba and Lincoln (1989: 245), confirmability is achieved when credibility, transferability, and dependability are concurrently attained. Koch (1994: 976) recommended that researchers incorporate markers within their study, delineating the

rationale behind theoretical, methodological, and analytical decisions. This approach enables others to comprehend the reasoning behind these choices. Confirmability ensures that the data presented in the case study can be traced back to the original data sources, such as fieldnotes, documents, records, and observation logs. Confirmability was maintained by using participants' own words (verbatim quotes) to illustrate themes and interpretations. This not only adds authenticity, but also enables readers to judge the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations. The researcher also appointed a validation committee, the findings and interpretations were shared with other experts in the field and their input was sought to ensure that the conclusions were aligned to the data.

### **3.12.5. Validation Committee**

According to Sandelowski (1998: 467), an expert validation committee in research is typically a group of subject-matter experts or specialists who are invited to review and validate the research methods, findings, and conclusions of a study. The primary purpose of forming an expert validation committee is to ensure the credibility, reliability, and validity of the research. The members of the Care generally experts in the field relevant to the research (Akins, Tolson, and Cole 2005: 8). They possess indepth knowledge and experience in the subject matter, and their expertise complement the research being conducted. It's essential that the committee are experts who are impartial and not directly affiliated with the research project. This helps maintain objectivity and avoids potential conflicts of interest (Sangoseni, Hellman and Hill 2013: 7). The specific roles and responsibilities of the expert validation committee need to be defined. These may include reviewing research proposals, providing feedback on research design and methodology, evaluating data analysis, and assessing the validity of research findings (Leite et al. 2018: 1640). In this study, the committee evaluated the data analysis and research findings. The expert validation committee provides constructive feedback and recommendations to improve the research. This feedback can help researchers refine their methods and enhance the quality of their work.

The researcher conducted two expert validation committee meetings. The first one was conducted with mental health practitioners from psychology, social work and child and youth care disciplines. This consisted of five participants. The second committee was conducted with mental health professionals (i.e., psychologist and equine-

facilitated learning specialist) using equine-based therapy. This consisted of three participants. The Table (3.11.5.1) below presents the number of participants and the disciplines that they were from.

Table 3.5.2. Table presenting number of participants per validation committee and their disciplines/roles.

<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Expert validation committee</b>
5	1 – psychologist 1 – social worker 3 – child and youth care practitioner	Round 1 – only mental health practitioners.
3	2 – psychologist 1 – equine facilitated learning specialist	Round 2 – mental health practitioners using equine-based therapy

The expert validation committee was arranged online via a Microsoft Teams meeting. The sessions lasted between 60-90 minutes. The researcher presented the major themes and an analysis thereof from the research study was conducted. The themes included the understanding of equine-based therapy and the processes involved. The committee was provided with the major research findings, and conclusions drawn from a study. The objectives and research questions that guided the study were also presented to the committee to provide context for the findings. The committee was given the opportunity to ask questions, seek clarifications, and provide feedback on the research and its findings. This interaction allowed for a thorough review and validation of the research.

The participants from the committee provided the following feedback:

- The researcher should be clear on who the participants are in the study, as equine-based therapy has broad spectrums and various approaches that involve different practitioners who are not limited to mental health practitioners.
- The researcher should be clear on which approach of equine-based therapy the study is focused on, as there are various approaches which are not limited to mental health.

- How the researcher described equine-based therapy changes according to the approach, the therapeutic process, particularly, with the differentiation between equine assisted psychotherapy and equine facilitated psychotherapy.
- To determine if the findings make sense, based on the conclusions that are drawn by the researcher, based on what was presented, it really it is very understandable.
- It is very much equine assisted psychotherapy work and it's also very different and if it's approached from the social work side or from the orientation in psychotherapy it would inform a lot of how the findings are presented.

According to Sandelowski (1998: 468), any records of the committees' feedback must be stored. This documentation can be valuable for transparency and accountability. The researcher stored a recording and notes of the feedback and recommendations of the committee. The purpose of presenting research findings to an expert validation committee is to ensure that the research is rigorously reviewed, validated, and critiqued by knowledgeable experts in the field. This process helps to ensure the credibility and reliability of the research and its potential contributions to the relevant field of study. It helps to ensure that the research meets the highest standards of quality in the field and contributes to the advancement of knowledge.

### **3.13. Ethical Considerations**

When conducting the study, the researcher has ethical obligations which he/she needs to adhere to. Ethics are preferences which influence behaviour in terms of human relations i.e., the researcher would have to conform to a code of principles or professional standards of conduct (Strydom 2011: 114). The ethical principles that were considered in this study are discussed in the following sections. They were elucidated by Strydom (2011:115-122), as follows:

#### **3.13.1. Informed consent**

Informed consent entails informing the research participants about the overall purpose of the investigation, and the key features of the design as well as any possible risks and benefits from participation in the research project. Informed consent further

involves obtaining the voluntary participation of the people involved, and to inform them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Through briefing and debriefing, the participants should be informed about the purpose and the procedure of the research project. This should include information about confidentiality, and who will have access to the interview or other material, the researcher's right to publish the whole interview or parts of it, and the participant's possible access to the transcription and analysis of the qualitative data.

When it comes to later use of the research material, it may be preferable to have a written agreement signed by both researcher and participant, thereby obtaining the informed consent of an interviewee to participate in the study and allow future use of the material (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2017: 233, Roulston and Choi, 2018: 239).

For the purpose of this study the researcher ensured that these aspects were communicated to the participants by email prior to the interview, while setting up the appointments, and again face-to-face before the interviews commenced. The participants were provided with a summary of the research proposal, which included the Institutional Research Ethics Approval (refer to Appendix F). Furthermore, the participants signed consent forms showing that they understood the nature of the research and stating that they agreed to participate voluntarily (refer to Appendix A and B).

### **3.13.2. Confidentiality**

Confidentiality in research implies that personal data which identifies the participants will not be reported. If a study will publish information potentially recognizable to others, the participants often need to agree to the release of identifiable information. The principle of the research participants' right to privacy is not without ethical and scientific dilemmas (Brinkmann and Kvale 2017: 233). Personal data must remain unknown to all but the research team (unless the participant agrees otherwise or in cases where there is an overriding of public interest, or where participants wish that their voices to be heard and identified) (Carpenter 2019: 39).

For the purpose of this research study, the researcher did not record the participants' names on the audio recordings or on the transcriptions. The researcher made use of

codes for each participant, and the codes were used during the data analysis, particularly, for the presentation of narratives. The researcher ensured that the information was kept confidential by briefing the participants about the confidentiality procedures and the participants signed a consent form showing that they agreed to the confidentiality agreements and procedures.

### **3.13.3. Beneficence**

The consequences of a qualitative study need to be addressed with respect to possible harm to the participants as well as to the expected benefits of participating in the study. The ethical principle of beneficence means that the risk of harm to a participant should be as least as possible (Guidelines 1992: 15). From a utilitarian ethical perspective, the sum of potential benefits to a participant and the importance of the knowledge gained should outweigh the risk of harm to the participant, and thus warrant a decision to carry out the study. This involves a researcher's responsibility to reflect on the possible consequences not only for the persons taking part in the study, but also for the larger group that they represent (Brinkmann and Kvale 2017: 234). The research must be worthwhile and have beneficial effects that outweigh any risks; it follows that the methodology must be sound so that best results will be yielded (Carpenter 2019: 39).

### **3.13.4. Autonomy**

The participant is usually aware of what the research entails and be free to take part in it without coercion or penalty for lack of participation and should be free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without a threat of any adverse effect (Carpenter 2019: 39). The researcher-maintained autonomy throughout by providing the participants with a letter of information and consent. The participants were notified that their participation was voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study at any time.

### **3.13.5. Integrity**

The researcher must be open about any actual or potential conflicts of interest and conduct their research in a way that meets the recognized standards of research integrity (Carpenter 2019: 39).

### **3.13.6. Deception**

Deception involves withholding or giving participants misleading information about the investigation to force participation. This must be avoided; it is necessary to be honest and give the participants complete and accurate information regarding the investigation. All information pertaining to the study and interview process was available to the participants. There was no information withheld from any participants involved in the study.

## **3.14. Limitations**

### **3.14.1. The use of a case study approach**

One of the primary limitations of instrumental case studies is their limited generalizability. Since these studies often focus on a case or a small number of cases chosen for their relevance to a specific research question, it can be challenging to generalize the findings to a broader population or context. The results may not be representative of other cases or situations. The current study has focused on a small group of mental health practitioners who are using equine-based therapy, making it difficult to generalise the findings. Moreover, the researcher had difficulty in accessing mental health practitioners who use equine-based therapy as there are few known in the field.

### **3.14.2. Small sample size**

The reasonably small sample size could be considered as a potential limitation of the study. Only 20 participants participated in the research. However, the small sample size did not affect the findings of the study. Since the research assumed a qualitative and not a quantitative approach, the sample size was sufficient for generalisations to be made from the findings. The purpose of qualitative research is not to mainly

generalise findings, however, but rather to explore meaning and descriptions of the chosen topic (Mason 2010: 14). Research by Mason (2010: 14) further showed that a sample size of between fifteen and thirty-five for a qualitative study is usually appropriate and sufficient to meet the needs of the study. Thus, whilst the findings can be generalised, as described in the motivation for the case study, they also provide a rich description of the role of equine-based therapy in social work and meet the criteria for a qualitative study. Furthermore, as previously indicated, the research reached a point of saturation, meaning that no more new information came to light towards the end of the data collection phase (Creswell 2014: 78). Considering these factors, the sample size was suitable for gathering the desired information for the purpose of the research.

#### **3.14.4. Lack of mental health professionals practicing equine-based therapy**

There are few known mental health professionals who are practicing equine-based therapy; hence it was difficult to locate participants for the study. Moreover, since there are few mental health professionals who are practising equine-based therapy, most participants were reluctant to share too much information on their practice due to their own development of upcoming models and programmes.

### **3.15. Conclusion**

The research methodology provides insight into how the researcher engaged in the research process, what decisions were made, as well as what factors influenced the research process. These are important, as they indicate the validity and reliability of the research and prove that the researcher followed scientifically sound methods and made decisions that were in the best interests of achieving the research goals whilst acting in a professional and ethical manner. This chapter provided an overview of the research methodology used to guide the study. It outlined each aspect of the research design and its rationale for being used. The following chapter focuses on the research findings from the analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of the data, as well as its systematic presentation.

## CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### 4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher presents data gathered from semi-structured interviews conducted with mental health professionals as part of this study. The findings are also discussed. The main purpose of this study was to explore the potential of equine-based therapy as a therapeutic modality in social work practice. The study was conducted with mental health professionals who were involved in equine-based therapy in South Africa. This study sought to explore the principles that guided equine-based therapy, the process underpinning this type of therapy, the emotional or social problems suited to equine-based therapy, the experiences of mental health professionals, as well as how social work practice is enhanced through equine-based therapy. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. The data collected were analysed through a process of thematic analysis. The data in this chapter is presented according to themes and sub-themes that later emerged following the analysis. The themes from the study served to capture the essence of experiences of mental health professionals. Rich, descriptive data was obtained through their experiences of equine-based therapy.

### 4.2. Demographic profiles

The demographic profiles of the participants are presented in Table 4.2.1. below.

Table 4.2.1. Demographic profiles of participants

<b>PARTICIPANT</b>	<b>NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS</b>	<b>PROVINCE</b>
Psychologists	5	Gauteng KwaZulu-Natal
Social Workers	3	Gauteng KwaZulu-Natal Eastern Cape
Equine facilitated learning facilitators	4	KwaZulu-Natal Gauteng

Wellness coaches	3	KwaZulu-Natal Gauteng
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### 4.3. Data analysis and findings

The following section presents the findings. The data has been grouped into ten main themes and twenty-two sub-themes which were identified according to the responses of the participants. These are presented in the Table below.

Table 4.3.1. Table presenting themes and sub-themes.

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Understanding equine based therapy.	
2. Value of the horse in therapy.	
3. Values and principles guiding equine-based therapy.	3.1. Values guiding equine based therapy. 3.2. Principles guiding equine based therapy.
4. Clients who are suitable for equine-based therapy.	4.1. All clients 4.2. Children 4.3. Mental health issues 4.4. Individuals and groups
5. Process underpinning equine based therapy.	5.1. Approaches applied in equine-based therapy. 5.2. The partners that form the equine-based therapy team – Equine-based therapy as collaborative work 5.3. Setting for the therapeutic session 5.4. Procedures for engagement between the mental health practitioner, client, and horse 5.5. Check-in session between the horse and mental health practitioner before the therapeutic session 5.6. Orientation of clients into equine-based therapy session

	5.7. Timing of sessions
6. Facilitation of equine-based therapy as a therapeutic session.	
7. Techniques used in equine based therapy	7.1. Counselling interventions 7.2. Spiritually based interventions 7.3. Play therapy. 7.4. Story boards as an intervention
8. The benefits of engaging in equine-based therapy	
9. Stories of healing	9.1. Clients' stories of healing from the perspective of the practitioners 9.2. Practitioners' self-care and healing
10. Social work	10.1. Horses at the interface of social work 10.2. The value of equine-based therapy in social work 10.3. Education and training
11. Challenges associated with implementing equine-therapy	

## **THEMES AND SUB-THEMES Theme 1: Understanding equine-based therapy**

The first theme that emerged from the data was understanding equine-based therapy.

The participants introduced the horse as central to the therapeutic process. They said as follows:

*"It would probably be any kind of therapy where horses are central, any kind of intervention with specific goals in mind with horses being central."* (P1)

*"I would define equine-based therapy as an immersive experience. Facilitated or guided by an equine, there are obviously different kinds of therapies, so there are emotional types of therapies, and there's physical therapy. I think the immersive experience is applicable to both."* (P4)

*“Horses are seen as very much part of facilitators in the process where they bring their own wisdom, their own gifts to the therapy process. So equine-based therapy would be for me therapy, which involves horses or therapy that is taking place in the field with horses, and they're choosing to interact or not. So equine-based therapy would be where the equines are a primary focus within the therapeutic process.” (P8)*

*“I'd say the horse is the magic partner in this equation and that the horse is a creature that just changes the dynamic. It changes absolutely everything, so the horse is actually the facilitator, the mental health practitioner at the centre of everything. And I think we are the human partners, we can just kind of help that along in a way. So, for me it is that the horse is the mental health practitioner.” (P9)*

*“I can just say that the therapy that I was involved with was more the psychotherapy and equine intervention. I can describe it as the horses bring excitement and wisdom, the horses somehow bring a different dimension to the session that the human doesn't.” (P2)*

*“Equine facilitated work develops the relationship with the horses and through the relationship with the horse change takes place, so the horse is a constant partner in every part of the process, including the so-called processing at the end of the session. I'm in the horse's space and they share that space with me, and we bring a client into that space and in bringing the client into that space and developing the therapeutic relationship. That's where the growth and the transformation happen.” (P7)*

As evidenced from the data, equine-based therapy involves the horse as a core partner in the therapeutic process, because it can provide a unique and meaningful connection with clients. The therapeutic process can focus on both psychotherapy for clients facing emotional and mental challenges as well as therapy for clients who are facing physical challenges, as explained by the participants. The role of the horse in the therapeutic process is to guide or facilitate the session by displaying particular behavioural patterns. This is the unique element that the horse brings to the session because the horse can sense the client's deep emotional state and reflect those emotions through its behaviour. This feedback from the horse is then translated into a story by the client with the assistance of the mental health practitioner. Similar descriptions are found in the literature which capture the horse as being pivotal to the therapeutic process. According to Frederick (2018: 43) the horse is an important part of the therapeutic process, as it provides a unique form of feedback and emotional

connection. Hallberg (2017: 8) further wrote that the mental health practitioner will help the client to interpret the horse's behaviour and responses, thereby encouraging the client to reflect on their own emotions and thought patterns. This reflective process can help the client to gain insight into their own emotional state and develop coping skills for managing stress, anxiety, and other mental health conditions (Bachi et al. 2011: 301; Wood et al., 2021: 88).

Participants also introduced the mental health practitioner as a facilitator in equinebased therapy. In describing equine-based therapy they said:

*“So equine-based therapy is a therapy with horses and humans, human facilitators, because obviously there's generally a mental health practitioner. There's a mental health professional with a qualification and experience. And then there is the equine who facilitates the work and so I think it's right to say equine-based because without the equines there is no work.”* (P5)

As evidenced from the response, the therapeutic process is incomplete without the presence of a mental health practitioner, who possesses a qualification in both equine-based therapy and counselling. The mental health practitioner serves as the link between the client and the horse as they facilitate their interaction through guided activities. They also create a safe and supportive environment for the client to express themselves and process their emotions. Priory (2022: 16) added that equine-based therapy typically involves a licensed mental health practitioner who works with the client and one or more horses. Stewart et al. (2016: 300) and Bennet (2019: 78) further wrote that the mental health practitioner will design activities that are tailored to the client's specific needs and goals for therapy.

Other participants noted that equine-based therapy is focused on relational elements and communication. They said as follows:

*“It's so multifaceted. It comes down to relationship. It comes down to communication and I think those are the two fundamental aspects of equine-based therapy. It's about developing a relationship and it's about finding ways to communicate.”* (P3)

As described in the data, equine-based therapy is relational and focused on communication, both with the horses and between the client and the mental health practitioner. The presence of the horse in therapy sessions creates a unique

environment that encourages interpersonal connections that are based on trust and communication. The presence of the horse also facilitates a deeper connection with oneself, and the therapeutic guidance of a mental health practitioner ensures a supportive environment for exploration and healing. There are similar descriptions within the literature. Routley (2020: 27) said that equine-based therapy is a relational process of co-created learning between humans and horses. Schroeder and Strand (2015: 369) explained that individuals learn to be present, clear, and consistent in order to effectively communicate and are provided with numerous opportunities to become aware of their interpersonal communication styles. Lac (2016: 199) also emphasised that working with horses enables clients to integrate their equine experience to better understand their own behavioural reactions and how this impacts relationship with self and others.

Participants also described equine-based therapy as a transformative therapy. They said as follows:

*“Probably the most powerfully transformative space for therapy. So, the most transformative therapy that’s equine-based happens where equines are considered co-facilitators and drivers of change. The power of engaging with the prey’s way of living and being and doing... it’s when you look at the reciprocal relationships in nature. When I look at equine-based therapy, equine-based therapy feels like a kind of coming back to that kind of relationship with horses that says, we’re bound to each other and the success of both our species depends on living in a place where you teach as much as you learn. Where you receive as much as you give.” (P6)*

As described, equine-based therapy is a transformative experience. It fosters personal growth, self-awareness, emotional healing, and empowerment, within an interconnected relationship between the horse, nature, and client. These elements combined create an environment, that supports and catalyzes transformative change for clients participating in equine-based therapy. Krob (2015: 99) concurred that equine-based therapy has powerful, transformative possibilities for all clients involved.

Some participants emphasised that equine-based therapy is an experiential form of therapy that allows clients to explore their problems more openly as opposed to traditional talk therapy. They said as follows:

*“Equine psychotherapy is just a way of being able to reach people’s emotional state without them being threatened. And so, it’s a really great way of helping.” (Psych 1)*

*“It broadens the opportunities for experiences that can promote well-being beyond the traditional talk therapy because not everybody is so open to talk therapy so it's an experiential therapy. So, I think all the benefits of experiential therapy are there. I think equine-based therapy adds to social work. I do think that the relationship with the animals brings a whole another level of experience.”* (Psych 2)

*“Everything fundamentally comes back to the individual, so if you're doing social work and you've got a dysfunctional family or one person in the family who needs to explain to the others how he's feeling. The equine-based therapy is a wonderful quiet way because you get to be in this lovely, quiet space. No cell phones, no external interactions. So sometimes people are so closed and claustrophobic so they're in a space that just gives you space to breathe. And the way its positioned amazes me how you see things happening to the horses and the horses hurt. That just resonates with this person's story or the family story.”* (EFLF 1)

As evidenced from the data, equine-based therapy is an experiential form of therapy. It is a hands-on, interactive experience which requires clients to be actively engaged in the therapeutic process. The client is engaged both physically and emotionally in the therapeutic process. Clients are encouraged to actively engage with the horse through various activities and exercises. Rather than relying only on traditional talk therapy, equine-based therapy involves direct experiences and interactions with the horse. This allows the clients to completely immerse themselves in the process. The experience with the horses often incorporates metaphors in the therapeutic activities and interactions with the horse. The metaphors are indications of various aspects of the clients' lives, relationships, and challenges. They can facilitate a deeper understanding of the clients' stories.

Similar descriptions are found in the literature which suggests that equine-based therapy is an experiential therapy. Wilke, Germain and Theule (2016: 379) said that equine-based therapy is geared toward improving mental health and positive development uses an experiential approach to promote therapeutic change. Conceptually, the experiential approach uses the present moment as a means of discovery and learning. (Klontz et al. (2007: 262) and Fry (2021: 98) also said that the horse can serve as a metaphor for the client. Personal experiences, past behaviour, or the processing of emotions can be projected onto the horse. The desired outcome is the ability to experience, process, and regulate emotion and behaviour. In return,

this personal growth and development can expand outward and be utilised within the client's life. Bachi (2013: 221) added that mental health practitioners use these metaphors to facilitate discussions, reflections, and deeper exploration of clients' thoughts and emotions.

## **Theme 2: Value of the horse in therapy**

The value of the horse in therapy emerged as the second main theme in the data. The participants said as follows:

*“The horses provide an element that for me, no other therapy can. I've exposed myself to different play therapies and narrative therapies and art therapies and it's just having that living animal...the horses bring a unique empowering element... often when we have a really hectic client or quite a severe case or a session that I think is going to be heavy. I often leave feeling elated and empowered myself because of the process.”*  
(SW2)

*“Working with horses, they have a very unique element to them... they are very similar in some ways to human and nature and we find that they respond very well to humans and particularly when you have difficult clients. Clients that are difficult to talk with, clients that are unable to really touch base or are very resistant. And horses are really good because it's outside, it's an animal we find that works really well with therapy. So, from that point of view, I think it's been a really nice modality to include in the therapy.”*  
(Psych 1)

The data reflects that horses bring a unique element to the traditional therapy environment. Equine-based therapy can be effective with many clients, particularly, those who may not have responded well to other therapeutic approaches. Interacting with horses in a therapeutic setting can offer unique benefits and experiences that may complement or enhance traditional talk therapy. Horses are non-judgmental animals that can create a safe and accepting environment for clients. This can be especially beneficial for clients who may have difficulty opening up or may have felt judged in previous therapy settings.

Other participants said that horses can regulate emotions. They said as follows:

*“The power of the horse is to be able to pick up accurately what the client is really feeling. If that client is saying they're not scared but they are actually terrified. The horse is able to sense that because they are designed to sense danger and to know what's going on around them. They pick up what the client is actually experiencing, and they react on that.” (SW 3)*

*“Horses are very therapeutic. So, they almost work like a magnetic field so they can slow our heart beats down as long as there's no major fear and anxiety that can overrule that. But like naturally neurochemicals are, at least when we're around persons and just being out and about and openly in the environment, they're really helpful. So, they reflect what we feel as well.” (EFLF 2)*

Horses are highly sensitive to human emotions and body language. They can provide immediate feedback to clients, reflecting their emotions and behaviour. This feedback can help clients gain insight into their own feelings and behaviour, promoting selfawareness and personal growth. Horses can support and facilitate emotional regulation. They have a natural ability to create a calming environment. Their presence can help clients regulate their emotions by promoting a sense of relaxation and calmness.

Another participant expressed that horses are relational animals. She said as follows:

*“We worked with the idea that horses are amazing at shifting into relational experiences. Because by their nature, they are very relational, very like us so that's by the nature, they are social. So, they have sensitivity to that and ultimately, if you want a horse to do something for you, you have to be congruent.” (Psych 2)*

Developing a relationship with a horse requires trust, patience, and effective communication. Through consistent interaction, mutual understanding and positive experiences, clients can cultivate trust and rapport with the horse. This relational foundation can then extend to other areas of their lives, improving their ability to build connections with humans as well.

According to Mellor-Clark, Cross, Macdonald and Skjulsvik (2016: 279) horses are also social animals that form strong bonds with their herd members. This can be a valuable lesson for clients who struggle with social skills or building healthy relationships. Moreover, Kern-Godal, Brenna, Arnevik, and Ravndal (2016: 31636) stated that by observing the herd dynamics and interacting with the horses, clients can

learn important skills such as empathy, trust, and boundaries. In addition, Hallberg (2017: 35) emphasised that working with horses can provide clients with a sense of accomplishment and purpose as horses require care and attention, and clients can feel a sense of pride and satisfaction in their ability to care for and connect with the horses.

Brubaker and Udell (2016: 121) and Tan and Simmonds (2018: 762) wrote that they have the ability to sense and reflect human emotions, providing immediate feedback to the individual. This connection between horses and humans forms the basis of equine-based therapy. Birke and Thompson (2017: 20); Johnson *et al.* (2018: 3) and Trzmiel *et al.* (2019: 108) wrote that horses can serve as powerful partners in therapy, facilitating emotional exploration, trust-building, and personal growth.

### **Theme 3: Values and principles guiding equine based therapy**

There are two sub-themes which emerged with the data. They include values guiding equine-based therapy and principles guiding equine-based therapy.

#### ***Sub-themes:***

##### ***3.1. Values guiding equine based therapy.***

Several important values emerged within the data to guide equine based therapy.

Participants said as follows:

*“I think humility is very important for me, in the work you do.”* (Psych 2)

Practicing humility involves recognising that clients are the experts of their own experiences. Being humble means acknowledging that the client knows themselves best and that their needs and preferences should guide the therapeutic process. Bennet and Woodman (2019: 1045) suggested that by embracing humility, equine mental health practitioners create an environment of openness, respect, and partnership that supports the therapeutic process. Humility in equine-based therapy allows for a deep connection with clients and horses, encourages continuous learning and growth, and fosters an atmosphere of collaboration and mutual respect.

Another value that emerged from the data was respect for clients and horses. Participants said as follows:

*“The values would be respect for client stories for where they are. I know sometimes with that value for me is also that we will find that clients can find their own solutions.”*  
(Psych 2)

*“It's about respect. Both respecting the horse and what they're capable of and what they're telling you, but also respecting where the clients at. And allowing the two of them to direct the process and your role is to support and to contain and to create the safety and obviously to help process so that they can get insight into what's happened.”*  
(Psych 3)

Mental health practitioners need to use a client-centred approach, where the clients' experiences, values, and autonomy are valued and respected throughout the therapeutic process. It should involve respectful communication, active listening and seeking to understand the client's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. It involves giving clients enough space and time to express themselves and validate their emotions and perspectives without judgment. Surujjal and Rufus (2011: 380) noted that by upholding the value of respect for both the client and the horse, equine-based therapy practitioners create an environment that promotes trust, growth, and well-being. The therapeutic journey is guided by a deep appreciation for the uniqueness and worth of each individual, as well as a commitment to the ethical treatment and welfare of the horses involved.

The value of maintaining a non-judgmental attitude was also seen as important by the following participant:

*“I think the basic attitudes of being accepting and non-judgmental and allowing creating a safe space for the client and allowing whatever needs to happen, happen. And I think those are consistent. Just being congruent and being authentic and I try to be like that anyway.”* (Psych 1)

Burton, Gammage and Hebden (2018: 8) recognised that both equine-based therapy and social work, focus on the importance of a non-judgmental attitude in creating a supportive and inclusive environment. Practitioners strive to uphold this value by setting aside personal biases, actively listening, and creating spaces that foster

acceptance, empathy, and growth. This approach allows clients to feel valued, understood, and empowered in their therapeutic relationships.

### **3.2. Principles guiding equine-based therapy.**

Principles that guide equine-based therapy emerged as a further sub-theme. These principles guide the practice of equine based therapy, ensuring that clients receive safe, effective, and client-centred therapy that promotes their emotional, physical, and mental well-being.

Participants practised maintaining professionalism in the field. They are required to abide by a certain code of ethics and must maintain a professional approach. They said as follows:

*“Your principles are like your professionalism. And your ethics. That is how I conduct myself, and obviously when you do social work, you undertake all of that you abide to have clients’ needs first and to have a professional approach, be ethically constrained and so for me all of those principles, as long as you are practising appropriately as a social worker they all come into play because I am still a social worker mental health practitioner.” (SW2)*

Establishing clear professional boundaries with clients to ensure a therapeutic relationship is important in equine-based therapy. It is essential to prioritize the safety and well-being of clients and the horses involved in the therapy. This means that the mental health professional must comply with the recognized standards for practicing equine-based therapy and include the practitioner regularly evaluating their own professional competence and engaging in ongoing professional development to enhance their skills, knowledge, and ethical awareness. The Equine Psychotherapy Institute (2020: 5) emphasises the importance of professionalism in equine-based therapy which includes upholding ethical standards, providing competent and responsible care, and continuously striving for professional growth and development. By maintaining professionalism, the mental health practitioner can create a safe and effective therapeutic environment for clients while upholding the integrity of the equine-based therapy field.

Other participants stated that it is important to practice self-determination in their practice, as follows:

*“The social work principle of self-determination. I see it as perhaps the fact that you don't lead the process, but the process is led actually by the horse and the client that it becomes more in that way self-determination as opposed to you coming up with some sort of plan.”* (SW 3)

*“We work from an empowering mindset, so it's that always the clients have a choice being aware that power dynamics are always at play. And yet I want to be as collaborative as I can. I want to be as equitable as possible, knowing that power dynamics are always present.”* (Psych 2)

In equine-based therapy clients are encouraged to actively participate in setting their therapy goals. The practitioner must collaborate with clients to identify their needs, and goals. This process empowers clients to take ownership of their therapeutic journey and promotes self-determination. Writing in a social work context, Wycoff and Gupt (2018: 278) said that the client's autonomy, self-determination, and active participation in their own healing and growth. Social work practitioners like equine-based mental health practitioners aim to create a collaborative, empowering, and personalized therapeutic experience that respects and honours the unique needs and aspirations of everyone. Another participant said:

*“One of the principles is first do no harm and always that the client's needs must come first.”* (Psych 1)

In equine-based therapy mental health practitioners ensure that they create a safe and supportive therapeutic environment that promotes the emotional and psychological well-being of clients. They do not practice interventions that may cause emotional harm, distress, or secondary trauma. The practitioner has to be attentive to the emotional responses of clients and horses and adjust activities accordingly to maintain a positive and non-threatening environment.

Walker, Aimers and Perry (2015:32) argued that more research needs to be undertaken to ensure such efficacy and that ethical guidelines are developed to ensure equine-based therapy programmes do not harm the client or exploit the animals themselves. Vakharia and Little (2017:72) also added that the first ethic of social work practice is to do no harm. This means that practitioners should make great efforts to

do nothing that could be traumatize the patient again, such as exercising authority or control, asking intrusive questions, being unpredictable, or using shaming language/ techniques. A social work practitioner needs to remain mindful of trauma and its varied effects on client behaviours, particularly, adverse childhood experiences, which are strongly correlated with several negative health outcomes.

Finally, the importance of confidentiality emerged:

*“Confidentiality is a big thing for me. I want the client to just feel that they're coming here and they're completely anonymous and I assure the clients of that as well. And obviously they don't talk about sessions with others.”* (Psych 3)

Mental health professionals practising equine-based therapy must maintain strict confidentiality regarding all client information. They obtain written consent to share any information with other professionals involved in the client's care. The practitioner must take appropriate measures to secure client records and protect their privacy. Notgrass and Pettinelli (2015) argued that equine-based therapy practitioners must establish clear confidentiality policies that outline how client information will be protected and shared. These policies should be communicated to clients, and practitioners adhere to them to maintain confidentiality.

#### **Theme 4: Clients who are suitable for equine-based therapy**

There are multiple types of socio-emotional problems in the data for which equine based therapy shows promise as a therapeutic intervention. Four sub-themes emerged within this theme. They are as follows:

##### ***Sub-themes:***

##### ***4.1. All clients***

Participants said that equine-based therapy is suitable for all clients. They said as follows:

*“So, for me because also it speaks to so many different kinds of people. People with fears, people with trauma, people of different heights, weights, color, race. You know backgrounds and opinion.”* (SW2)

*“All counts, all ages, all types. I would want to say they're somebody who's in an active psychotic state, no, and somebody who is in an active drug psychosis, or I would say no and those that are too concrete in their thinking.” (Psych 1)*

Equine-based therapy is a versatile approach that can be beneficial for people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities. It can be adapted to suit various populations. Equine-based therapy is adaptable and can be tailored to suit the specific needs and goals of individuals from diverse backgrounds and situations. Hojgaard Boytler and Argentzell (2022: 6) stated that equine-based therapy provides a safe and non-judgmental environment for clients to express and process their emotions which is related to the trauma of gender-based violence. Interacting with horses can be emotionally cathartic and allow clients to explore and release their feelings in a supportive setting. Interacting with horses and participating in equine activities can promote emotional regulation, self-confidence, and improved coping skills.

#### **4.2. Children**

Other participants emphasized that equine-based therapy is beneficial for children:

*“it's healing, especially with our children. I feel like it's great for our kids that have gone through a lot of traumas because they shut down to opening themselves up to physical affection or connecting emotional connection. Clients able to express physical affection easily without that judgement without fear of rejection and they're able to receive affection from the horse much easier as opposed to human trying to be affectionate.” (EFLF 2)*

*“I would literally say kids and adolescents love it. They mainly flourish in the different kind of therapy than just talk therapy.” (P1)*

*“Equine-based therapy is brilliant with kids with ADHD as well. You know, it's not really a social problem, but often those kids are unaware of how they present to other people. And they'll do the same with the horse. They'll go running up into the horses, the horses are like all they want to kick them.” (Psych 3)*

Equine-based therapy can be effective for children and adolescents who are dealing with various emotional, behavioural, or developmental challenges. It provides a unique and engaging therapeutic experience that promotes self-expression, emotional

regulation, social skills development, and self-confidence. Children often respond positively to the experiential nature of equine-based therapy. Interacting with horses, participating in activities, and being in a new environment can be exciting and engaging for them. This hands-on approach allows children to learn and grow through direct experiences with the horses. Bjønness, Grønnestad and Storm (2020: 140) and Haig and Skinner (2022: 730644) emphasized that equine-based therapy can be beneficial for a wide range of children facing various challenges. Graves (2011: 25), Alfonso et al. (2015: 465), Coman et al. (2018: 551) and Punzo et al. (2022: 1080) added that equine-based therapy can help children who struggle with anger, anxiety, depression, trauma, ADHD, or other behavioural and emotional issues.

#### **4.3. Mental health issues**

Other participants viewed equine-based therapy as beneficial to clients with mental health issues. They said as follows:

*“The versatility of the model is being able to work with people from anxiety. Horses and their heart rate, lower human heart rate, so we have had clients with anxiety. I can literally feel better after being with the horses for 10 minutes and that's it. It's an actual physical process that has been researched.”* (SW2)

*“The gender-based violence space. So, we work with women who have been abused, traumatized. We raise funds to provide programs for women who have been abused, so the women are either in shelters or they're in counselling centers for trauma that they've suffered.”* (SW2)

*“We do work with parents caring for the carer programme, so we work with social workers, nurses, police officers, anyone who experiences secondary traumatic stress due to their exposure to and the nature of their work. That's a six-week program, an hour long, so 6 participants, and that's in collaboration with organizations where we can get funding for that.”* (SW2)

Equine-based therapy is highly suitable for clients with mental health problems. Engaging in equine-based therapy can foster a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy with clients with mental health problems. It involves activities that focus on problem-solving and overcoming challenges. Accomplishing tasks, overcoming fears, and building a relationship with a powerful and gentle animal like a horse can boost clients' confidence, self-esteem, and belief in their ability to create positive change in

their lives. Damien et al. (2020: 309) and Andersson et al. (2021: 450) also agreed that equine-based therapy can be helpful for individuals with a range of mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance abuse disorders. Horses can provide a calming and non-judgmental presence that can help clients feel more comfortable in opening up about their struggles (Snowshoe and Starblanket 2016: 5; Mendonca et al. 2019: 409; Ayala et al. 2021: 3527).

#### **4.4. Individuals and groups**

As evidenced from the responses below, equine-based therapy was found to be good for individuals and groups:

*“There's quite good programs in terms of parenting, step parenting, blended families work really good for group work helping with issues at work.” (Psych 1)*

*“I think the equine-based therapy is as valuable for one-on-one therapy sessions as it is for family groups because families are made-up of individuals in the way that they interact and connect.” (EFLF 1)*

*“Group therapy is just a different way of processing within the group. It's pretty much the same with whether you're working with individual couples or family or group.” (SW2)*

*“With the individual we have the premise or goal, the theme of the session may emerge as we work with them. With groups, I find that doesn't work so well so with groups, it's better if we can find the premise or a common premise for the group to work on. With the group we might sit outside the arena, and we could do it indoors if we wanted to.” (Psych 2)*

According to the data, equine-based therapy is valuable for both one-on-one therapy sessions and family groups. The dynamics within the family are shaped by how individuals in the family interact and connect with one another. Equine-based therapy can address the needs of individuals within the family context, while simultaneously working on family dynamics and relationships. Equine-based therapy can be effective, particularly, when working with complex family dynamics in blended families, stepparenting situations, or families who are facing challenging life transitions. The

presence of horses often creates a neutral and non-threatening environment, which can encourage openness and vulnerability in family members. Both individual and group therapy can be valuable and effective forms of treatment, but they offer different approaches and experiences. The choice between these therapies depends on the individual's or group's specific needs, preferences, and therapeutic goals.

In individual equine-based therapy sessions, the mental health practitioner typically works with one client at a time. The therapy may begin with a specific goal or premise in mind, such as improving emotional regulation, building self-confidence, or addressing specific challenges the individual is facing. However, as the therapy unfolds, and the individual interacts with the horses, new themes or issues may emerge naturally. The mental health practitioner may adapt the session to explore these emergent themes, allowing the individual to gain insights and work on relevant areas of personal growth. When conducting equine-based therapy in a group setting, it is often beneficial to establish a common premise or therapeutic focus for the group to work on together. This shared theme can provide a unifying direction for the therapy and help group members connect with one another's experiences. Establishing a common goal can also promote cohesion within the group and facilitate meaningful discussions during and after the equine interactions.

According to Vridrine et al (2002: 10), a group of individuals with similar therapeutic needs and goals is formed. Trotter and Chandler (2008: 256) added that the mental health practitioner facilitates activities that help the group members to build trust and establish a rapport with one another. The mental health practitioner uses these interactions to explore and address the group dynamics, communication patterns, and emotional responses that arise. After each activity, the mental health practitioner guides the group members in reflecting on their experiences, emotions, and observations. Perkins (2018: 298) emphasized that this process encourages self-awareness, communication, and sharing of insights within the group.

### **Theme 5: Process underpinning equine based therapy**

The process underpinning equine based therapy emerged as the third theme in the data. Six sub-themes emerged within this theme. They are as follows:

## **Sub-themes:**

### **5.1. Approaches applied in Equine- based therapy**

The data reflected that there are different approaches to equine-based therapy. Participants described the approaches as follows:

*“I think one of the key aspects in terms of understanding the process is that there are mental health and horse professionals who follow an approach called equine assisted psychotherapy and learning, and then there are those of us who follow an equine facilitated psychotherapy and learning approach. And although there are crossovers between the two approaches in terms of how people run a session, how they work with the horses, a key distinction is that the equine assisted focuses more on the human facilitation of the therapeutic process. Whereas in facilitated, the horses are co-facilitators. They guide...you could say drive the process of a session or the focus in a session.” (SW 1)*

Another participant described the hippotherapy approach as follows:

*“There are programs that work with riding in the physical therapy field, of course. It's called hippotherapy, so hippotherapy is where the motion of the movement is used for brain stem injuries, for developmental delays...so our focus is on clients who are cognitively able to process and able to reflect on processes and they are all on the ground. So, there is touch if it is okay for the horse and okay for the client.” (SW 1)*

Equine-based therapy, therefore, involves two different therapeutic approaches depending on the needs and goals of the individual client. These include groundwork exercises that can help clients to develop their communication and leadership skills, as well as their ability to read non-verbal cues. This is referred to as either equine-facilitated psychotherapy or equine-assisted learning. Depending on the client's experience and goals, equine-based therapy may also involve riding lessons. Riding can help clients develop to balance, coordination, and confidence, as well as a sense of connection with the horse, which is referred to as hippotherapy. These forms of therapy also involve working with a mental health practitioner who uses the horse as a tool for promoting emotional and psychological growth. The mental health practitioner may also use a variety of techniques, such as role-playing or cognitive-behavioural therapy.

In a similar view, White-Lewis et al. (2019: 5) argued that equine-assisted activities are an intervention for companionship, socialization, reduction in emotional blunting, improvement in attachment issues, personal space/boundary improvement, self-esteem enhancement, reflectivity and meta-cognition (Thomas, Lytle and Dammann 2016). Pendry, Smith, and Roeter (2014: 80) emphasized that the terms equine-assisted Learning or equine-Facilitated Learning are used interchangeably in the literature and include education directed at improving communication skills, self-awareness, confidence building and self-control by interacting with a horse. Burgon, Gammage, and Hebden (2018: 9) added that this is accomplished by grooming, riding, and saddling together with non-violent communication, play therapy and mindfulness practice.

### **5.2. The partners that form the equine-based therapy team**

The data reflected that the process of equine-based therapy involves key partners in the therapeutic session for the sessions to have a successful outcome. The participants said as follows:

Participants discussed that equine-based therapy involves collaborative work between the mental health practitioner and horse professional. They said as follows:

*“I work very much in with the value of collaboration, that's very important for me. I work from the space of the value that I bring in my experience and training, and the horse specialist bring their experience into the session and of course the horse brings their own special power.”* (Psych 2)

As evidenced from the data, equine-based therapy involves collaborative work between various professionals and individuals to provide effective treatment and support for clients. Collaboration is a fundamental aspect of effective equine-based therapy, and it enriches the therapeutic experience for all involved, including the therapist, horse specialist, and the clients. Wilson, Buultjens, Monfries and Karimi (2017: 20) stated that the equine mental health practitioner is the primary professional responsible for conducting therapy sessions and utilising horses as part of the therapeutic process. Abrams (2013: 17) said that these professionals have expertise in both therapy techniques and horsemanship skills. Equine mental health practitioners design and facilitate therapeutic activities, assess client progress, and ensure the safety of both clients and horses during sessions. Bennet and Woodman

(2019: 1041) also argued that equine-based therapy frequently involves collaboration with mental health professionals such as psychologists, counsellors, or social workers. These professionals contribute their expertise to psychological assessment, diagnosis, and treatment planning.

Partners in the therapeutic process include the horse professional, mental health practitioner and horse.

*“You would have the horse professional always be with you. He/she will guide you in terms of what they've seen in horses, which then informs you about how you're going to therapeutically talk to your client about what's seen, so what you need is your strong therapeutic grounding and counseling skills. And then you're just using this added information to build into that. So, there are some mental health practitioners, where some of them don't know horses but they are actually fine because they have a strong therapeutic background and horse specialist working with them.”* (Psych 1)

*“I would say that equine-based therapy is quite a deep, powerful sort of therapy. It requires a mental health professional and normally a horse specialist and an equine partner. And the equine partner will often give the clients insight about themselves, their patterns of behaviour, or maybe things that they're struggling with. And it's also an experiential therapy because they get the opportunity to try something different in their relationship with the horse in the arena and through that learning, they can then use that metaphor to transfer it to life. So that's why I say it's quite powerful because they can see the results if they change.”* (Psych 3)

Equine-based therapy includes a horse professional or specialist in the therapeutic process. The role of the horse professional is to ensure the physical and emotional wellbeing of the horse in the therapy sessions. They are trained with the necessary knowledge and skills to understand and manage the horses. Their expertise in horsemanship and horse management is essential to creating a supportive and therapeutic environment, so as to enforce safety protocols and guidelines and monitor clients' interactions, with the horse. The horse professional works closely with the mental health practitioner by providing input on the horse's behaviour, and if there needs to be an adjustment in the therapy plans. The mental health practitioner's role in the process is to provide professional guidance, support and therapeutic interventions that promote the clients' mental health and well-being. They combine the

horse and client interactions, with the horse professional's expertise to facilitate healing in clients.

According to Beauchen (2017: 8) and Ayala (2021: 3527), the horse serves as a key component of the therapy, providing a unique and powerful way to connect with the individual and facilitate personal growth and healing. In addition, Tuuvas, Carlssona and Norberg (2017); White-Lewis (2019: 7) and Diaz (2022: 3) noted that the mental health practitioner serves as a guide and facilitator, helping the individual navigate their experiences with the horse and apply those experiences to their daily life. Fry (2021: 103) noted that these partners work to create a therapeutic environment that is safe, supportive, and focused on the individual's needs and goals. Tobin (2020: 12) also added that the client is the person who participates in the therapy sessions and is seeking support to achieve their therapeutic goals.

Several descriptions of the EAGALA model emerged in the data, as follows:

*"There has to be at least one certified EAGALA model practitioner facilitator within to be able to call it an Eagala model. So, if neither of you are trained EAGALA then you obviously wouldn't be able to call it an EAGALA model."* (SW2)

*"There are four tenets to guard and that is one of the tenets for you to be able to say that you are doing any EAGALA model therapy session, you have two facilitators in the arena at the same time, both of them don't have to be certified by the Model so only one facilitator can be certified by the model. So the horse professional and I do the whole process together. So, we will meet the clients wherever we are."* (SW2)

*"I belong to an association called EAGALA, which is equine assisted Learning and growth association, and we follow a couple of principles. Firstly, we have quite a strong ethical code of conduct and background. So that informs a lot of what we're doing. Secondly, equine-based therapy works as you work in the team, so you always have a second person with you, so there's never a time that if you miss something, there's always somebody to be there with you. The second person is also a psychologist. It's also including a horse specialist, so their focus is my horses and horse behaviour. And then working as a team, it means that you yourself hold the greatest sense of accountability and safety for the post decision."* (Psych 1)

According to the data, the client works in partnership with the equine specialist and mental health professional to engage in the therapeutic process. The mental health

practitioner or the horse professional must be a certified EAGALA trainer, and they must practice within the scope of the EAGALA guidelines. The previous participants did not express the same views in their practice. Nurenberg et al. (2015: 82) and Haig and Skinner (2022: 730644) stated that the EAGALA model emphasizes the importance of collaboration and partnership between the equine specialist, mental health professional, and client to achieve therapeutic goals, affirming what participants said. The model is then designed to provide a safe, supportive, and effective intervention that promotes growth and learning for clients (Staudt and Cherry 2017: 403; Stapleton and Grimmett 2021: 3).

### **5.3. The setting for the therapeutic session**

The third sub-theme that emerged from the data is the setting for the therapeutic session.

Participants explained that equine-based therapy is facilitated in nature. Participants described this as follows:

*“The first thing people do notice when they're doing a session, it's so nice to not be confined to a room in a small space, so being in in a natural environment, I think it really does add to the experience. The client is able to actually think clearly.”* (SW 3)

*“I think equine-based therapy and nature go hand in hand. If you were doing equine-based therapy in a stable or an indoor arena, I think you'd lose part of the benefit because I think that people are grounded by being in nature. There's just something about nature that allows us to take a deep breath and put both feet on the ground and just feel calmer. You're kind of 30% of the way. They're just driving out to the farm and being surrounded by all the beauty. And then you meet the animal that's a part of that. And it just all sort of comes together to support the whole process.”* (Psych 3)

*“Outdoors plays a huge role, everything, from the time they arrive. Everything plays a role, but mostly I think that human nature has a tendency to be drawn towards nature, it's less threatening, it's more open, so it allows them the freedom to express themselves a whole, so I think that's probably why the nature side of it, and we use everything that we can in the environments of these birds or cats or whatever have arrived in the arena. That form part of the story. And we find that quite useful.”* (Psych 1)

As evidenced from the data, the setting for a therapeutic session in equine-based therapy typically takes place in a natural outdoor environment. Equine-based therapy in a nature setting can provide a unique and enriching therapeutic experience for the clients.

Conducting equine-based therapy in a natural setting allows the clients to connect with the natural world. The therapeutic space can be located on a farm, open field, or paddock. The natural surroundings can be incorporated into the therapeutic activities with the horses, such as encouraging the client to engage with the natural elements such as the birds or scent of the outdoors. The combination of equine-based therapy and a nature context can enhance the benefits and create a more holistic therapeutic experience.

Similarly, writers such as Palsdottir, Persson, Persson and Granh (2014: 2431) and Escobar (2021: 28) suggests that equine-based therapy takes place in a natural environment, such as a ranch or stable, and provides clients with the opportunity to engage in physical activity and outdoor recreation. Almasloukh (2022: 95) stated that is particularly beneficial for individuals who spend most of their time indoors or who may be experiencing feelings of isolation or disconnection from the natural world. Haig and Skinner (2022: 730644) further emphasized that nature-based interventions, such as equine-based therapy, have been shown to have a positive impact on mental health, including reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.

Other participants explained that the natural environment allows clients to connect on a deeper level and relate their stories. They described it as follows:

*“Everything happens in the arena. We believe the power is in the experience. It’s not about the talk therapy, which is why we don’t take the client out of that experience and bring them to the office, but when we do equine work, we try not to go into the minds like the headspace, where you talk about everything too much because then we might lose the client. You lose the potency of the equine experience” (SW 3)*

*“Essentially, we work in a space with the horses, where we’re working with people’s narratives. We work with stories, we work outside in the space with horses, and that whole space can represent a story. That has like a storyboard, and we’ve got live characters and these characters can choose how they want to interact in the story.” (Psych 2)*

The natural elements present within nature can serve as symbols or metaphors for clients to explore and reflect on during therapy. The mental health practitioner may guide the client in relating their experiences with the horses to nature, thus drawing parallels and facilitating deeper insights. By ensuring that the client's equine experiences occur in a natural setting, the therapeutic journey remains uninterrupted.

It allows for a deeper connection with the natural environment, the horse, and the therapeutic process. Similarly, Burgon (2014: 33) argued that the natural setting of equine-based therapy provides an opportunity for clients to connect with the natural world and interact with animals. Snell and Simmonds (2012: 326) added that this connection can foster a sense of interconnectedness, promote empathy, and provide metaphoric experiences that can be explored in therapy.

#### **5.4. Procedures for engagement between the mental health practitioner, client, and horse**

The fourth sub-theme that emerged outlines the types of procedures that equine-based therapy uses.

Participants said that before a session can commence, clients are required to book a session based on the problems they are presenting with and a referral. A brief assessment is also conducted, as described below:

*“A client would call or e-mail or message asking for a booking asking for a session, reporting the reason, generally, why they are coming or who referred them or what they may have been referred for, and then they would book the session, so they'd book the appointment.” (SW 1)*

*“Then the client would arrive... making sure that they feel that they are very welcome and that this is a safe space and then talking through just some confidentiality aspects and always checking in with a client you know what's your experience with horses before this? Do they come with fears? Do they come up with certain pre -ideas? What's their history? Sometimes people arrive and they suddenly tell you about the traumatic experience they had with horses in their childhood. So, you just get a sense of how they arrive, and then there's always some form of grounding exercise.” (SW 1)*

As evidenced from the data, there are several procedures that are typically followed in equine-based therapy before the horse, client, and mental health practitioner engage

in the therapy session. The clients are required to book a session with the mental health professional. The mental health professional will gather an overview of the background history of the client so that the mental health practitioner has an idea on the course of action to take. So, when the client first arrives for equine-based therapy, there are several steps that are typically followed to ensure a smooth and productive session. The mental health practitioner welcomes the clients and provides a brief orientation to the facility and therapeutic space in terms of rules and safety procedures. Thereafter, the practitioner has an introductory session and attempts to build rapport with the client so that a connection is established, and the client feels more comfortable. This will allow the client to share more about themselves and their expectations of equine-based therapy. Patel (2022) also discussed that before beginning equine-based therapy, the mental health practitioner conducts an initial assessment of the client to determine their needs, goals, and suitability for equine-based therapy. This resonates with the views of practitioners in the study. Townsend and Hood (2019: 254) emphasized that this assessment may involve a review of the client's history, a mental status examination, and a discussion of their expectations and concerns.

Another participant suggested that clients are also required to complete an indemnity form before a session to ensure that there is an understanding that there could be possibly safety concerns, this is noted below:

*“There is an indemnity form for them to sign. Because we are working on farms that do not belong to us and it is a model of therapy that is experiential, so we ask them that they sign the indemnity form because injuries can happen.” (SW2)*

It is common for clients to be required to complete an indemnity form before engaging in equine-based therapy. This form is a legal document that outlines the risks associated with participating in equine activities and acknowledges the clients understanding and acceptance of those risks. Lowry (2023: 29) discussed the importance of the client and/or their legal guardian providing informed consent before participating in equine-based therapy. This possibly involves a discussion of the purpose of the therapy, the potential risks and benefits, and the client's rights and responsibilities.

### **5.5. Check-in session between the horse and mental health practitioner before the therapeutic session**

This fifth sub-theme outlines the basic procedure that must be followed between the mental health practitioner and the horse before a session is hosted. Participants said as follows:

*“The horses are freely moving around, they are able to move in and out of connection interaction, make contact as they choose so they’re not being held or forced in any way. So, there’s always this pre check in, where am I at because I come with my own stuff when I walk in and the horses pick up on everything, what’s the weather doing? Is it windy? What impact might that have on the horses and on my own system? You know where am I feeling it in my body? What are their bodies showing me and telling me about the setting for the day?” (SW 1)*

This type of interaction allows for a unique and intuitive connection between the horses and the clients. The horses are allowed to move freely, which means they can express their natural behaviours and preferences. This can lead to more authentic interactions with clients, as the horses are not restricted or forced into specific actions. Before engaging with the horses, it’s important for clients and the mental health practitioners to assess their clients emotional and mental state. Horses are highly intuitive animals and can sense the emotional energy of the people around them. Being aware of one’s own feelings and thoughts can help establish a more authentic and positive connection. Understanding the weather conditions, such as wind or other environmental factors, is also crucial. Weather can influence both the horses and the humans present. For example, strong winds might make the horses more alert, while also impacting how individuals feel and interact with the animals.

*“You have this very intimate relationship with your herd right from the start. It is an ongoing relationship of mutual choice. When the herd feels that they are in the right space, they arrive and interact with us.” (Psych 1)*

Being aware of the herd’s social dynamics is crucial in fostering a positive relationship. Horses are herd animals and have complex social structures. Understanding their behaviour and communication within the group can provide insights into their overall well-being and receptiveness to human interaction. In this relationship, patience and non-interference play significant roles. Allowing the horses to approach at their own

pace and not imposing actions upon them demonstrates a deep respect for their individual preferences and boundaries.

Similarly, Schmidt, Wartenberg-Demand and Forstmeier (2020: 3) said that an assessment is done on the horse's willingness to engage in activities, respond to basic commands, and maintain focus. By conducting a thorough check-in session with the horse before the therapy session, the mental health practitioner can ensure the horse's welfare, comfort, and readiness. This preparation contributes to a positive and effective therapy experience for both the horse and the client.

A check-in session between the horse and the mental health practitioner before the therapy session serves several purposes. It allows the mental health practitioner to assess the horse's well-being, readiness, and suitability for the upcoming therapy session (Murphy and Wilson 2017: 366). According to Naste et al. (2018: 289), the mental health practitioner may evaluate the horse's overall health, including checking for any signs of lameness, illness, or discomfort. They may also observe the horse's movement, posture, and body condition to ensure the horse is physically able to participate in therapy activities. The mental health practitioner will assess the horse's emotional and behavioural state, observing for any signs of stress, anxiety, or behavioural issues. Badin (2022: 242) said that they may consider factors such as the horse's recent experiences, environmental conditions, and any specific triggers that may affect the horse's demeanour during the session.

### **5.6. Orientation of clients into equine-based therapy session**

The sixth sub-theme that emerged from the data is orientation to equine-based therapy.

One participant said that before the client engages with the horse, a brief introduction on equine-based therapy is presented to the client. One participant said as follows:

*“So first of all, we explained to the client what equine-based therapy is and what they can expect from the session, then we invite the client to go and meet the horses. It will depend on what it is that they are there for? Say if they can do the session to may be work on setting boundaries you would say. Well, that is what your purpose of the session is. So maybe can you go out and see what boundaries are out here. So, then they would go out, they would meet the horse.” (SW 3)*

Introducing equine-based therapy to the client before engaging with the horse is an important step in the therapeutic process. It helps to set expectations, clarify the purpose of equine-based therapy, and creates a foundation for the clients understanding and readiness.

Other participants shared that they conduct an assessment with the client to determine how the process should move forward. They said as follows:

*“We like to assess and see where the clients are at and what their needs are. According to us, we don't ask for too much history, so don't ask for detailed history, I prefer to see what comes out because it's a client solution orientated process. The clients think they need to work on something, but often it's something else that comes up in the sessions. So, they will move into the space we then invite them to meet and greet the horses. And once they've done that, we reflect on that. And then what starts to happen is, depending on the reflection process, we have all those activities in our heads, you know at our at our disposal.”* (SW2)

*“We look for things like the person can feel their heartbeat or they are aware of their breathing, or they will look down at the ground or they'll look up at the sky. The moment that they do that orientating then you have a sense that okay they have arrived...Then you choose a very neutral space in the paddock so that there's enough space around.”* (SW 1)

Equine-based therapy adopts a client solution-oriented approach, where the mental health practitioner focuses more on the present experiences and solutions rather than focusing extensively into the client's detailed history. This approach aligns with the strengths-based perspective and allows the therapy to be more experiential and focused on the client's current needs and goals. Equine-based therapy is rooted in experiential learning, where clients engage in hands-on experiences with the horses to gain insights and self-awareness. By focusing on the present and the interactions with the horse, clients can experience and process emotions and patterns in real-time. The presence of the horse and the sensory experiences during the therapy session bring the client's attention to the present moment. This allows clients to connect more authentically with their emotions and responses without being overly influenced by past experiences.

While a detailed history may not be the primary focus in equine-based therapy, it doesn't mean that past experiences or traumas are completely disregarded. If relevant, the mental health practitioner may address specific issues that emerge during the sessions or explore how past experiences may relate to the client's current experiences with the horse.

Moreover, in equine-based therapy, the mental health practitioner may focus on helping the client become more aware of their bodily sensations, including their heartbeat, breathing, and other physical sensations. According to Trotter and Baggerly (2018: 2), this heightened awareness of bodily sensations is a fundamental aspect of mindfulness and somatic-based approaches which are integrated into equine-based therapy. Buck, Bean and Marco (2017: 387) said that by fostering an increased awareness of bodily sensations, equine-based therapy enables clients to gain a deeper understanding of their emotional experiences and develop greater self-awareness and self-regulation skills.

Beauchen (2017: 9) also described the process, similarly, saying that before engaging with the horses, the client and mental health practitioner are usually given a tour of the facility and provided with safety protocols. This may include information on how to approach and handle the horses, how to put on and take off equipment, and what to do in case of an emergency. The equine specialist selects the horse or horses that will be used in the therapy session based on their temperament, training, and suitability for the client's needs and goals. The client may also interact with the horses before the therapy session begins. Kovacs (2020) added that the horse, client, and mental health practitioner engage synergistically to ensure that the therapy is safe, effective, and tailored to the client's specific needs and goals.

### **5.7. Timing of sessions**

The timing of sessions with clients emerged as the seventh sub-theme. The participants' responses considered the length of each session and the frequency of the sessions, depending on the client's assessment. The participants expressed the following:

*"I book sessions with adult clients for an hour and half, that for me has just so that 90 minutes has just served well...for children, I usually book between 40 and 60 minutes, and I find that that is the perfect session time. It's always interesting for me because*

*the horses don't wear watches...But when the hour and, a half is up. The horses will usually disengage.” (SW)*

As evidenced in the data, a specific timeframe is set depending on the client's needs and the therapeutic approach used. The timeframe allows for adequate time for the client to engage with the horse, process the experiences and reflect on the therapeutic work. Similarly, Kemp, Signal, Botros, Taylor and Prentice (2014: 558) said that the timing of sessions in equine-based therapy can vary depending on various factors, including the goals of the therapy, client needs, and logistical considerations. Hilliere, ColladoMateo, Villafaina, Duque-Fonseca, and Parraca (2018: 1064) stated that equine-based therapy sessions typically range from 60 to 90 minutes, although they can be shorter or longer depending on the specific therapeutic approach and client needs. Moreover, Carlsson (2017: 328) emphasized that the duration of the session should provide sufficient time for clients to engage in activities, process their experiences, and have meaningful interactions with the horses.

Other participants said that numerous sessions are set up, based on the client's needs. They said as follows:

*“Sessions are usually once a week, I think further than that, any more than that, it's too intense. We use probably 8 sessions between 8 to 12 sessions. Then we do an evaluation just to proceed, measure the process and if we need to, we'll give them a couple of weeks break and then pick up another set.” (Psych 1)*

*“For each client, depending on the problems they present I think it differs. We will see where they are with that. And then in discussion with their parents and in discussion with them. We will see what we do going forward.” (Psych 2)*

Participants said that the frequency of equine-based therapy sessions can vary depending on the client's therapeutic goals, availability, and the recommendations of the mental health practitioner. Regular sessions allow for consistency and continuity in the therapeutic process. Similarly, Grimm (2015: 26) emphasized that the frequency of equine-based therapy sessions is based on the client's treatment plan and availability. Sessions may be scheduled weekly, biweekly, or on a more flexible basis, depending on the client's therapeutic goals and the recommendations of the mental health practitioner (Pendry, Carr, and Vandagriff 2018: 300; O'Hanlon 2021: 19).

Roberts and Honzel (2020: 133) argued, however, that the consistency and regularity in session scheduling can contribute to the effectiveness of the therapy.

### **Theme 6: Facilitation of equine-based therapy**

This theme provides data related to the facilitation of equine-based therapy with a client. One participant expressed that the client and horse/s are observed the moment the client arrives. The participant said as follows:

*“One of the things that we’ve learned about horses is that they actually can sense a person. Physiologically, from quite a distance. The horse responds as soon as the person arrives but also as they walk into the arena. So, everything that is happening from the time they walk in and walk into the arena, that is an opportunity for us to give feedback and to notice how the person is processing. The aim of the session is really to see how the person processes their environment, their understanding, the interaction skills. It’s all of those variations that have been processed. And then there’s usually time where they just spend time doing certain activities with the horse, sometimes on its own, sometimes it’s...then next time it’s always processing, and it really depends on the clients understanding of what is happening around them and their awareness that we will get a sense of the process of the therapy. And that’s usually what happens. We find often that it’ll bring up some insight or some question that they have, but often we find that the real therapy happens afterwards where they start to think about what’s happening and they start to talk about the onset.” (Psych 1)*

Clients are observed by the mental health practitioner from the moment they enter the therapeutic space. The mental health practitioner begins the assessment process by observing the clients body language, the dynamics and patterns that emerge, as well as their emotional state as they approach and interact with the horse. This will provide the practitioner with an idea of the clients’ comfort level and potential areas of focus for the therapy. The practitioner also observes the horse as the horse also provides non-verbal cues which assist the practitioner in the initial assessment.

According to the data, the process of equine-based therapy can vary based on the individual client's understanding and needs. Equine-based therapy sessions often involve a combination of activities with the horse and processing time to reflect on the experiences. The mental health practitioner's role is to observe and gain a sense of the client's progress and the unfolding process of therapy. During the session, clients engage in activities with the horse, such as grooming, leading, riding, or participating

in structured exercises. These activities are designed to elicit emotional responses and encourage interaction, communication, and connection between the client and the horse. The therapy sessions are client-centred, meaning they are tailored to meet the specific needs, goals, and comfort level of the individual client. Some clients may prefer spending more time with the horse, while others may need more processing time.

The mental health practitioner also pays attention to the client's understanding of the equine-based therapy process and their comfort level with the activities. Some clients may naturally grasp the metaphors and symbolism in the horse's behaviour, while others may need more guidance to recognise the connections. During the activities with the horse, the mental health practitioner and any supporting horse professionals observe the client's interactions, body language, and emotional responses. These observations provide valuable insights into the client's emotional state and how they relate to the horse. After the equine activities, the client and mental health practitioner come together for processing and reflection. The mental health practitioner may ask openended questions to encourage the client to share their experiences, emotions, and any realizations that occurred during the session. The processing phase allows the mental health practitioner to gain a sense of the client's progress and how they are integrating the experiences with the horse into their understanding and personal growth. The mental health practitioner might identify emerging patterns, themes, or breakthrough moments that can guide the therapeutic journey.

Other participants explained that particular themes or topics are set up to enable assessment and the client has to work with that theme during the sessions. Thereafter, a discussion occurs with regards to aspects that come up during the exploration of the theme and feedback is given as follows:

*“What starts to happen through the process is we'll say to the client we're going to invite you to explore connection with the horses. And they will go out and explore the connection. Come back, reflect with us and what we are start to able to do is to create a metaphorical link between the client's experience with the horses and then connect it to what's happening for them in their life. So, who or what has that also reminded them of the situation, is it an emotion? Is it a feeling? And then we start to work with that, so it becomes quite a powerful process and parallel to their life. And we tend to get quite quickly into their reasons for coming because it's a very non-judgmental*

*space and the horses, the process or processing is all done through the horses and so it feels like the pressures off them. So, we all engage with what's happened with them.” (SW2)*

As evidenced from the data, sessions are set up where the client is guided to interact with the horse in various ways depending on the therapeutic goals and client needs. Throughout the session, the mental health practitioner encourages the client to reflect on their experiences and observations. The practitioner also helps the client to explore the symbolic meanings and metaphors that emerge from the interactions with the horse. The horse's behaviour, responses and the dynamics observed during the sessions are discussed in relation to the client's personal life and therapeutic goals.

As mentioned in the data, mental health practitioners use metaphorical links, metaphors are powerful tools in equine-based therapy as they provide symbolic connections between the client's experiences with the horse and their personal growth within the therapeutic context. These metaphors enable clients to gain insights, process emotions, and understand their behavioural patterns in a meaningful and relatable way. If the client struggled to approach or connect with the horse initially, but gradually built trust, the mental health practitioner may draw a metaphorical link to the client's experiences in establishing trust and setting boundaries in their personal relationships.

The mental health practitioner might explore how learning to trust the horse can translate to trust-building in other areas of their life. If the horse responded positively to the client's emotions and body language, the mental health practitioner can use this metaphor to highlight how others might also be affected by the client's emotional expressions in daily interactions. It can be an opportunity to explore the impact of emotional communication on relationships. By using these metaphors, the mental health practitioner can facilitate a deeper exploration of the client's experiences with the horse and link them to the therapeutic goals of equine-based therapy. Metaphors help clients internalize insights and apply them outside the therapy setting, ultimately fostering personal growth and positive changes in their lives.

Another participant described how interaction with the horse shapes therapy as follows:

*“You invite the client to find the themes that have emerged. How does that connect with what you're experiencing in your life right now? Or who does that connect with your relationship? You know what is the wisdom that that you've drawn from this?”*

*“What is a possible solution if there's a conflict, or if clients are in a change situation, they're getting divorced or recently divorced or kind of like sort of trying to draw the generics.”* (Psych 3)

In equine-based therapy the client and the mental health practitioner work together to set goals and design activities that align with the clients' therapeutic needs. The clients are able learn and grow through these direct experiences. The interaction with the horse provides a tangible and immediate experience for the clients to engage with their options, behaviour and patterns that may emerge during the therapeutic process. The client is then able to gain new insights into their situations and develop new ways of coping with these situations.

As one participant mentioned, clients are invited to find themes that emerged, identifying themes that emerged during the equine-based therapy session is an essential part of the therapeutic process. These themes are the underlying patterns, emotions, or insights that surfaced throughout the client's interactions with the horse. By exploring and discussing these themes, the mental health practitioner can help the client gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and how they relate to their life outside of the therapy setting. After the equine activity, the client returns to the mental health practitioner to discuss their experiences with the horse. The mental health practitioner creates a safe and supportive space for the client to reflect on what happened during the session, how they felt, and any significant moments that stood out. The mental health practitioner may ask open-ended questions to encourage the client to explore their feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations during the equine interaction. The mental health practitioner helps the client to identify and express the emotions that emerged during the equine-based therapy session. These emotions can range from joy, excitement, and connection to fear, frustration, and vulnerability. As the mental health practitioner listens to the client's narrative, they may notice recurring patterns or themes that emerged during the session. These patterns can relate to the client's communication style, relationship dynamics, or emotional responses. The mental health practitioner helps the client connect the themes that emerged in the equine-based therapy session with their daily life and relationships. This integration

allows the client to explore how the insights gained during the equine-based therapy session can be applied to real-world situations. Through the exploration of themes, the mental health practitioner and client collaboratively identify therapeutic goals and areas of growth.

The client may recognise areas where they want to make positive changes or further explore specific emotions or challenges.

The practitioner then focuses on strengths, abilities, and skills that the client demonstrates. They use this knowledge to empower and assist the client to build on the strengths as part of the healing process, as suggested by one participant below:

*“It's very much strength-based perspective. What are the strengths that you have? What are the resources that you've got and then drawing that back to where they felt it in their body. It's really around helping the client connect with where they are in their body such as every time, they hear the horses breath on their shoulder or when they bring back the moments that stood out for them in the session. A stopping foot, a breath that they took now, then they're immediately connecting with felt sense of what potential healing is, the horses will tell you because they'll immediately react. Its goal is to help calm the nervous system. Help the client remain calm and connect again. With the parasympathetic system, which is where all that healing is just so powerfully available to them.”* (SW 1)

As evidenced from the data, equine-based therapy applies the strengths-based perspective. A strengths-based approach focuses on identifying and building upon an individual's strengths, resources, and capabilities, rather than solely focusing on deficits or challenges (Caiels, Milne and Beadle-Brown 2021: 401; Pulla 2017: 97). In equine-based therapy, the emphasis is on harnessing the therapeutic potential of the client-horse interactions to empower clients and promote growth and change. The strengths-based perspective in equine-based therapy aligns well with the natural characteristics of horses. Horses respond to genuine and authentic interactions, and they can serve as powerful co-mental health practitioners in helping clients discover their strengths and capabilities. As clients build a positive and trusting relationship with the horses, they often transfer these qualities to their relationships with others and themselves. Equine-based therapy's strengths-based approach fosters a sense of hope, resilience, and empowerment, creating a fertile ground for personal growth and healing.

Moreover, in equine-based therapy, helping clients connect with their body sensations and experiences is a fundamental part of the therapeutic process. The presence of the horse and the sensory experiences during the session can facilitate a deeper connection with oneself and the present moment. Equine-based therapy sessions can be rich in sensory experiences, such as feeling the horse's breath on their shoulder, the warmth of the horse's body, or the rhythm of the horse's movement while riding. These experiences help clients ground themselves in the present moment and heighten their body awareness. After the equine activity, the mental health practitioner may prompt the client to recall specific moments or experiences that stood out during the session. By revisiting these moments, the client can gain deeper insights into their emotional responses and body sensations at various points in the interaction.

The therapeutic session isn't always guided by the client physically touching the horse. One participant clarified this:

*“So, there isn't always necessarily touching there isn't always necessarily an activity like you're going to go and put a halter on the horse, and you're going to go and groom the horse and you're going take the horse from point B, which is what a lot of the assisted activities are more focused on. You'll do an activity with the horse and then you'll come back to the mental health practitioner and the horse professional, and you will unpack it.” (SW 1)*

In equine-based therapy, not all interactions between the client and the horse involve touching. The focus of equine-based therapy is on the therapeutic benefits derived from the presence of the horse, their behavior and the client's interaction with them. Activities can include observational exercises, ground based activities as well as mindfulness exercises.

The typical process of equine-based therapy is that clients engage in various activities with the horse, and then they return to the mental health practitioner and the horse professional to process and unpack their experiences. The clients participate in structured or unstructured activities with the horse, which can include grooming, leading the horse through an obstacle course, riding, or simply spending time in the horse's presence. These activities are designed to be both physically and emotionally engaging. While the client interacts with the horse, the mental health practitioner and the horse professional closely observe the client's behaviour, body language, and

emotional responses. Horses are sensitive animals and can react to the client's emotions, offering valuable feedback that the mental health practitioner and horse professional can use to assess the client's state of mind and emotional reactions. After the activity with the horse, the client returns to the mental health practitioner for a debriefing and processing session. The mental health practitioner creates a safe and non-judgmental space for the client to discuss their experiences, emotions, and any insights gained during the activity.

During the processing session, the mental health practitioner facilitates a discussion to help the client unpack their feelings, thoughts, and reactions during the equine activity. The mental health practitioner may ask open-ended questions, encourage the client to explore their emotions, and help them connect their experiences with the horse to their personal life and challenges. Equine-based therapy often involves the use of metaphors and symbolism related to the horse's behaviour and interactions. The mental health practitioner may help the client recognise parallels between their experiences with the horse and their interpersonal relationships or life circumstances. Through the unpacking process, clients may gain insights into their emotions, patterns of behaviour, and areas of growth. The mental health practitioner helps the client identify therapeutic goals and strategies for addressing specific issues or challenges in their life. At the end of the session, the mental health practitioner and client work together to integrate the insights gained from the equine experience into the client's broader therapeutic journey. This may involve discussing how the newfound awareness can be applied to daily life and ongoing treatment.

The session will entail an interaction with the horse, be it emotional or physical and the themes that emerges from those interactions are then unpacked with the client, the horse professional and mental health practitioner. This is as follows:

*“There's no like conversation or actual unpacking of what happens there in an office space. So that happens, that unpacking happens with the horses. It's always happening. There's always something happening within this space and so many times other things also play a role, squirrel, a tortoise walking through, or a horse jumps out while we're busy talking, and that's all part of the story.” (SW2)*

Unpacking within the context of equine-based therapy refers to the process of exploring and addressing emotions, thoughts, and behaviours that arise during interactions with horses. Horses are sensitive and intuitive animals, and their

interactions with humans can provide valuable insights into the individual's emotional and psychological state. During equine-based therapy sessions, individuals or groups work with horses in various activities, such as grooming, leading, or riding. The mental health practitioner helps the participants "unpack" their emotions and experiences by encouraging them to reflect on their interactions with the horses and exploring the feelings that arise during these interactions.

Unpacking also involves exploring how clients' non-verbal communication influences the horse's behaviour and how it may reflect their interpersonal communication patterns. Participants' behaviours with the horses may mirror patterns they display in their relationships with others. By unpacking these behavioural patterns, participants can gain awareness of how they interact with others and identify opportunities for growth and change. Building a relationship with a horse requires trust and the establishment of clear boundaries.

The unpacking can happen with other elements in the environment playing a significant role. The therapy sessions often take place in specially designed outdoor settings that include not only the horses but also the natural environment and various props or obstacles. These additional elements can add depth to the therapeutic experience and provide further opportunities for exploration and growth. The integration of various elements in the environment enriches the equine-based therapy experience, allowing for a more holistic and comprehensive exploration of participants' emotions, behaviours, and personal challenges. The mental health practitioner or facilitator plays a crucial role in guiding the unpacking process, ensuring that the interactions with the horses and the environment are used to foster self-awareness, emotional processing, and positive change. Being in a natural environment can have a calming and grounding effect on participants. The presence of nature, such as trees, open spaces, and fresh air, can facilitate relaxation and encourage open communication during the therapy sessions.

The feedback in equine-based therapy occurs through the interaction between the clients and the horse within the horse's space. When engaging with horses in their environment clients can receive valuable feedback and responses from the horses, which are interpreted by client with the help of the mental health practitioner to facilitate the therapeutic process. The feedback can take various forms such as understanding

the horses body language, facial expressions, movements and responsiveness to clients' actions and emotions, in order for the client's story to unfold.

Schroeder and Stroud (2015: 368) described the facilitation of equine-based therapy as the main goals of equine-based therapy are to, "provide structure, observe processes, and assist clients with making meaning of the equine experience related to their treatment goals." EAGALA (2015) argued that through a learned facilitation framework of reflective listening and observation, the treatment team can create a therapeutic environment for a client's own story, perceptions, attitudes, emotions, and feelings to emerge. The framework includes four criteria: shifts, patterns, unique aspects, and discrepancies, methodology used by the team to track the activity and responses of both horse and client, although the primary focus is on the horses and symbols. Thomas, Lytle and Dammann (2016: 71) said that as a client session progresses, the first four criteria allows for the team to focus, pinpoint, and define moments of significance. The treatment team then takes these observations and reflect them to the client in the form of questions, observational statements, metaphors, and invitations for clients to share their story. This forms the foundation of how the session is executed. This model of intensive observation provides structure for the treatment team to stay within the model and resist interpreting client behaviour, thus, allowing the client's own interpretations and solutions to come forth.

## **Theme 7: Techniques used in equine based therapy**

The seventh theme is techniques used in equine based therapy. What emerged in the data is that equine based therapy is often combined with other therapeutic approaches. Four sub-themes emerged under this theme. They are spiritually based interventions, play therapy, story boards and counselling interventions as important within the context of equine based therapy.

### ***Sub-themes:***

#### ***7.1. Counselling interventions***

Various counselling interventions were also utilized in conjunction with equine-based therapy. The participants said as follows:

*“You can use any therapeutic approach. So, it matches quite well, so this talk therapy works really well with this. Logo therapy works really well with equine-based therapy. Cognitive behavioural therapy works very well with this.”* (Psych 1)

*“There are specific therapeutic tools that you could use hand in hand with the horse therapy. Your traditional psychology therapeutic person centered. I'm very person centered, so I keep that, that's always foremost in my approach. Unconditional positive regard, I won't challenge what a client is doing.”* (Psych 2)

*“I incorporate horses into psychotherapy, so I will incorporate horses into dialectic behavioural therapy. I'll incorporate horses into logo therapy, incorporate horses into narrative therapy.”* (Psych 3)

There are several traditional psychotherapeutic interventions that are utilised together with equine-based therapy. While equine-based therapy itself is a specialized form of therapy, it draws upon established psychotherapeutic approaches to guide the therapeutic process. According to the participants traditional psychotherapy approaches such as cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), dialectic behavioural therapy, psychoeducation, narrative therapy, and logo therapy can all be integrated into equine-based therapy. Young and Horton (2019) also supported the idea that cognitive-behavioural interventions can be adapted for use in equine-based therapy. Mental health practitioners may help clients identify and challenge unhelpful thoughts or beliefs related to their trauma and develop more adaptive thinking patterns. Kovacs, Van Dijke and Enders-Sledgers (2020) said that these interventions can support clients in gaining a new perspective, reducing negative self-talk, and promoting healthier coping strategies.

Kurtenback (2022: 66) wrote that narrative therapy techniques can be employed in equine-based therapy to help clients construct empowering narratives about their experiences and identities. Cairns (2019: 26) also said that mental health practitioners may use storytelling or metaphorical exercises to help clients externalize their problems, challenge dominant narratives, and develop new narratives that emphasize strength, resilience, and growth. Harvey et al. (2020: 665) added that equine-based therapy can also be adapted to include trauma-focused interventions. Mental health practitioners may utilise trauma-focused, cognitive-behavioural therapy (TF-CBT) techniques, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), or other

evidence-based trauma interventions to address trauma-related symptoms, process traumatic memories, and promote healing.

## **7.2. Spiritually based interventions**

Equine-based therapy also integrates spiritually based interventions, such as meditation, breathing exercises and mindfulness to assist in the therapeutic process.

The participants said as follows:

*“Breathing, focusing on really bringing the part of the brain online that helps you access oneself that some people might reference it as mindfulness.” (SW 1)*

*“We sometimes will meditate, so we'll just do a bit of a grounding exercise with the clients. And a bit of a breathing body awareness with anxiety levels and then we will walk up to where the horses are. We will observe the horses from outside looking in and engage in that process.” (SW 2)*

Various spiritual interventions, particularly, meditation can be used to assist in the therapeutic process. It allows the clients to be completely connected to their whole self as well as connect with their environment and surroundings. Furthermore, utilizing spiritual techniques such as mediation assists clients in dealing with anxiety. Clients may engage in guided meditation or mindfulness exercises while interacting with horses, allowing them to cultivate a sense of spiritual awareness, grounding, and connection to the present moment. Equine-based therapy takes place in natural settings, which inherently invites a connection to the natural world and its spiritual elements (Korn 2016). Clients may be encouraged to appreciate and engage with the beauty of nature, reflecting on how it relates to their spiritual beliefs and practices. Being in nature can provide a sense of awe, reverence, and connectedness to something greater than oneself (McCullough, Risley-Curtiss and Rorke 2015: 165).

Hoge et al (2017) stated that equine-based therapy can provide opportunities for clients to explore their values, life purpose, and make meaning. McCullough (2018: 134) added that clients may engage in discussions or activities that invite them to reflect on how their spiritual beliefs and values align with their goals, relationships, and overall wellbeing. Escobar (2021: 28) emphasized that horses can serve as gentle

guides in this exploration, supporting clients in connecting with their inner wisdom and spiritual essence.

### **7.3. Play therapy**

Play therapy emerged as a second sub-theme. This sub-theme outlines how play therapy can be integrated as a complementary technique in equine-based therapy.

It can be used as a therapeutic intervention. The participants said as follows:

*“I use a lot of arts and crafts with kids lots so like play therapy. But I will always use the theory and I always use therapy as the structure with my children to hold the structure because equine-based therapy is experiential. Therapy gives us some great framework in terms of holding that structure with kids, it's a little bit more non-directed with adults.”* (Psych 2)

*“Stuff that we use becomes a metaphorical representation of something of that issue, and sometimes the client links directly sometimes they don't, but generally that metaphorical link is really important. We can use equipment such as noodles or we can use food cones. We have a box of stuff like you would in a playroom, things like a telephone, balls, all of those kind of things we've got....”* (Psych 1)

Play therapy can be integrated into equine-based therapy to enhance the therapeutic experience and promote clients' emotional, social, and cognitive growth. Through play therapy, the clients can share their story, their challenges and obstacles and find solutions to problems. The use of a box of various items, such as telephones, balls, and other objects, during equine-based therapy sessions, can become metaphorical representations of the client's emotions, behaviours, and experiences, similar to how toys are used in traditional play therapy. By incorporating these elements into equine-based therapy, the client gains a unique and engaging therapeutic experience. The combination of equine interactions and play-based materials can provide a rich and insightful exploration of the client's emotions, behaviours, and thought patterns. It's important to remember that the therapeutic process should still be guided by a client-centred and strengths-based approach, and the mental health practitioner should be attentive to the client's responses and needs throughout the session. Each object in the box could represent different aspects of the client's life, relationships, or

challenges. The mental health practitioner may guide the client to explore the meanings to which they assign to each item and how they relate to their experiences.

Jung (2022: 2903) stated that children, and even some adults, often engage in symbolic play to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Van Fleet and Faa-Thompson (2010: 9) also discussed the value of using play materials, such as miniature horses, figurines, or props, to reenact scenarios, explore relationships, and process emotions. Sheade (2018: 128) noted that this symbolic play can provide valuable insights and promote self-expression. Equine-based therapy sessions can incorporate imaginative play, where clients engage in pretend play and create imaginary scenarios involving horses (DePrekel 2012: 59). More importantly Van Loggerenberg (2019: 2) said that this type of play allows clients to explore new possibilities, problem-solve, and develop creative approaches to challenges. It can also foster imagination, empathy, and perspective-taking.

#### **7.4. Story boards as an intervention**

Story boards were also identified in the data as an important intervention that can be used with equine-based therapy. The participants said as follows:

*“We could work with a storyline that the client has brought so that could be a premise. So that could be a theme that or we could work with the storyline that emerges out of the interactions that we have.”* (Psych 2)

*“With the story board, we look at the different things that happen. Who are the characters, what was the role or what were the values of these characters in the story? What was the timing? Which is the location? We work with the client as we create this kind of space, and then we might ask the client to come up with a working title for their set. We find that working title helps people to come to this sense of this is what the session was about and these are the different characters. And then we give them time to write if they want to write or they can journal and write outside of the session and some people don't want to write. So, we'll use art so they can paint. There will always be a reflective element on our work or the session.”* (Psych 1)

Participants used story boards as a technique to support equine-based therapy, as it allowed their clients to use the storyline, that emerges as a projection or reflection of

their own story. The story involves the horse, environment and any objects in the environment, these characters involved in the story represent specific people in the client's world. This technique then creates a conversation between the client and mental health professional on what the clients' views are. It creates an opportunity for reflection.

According to Lee, Dabelko-Schoeny, Jedlicka and Burns (2020: 399), storyboards are also a creative and effective intervention in equine-based therapy. Storyboards allow clients to visually depict their experiences, emotions, and personal narratives. Clients can use images, drawings, or words to represent different aspects of their lives and the challenges which they are facing. This process can help them explore and communicate their stories in a structured and visual manner. Storyboards can be particularly helpful in processing traumatic experiences. Clients can create storyboards to sequence and narrate the events of their trauma, enabling them to gain a sense of control and understanding over their experiences. This intervention provides a safe and contained way to explore and process difficult memories, emotions, and the impact of trauma (Kottler 2022).

Storyboards therefore can assist clients in externalizing their problems by representing them visually and are important to consider in social work practice. By separating the problem from themselves, clients can gain a different perspective and develop a sense of agency and empowerment (Medina-Muñoz *et al.* 2016). This process can contribute to reframing their experiences and developing strategies for overcoming challenges. They can be used as a tool for goal setting and action planning. Amerine and Hubbard (2016: 11) added that clients can create storyboards that illustrate their desired outcomes, steps toward achieving those goals, and the resources and support available to them. This intervention then can help clients clarify their aspirations, identify necessary actions, and develop a roadmap for their journey toward positive change.

Zur and Zur (2018) suggested that this intervention supports self-reflection, self-awareness, and deeper understanding. They facilitate communication and collaboration between the client, mental health practitioner, and possibly other group members. Clients can share their storyboards and discuss their meaning, allowing for dialogue, feedback, and mutual support. Mayo (2015: 1) believed that this process

encourages connection, empathy, and the exploration of shared themes and experiences.

### **Theme 8: The benefits of engaging in equine based therapy**

The benefits of engaging in equine-based therapy emerged as a further theme in the data. The participants identified the benefits as follows:

*“This is really good for those, and particularly, for those that are finding therapy resistant or are feeling really suspicious and afraid and anxious. It’s a lovely way of being able to change their focus.”* (Psych 1)

*“The first thing that comes to mind is that, when people are resistant to therapy and this is a wonderful way of actually getting them in touch with themselves and grounding them and also helping them work through difficulties because all the emphasis is on the horse, not on them, and it doesn’t feel like therapy, so it’s not like you’re the problem. You need to get fixed, which I think a lot of people think when they come to therapy. They’re much more open to working with horses and also, being open to you.”* (Psych 3)

Participants believed that equine-based therapy was extremely beneficial for clients who are usually resistant to traditional therapy. Clients are more open to equine-based therapy as it occurs in a non-threatening environment, and the focus of the therapy is shifted from the client to the horse, making it a much more comfortable experience. The client is then able to open themselves to the therapy. Horses are non-judgmental animals that offer acceptance and support. For clients who may have had negative experiences in traditional therapy or struggle with trust issues, the presence of a horse creates a non-threatening environment. This allows the client to feel comfortable and to open up emotionally.

Participants also noted that equine-based therapy promotes emotional well-being. They are identified as follows:

*“Improved ability to be in the present. Increased awareness about what’s important in life and sense of meaning and purpose. Decrease some anxiety. Decrease in depression. You’re developed an ability to process trauma in a way that it doesn’t show up that it’s having a negative impact in your life. It improves effective coping skills and coping strategies.”* (Psych 2)

Working with horses requires clients to regulate their emotions, as horses are sensitive to emotional cues. Clients learn to manage their emotions in order to effectively communicate and connect with the horse. This practice of emotional regulation can extend beyond the therapy setting and contribute to improved emotional well-being. Through interactions with the horse, clients gain insights into their own emotional patterns, triggers, and responses. This increased self-awareness allows them to make positive changes, develop healthier coping mechanisms, and improve their emotional well-being.

Other participants also mentioned that equine-based therapy promotes social wellbeing. They said as follows:

*“A lot of the women's groups that we work with...what we start to see is through the sessions they start to be self-confidence and the self-awareness that develops, the verbal interaction within the group is more confident and they share a bit more, so that's quite an incredible transformation that we see very regularly with our women groups.”* (SW2)

*“They have good results with that for self-promoting, self-esteem, self-concept definitely different life skills.”* (Psych 2)

*“Like a lot of acceptance happens in that space. And a lot of validation that happens in that space there's a lot of confidence building, so I think that plays into the emotional side of things.”* (EFLF 2)

The bond that can develop between humans and horses can provide a sense of connection and social support. Horses offer unconditional acceptance, which can be beneficial for clients who may feel isolated or struggle with trust in relationships. Accomplishing tasks with horses, overcoming challenges, and developing a relationship with the horse can increase a client's confidence and self-esteem. As clients succeed in their interactions with the horse, they gain a sense of confidence which can positively impact on their social well-being.

The participants also said that equine-based therapy can also assist clients with their physical well-being. They said as follows:

*“From a physiological point of view, it adds elements of you know when they're doing brushes with the horse, it actually picks up on the endorphins. It actually gets them*

*when they kind of pulled the relationship. It actually allows them physiologically to slow down to breathe better, just to feel more relaxed. So, it has a very good element being with animals. We found it particularly helpful for our clients.” (Psych 1)*

*“Balance strength, coordination, you know fine, fine motor skills as well as fine motor skills as well as sort of the larger motor skills of just walking.” (P4)*

Equine-based therapy involves physical activities such as grooming, leading and riding horses. These activities require various movements, including walking and balancing. These aspects of equine-based therapy can help improve coordination, balance, and body awareness. Being in the presence of horses can also have a calming effect on the body.

Similarly, Fischer (2019) stated that equine assisted activities and therapies undoubtedly provide a strong foundation in horsemanship skills while also offering a wide array of physical, cognitive, social, and emotional benefits. Nicholas (2019: 1) argued that the power of the horse transcends disability, age, and skill to provide a motivating and enjoyable experience for all involved.

Escobar (2021: 24) also emphasized that equine assisted activities offer a wide array of physical benefits including improved balance, coordination, strength, endurance, core strength, head control, gross motor skills, and fine motor skills. Nicholas (2019: 1) argued that participants with disabilities in an equine-based therapy programme in Wisconsin, similarly, identified a variety of cognitive benefits including improved attention, sequencing, memory, communication, spatial awareness, left/right discrimination, and safety awareness. Lee, Dabelko-Schoeny, Jelicka and Burns (2020: 402) and Norwood et al. (2021: 682) added that participants experience a variety of social and emotional benefits as well, including, but certainly not limited to, improved social motivation, improved self-regulation, improved management of sensory behaviours, improved self-control, increased confidence, trust, leadership, and assertiveness.

## **Theme 9: Stories of healing**

Stories of healing emerged as the ninth theme within the data. There were two subthemes that emerged under this theme.

### **Sub-themes:**

### **9.1. Clients' stories of healing from the perspective of the practitioners**

This theme reflects some of the stories of healing based on the perspectives of the mental health practitioners of their clients. The participants said as follows:

*“Especially for trauma clients, being able to open up to where the trauma is stuck within the body and then shift it with the experience and with the physical doing of activities and engaging with horses. We’ve had horses last week with a lady from a township. Where the horse came up just the first time she’s meeting, and the horse just knocked with its head here. And she queried. “What is the horse doing?” It’s not for us to say, we asked her well, “what was it for you?” “Either it was moving me out the way or telling me something.” By the end of that session and her second session, she said “the horse is telling me I’m holding too much for everybody, and I’m keeping all my stuff down inside and I need to open up and make myself vulnerable.” (SW2)*

Equine-based therapy can be particularly beneficial for trauma clients as it provides a unique and powerful approach to healing and processing trauma-related experiences. The presence of horses, along with the experiential nature of the therapy, can create a safe and supportive environment for trauma survivors to address and work through their traumatic memories and emotions. Equine-based therapy is inherently somatic and experiential, focusing on bodily sensations and emotions. Trauma is often held in the body, and equine-based therapy can provide trauma survivors with a gentle and effective way to process and release stored trauma energy. Trauma clients may struggle with emotional regulation and may have difficulty expressing and managing their feelings. Interacting with horses can help clients learn to identify and regulate their emotions in a supportive and non-threatening context. Setting boundaries and regaining a sense of empowerment is essential for trauma recovery. The client's interactions with the horse can provide opportunities to explore boundary issues and practice assertiveness. Trauma can disrupt a person's sense of self and their life narrative.

Equine-based therapy can aid trauma clients in rebuilding their narrative and creating new, more positive stories about themselves and their experiences.

Another participant said that equine-based therapy was helpful to a client who had issues with communicating and expressing herself. She said as follows:

*“We’ve recently been working with a young girl from a school where the social worker was extremely concerned. She just verbally shut down. You can’t hear her when she speaks, she doesn’t talk to you, she covers up. She’s had a very traumatic family life, so she came for equine-based therapy. When she started at the beginning. She wouldn’t even go up to a horse on her own, she would just be stuck with us. Her insecurity was so high, she was fumbling, nervousness with the body and through her sessions she especially went around the horses... she started to speak up, her volume shifted. She started to have more words and towards the end, the hair was washed and tied back and there was like subtle changes but quite unique.” (SW2)*

Equine-based therapy can be especially beneficial for clients who are shut down emotionally or have difficulty expressing themselves. The presence of horses and the experiential nature of the therapy can create a unique and supportive environment for these clients to begin the process of opening up and connecting with their emotions. Horses are highly sensitive and responsive animals, particularly attuned to non-verbal cues. Clients who find it challenging to express themselves verbally may find it easier to communicate and connect with the horse non-verbally. For clients who feel overwhelmed or powerless, equine-based therapy can provide opportunities to regain a sense of control and empowerment through their interactions with the horse. Equine-based therapy can promote integration between cognitive, emotional, and physical experiences. As clients connect with their emotions and experiences during the therapy session, they can begin to integrate these insights into their daily lives.

One participant referred to a client’s story of healing from issues related to eating disorders. She said as follows:

*“A counsellor heard about equine-based therapy, so she referred her client to me. We had one session and then afterwards she gave me feedback and said that this lady actually started to work on things and opened up to about her eating disorder and she actually spoke about it for the first time and was starting to work on it, and it’s something she’s struggled since she was a child, and this lady was like in her 40s.” (SW 3)*

Equine-based therapy can be beneficial for adults who have struggled with eating disorders since childhood. The unique and experiential nature of equine-based therapy can offer a powerful and supportive approach to address the complex issues surrounding eating disorders. Equine-based therapy emphasizes the mind-body

connection, allowing clients to become more aware of their physical sensations and emotions. This awareness can be particularly helpful for individuals with eating disorders, as it can foster a deeper understanding of the link between emotions and disordered eating behaviours. Engaging with horses can help clients to learn to regulate their emotions, which is crucial for individuals with eating disorders. Interacting with horses can promote body acceptance and positive self-esteem. This can be transformative for individuals with eating disorders who often struggle with body image issues and low self-worth.

Another participant referred to a story of a client who experienced stagnation in her life. The participant said as follows:

*“Another client who found herself very stuck in her personal life. She didn’t know what to do next, what she should be doing, and the horses just reflected that. We felt so stuck in the session. The horse was literally standing still, basically frozen for almost the entire session, and that just reflected how stuck the client was. She was experiencing in her world exactly what was happening in the arena. So, I think that horses provide a mirror to the clients world. It’s just always so spot on.” (SW 3)*

Equine-based therapy can be a powerful therapeutic modality for clients who feel stuck in life or are facing challenges in moving forward. When clients experience a sense of being stuck in an equine-based therapy session, it often reflects their current life struggles and can provide valuable insights into the underlying issues hindering their progress. The horse’s behaviour and responses can often mirror the client’s emotional state and behavioural patterns. When the client feels stuck during the equine session, it may indicate patterns of stagnation or resistance that they experience in their daily life. The equine-based therapy session allows clients to externalize their internal struggles through interactions with the horse. The mental health practitioner can help the client recognize and explore these struggles in a safe and supportive setting. Equine-based therapy can help clients identify the psychological, emotional, or behavioural blocks that are preventing them from moving forward in life. These blocks may be related to past traumas, self-limiting beliefs, or unprocessed emotions. The horse’s behaviour can serve as a metaphor for the client’s life challenges. Clients can learn valuable lessons about assertiveness, boundaries, communication, and leadership by observing how the horse responds to their actions.

Whilst one participant focused on a story of healing related to bullying. The participant said as follows:

*“I had a little boy, he was bullied. He went into the arena and the horse was fine, and during the second session the horse started getting in his personal space and pushing him around a little bit and he immediately took steps backwards. And you could see immediately through his body language what happened in his outside world, so that was such a rich experience to say. How are you feeling now? We could actually take him aside and say, okay, let’s look at your body language, which was like, right, put your shoulders back. Look at the horse in the eyes. If he comes into your space. What are you going to do? Make yourself bigger. What can you do with your hands? That kind of thing and he got a result immediate. And by the end of about four sessions, that horse had accepted him as leader and was following him around without a halter.”*

(Psych 3)

According to White-Lewis (2020: 58) building a relationship with a horse can foster trust, empathy, and healthy attachment patterns. Horses can teach individuals about healthy boundaries, effective communication, and building relationships based on mutual respect. Adams et al. (2015: 58) stated that horses are highly perceptive animals that respond to human emotions and behaviours. Interacting with horses can provide individuals with immediate and honest feedback, increasing self-awareness and promoting personal growth. Working with horses can help individuals learn to regulate their emotions and manage stress. (Diaz 2022: 2). Badin (2022: 245) added that horses can mirror and respond to emotional states, providing opportunities for individuals to practice emotional regulation skills in a safe and supportive environment. Healing with horses can be particularly beneficial for individuals who have experienced trauma. Moreover, Hojgaard-Boytler (2022: 8) noted that overcoming challenges and developing skills in working with horses can foster a sense of empowerment and self-confidence. Murphy and Wilson (2017: 368) also said that healing with horses can help individuals rediscover their strengths, develop resilience, and enhance their self-esteem.

## **9.2. Practitioners' self-care and healing**

Personal stories are a reflection of some of the practitioners' stories of healing.

Participants said that equine-based therapy was beneficial in the lives of their children.

They said as follows:

*"My older son had severe learning disabilities and also social issues and I found that working with him and horses actually helped a lot. It helped to calm him. It helped open up avenues of communication and that's when it started."* (P3)

Equine-based therapy can be a valuable and transformative intervention for mental health practitioners' children with learning disabilities. The presence of horses and the experiential nature of the therapy can offer a unique and supportive environment to address the challenges that are associated with learning disabilities. Equine-based therapy involves a range of sensory experiences, movement, and visual stimuli. These sensory inputs can support the child's sensory integration and processing skills, benefiting their overall development. Success in equine activities can boost the child's self-esteem and confidence. Achieving tasks and overcoming challenges with the horse can provide a sense of accomplishment and empowerment. Working with horses requires focus and attention, which can be beneficial for children with attention difficulties. The structured nature of equine-based therapy can support the child in improving their focus and sustained attention. Skills learned and practiced in equine-based therapy can often be transferred to the child's academic and everyday life. For example, improved focus, emotional regulation, and social skills can positively impact their educational experience.

*"It's magic first of all. I have a son, he turned 29 yesterday. He's ADHD and when he rides it makes a world of difference, he's more focused, more together and more relaxed. I worked with an occupational mental health practitioner who does hippotherapy, and I was the horse person. And I was absolutely amazed at two special needs children, how they developed it was mind play seriously. So, for me, I mean I love horses. I think equine-based therapy psychotherapy is just the beast."* (P5)

Equine-based therapy can be incredibly beneficial for special needs children, as the presence of horses and the experiential nature of the therapy can offer a unique and supportive environment for their specific needs. Equine-based therapy can be adapted to address a wide range of conditions and challenges faced by special needs children,

including physical disabilities, developmental delays, intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, sensory processing disorders, and emotional or behavioural difficulties. Equine-based therapy activities can involve problem-solving, sequencing, and memory tasks, providing cognitive stimulation and mental engagement for special needs children.

Another participant said that equine-based therapy was beneficial for her physical well-being. She said as follows:

*“A number of years ago I had a run in with really bad surgery and spent some time in hospital and I was absolutely wrecked and when I started to engage with the horse and I was able to ride again...that was my “save me”, just being with them is incredible. So, from a physical viewpoint you just become stronger, better, healthier. I would say from an emotional level it takes the focus away from yourself.” (P9)*

Equine-based therapy can be a beneficial and supportive intervention for clients who have undergone surgery. The unique and gentle nature of equine interactions can provide a therapeutic environment that complements the healing process after surgery. Equine-based therapy can be incorporated into physical rehabilitation programs to help clients to improve their strength, balance, and mobility. The rhythmic movement of the horse can aid in restoring muscle function and coordination. Interacting with horses and engaging in equine activities can have a positive impact on pain management. The experience of being around horses and focusing on the therapy session can help distract from or reduce post-surgery discomfort. The presence of horses can provide emotional support and comfort for clients during their post-surgery recovery. Horses are known for their calming and non-judgmental presence, which can be therapeutic for clients who are facing the emotional challenges of surgery and recovery. Equine-based therapy can support the overall well-being of clients by addressing physical, emotional, and mental aspects of recovery. It offers a holistic approach that complements medical treatments.

Equine-based therapy provided an opportunity for practitioners to prioritise their own self-care and well-being. Engaging in activities with horses can be both therapeutic and stress-relieving for the practitioner. Taking time to connect with horses, enjoy the natural environment, and engage in self-reflective practices can contribute to the practitioner's own emotional resilience and overall well-being. They may also experience personal growth and self-reflection. Interacting with horses and witnessing

the transformative experiences of their clients can inspire introspection and personal insights. Practitioners may gain a deeper understanding of themselves, their own beliefs, and the impact of their therapeutic work. Similarly, Simmons (2011: 3) argued that interacting with horses in equine-based therapy can help mental health practitioners to develop emotional regulation and self-awareness. Horses are highly attuned to human emotions, and their responses can provide valuable feedback to mental health practitioners about their own emotional states. This increased self-awareness allows mental health practitioners to better understand and manage their emotions, thus promoting their own well-being (Kendell *et al.* 2015: 57). Similarly, Johns, Bobat and Holder (2016: 200) stated that spending time in the natural environment with horses can have a calming and stress-reducing effect. Mental health practitioners can benefit from the therapeutic environment themselves, finding solace and relaxation amidst the peacefulness and serenity of the equine setting. This can help mental health practitioners to alleviate their own stress and to recharge emotionally.

Brandt (2013: 30) also noted that engaging in relationships with horses can foster a sense of connection and trust for mental health practitioners. Building a bond with a horse requires mutual trust and respect, similar to the therapeutic alliance with clients. Through these relationships, mental health practitioners can experience the healing power of connection, which can positively impact their own well-being. Fry (2013: 255 and 2021: 105) added that equine-based therapy can reignite a mental health practitioner's passion for their work and bring a sense of joy and fulfilment. Witnessing the transformative experiences of their clients with horses can serve as a powerful reminder of the therapeutic impact they have as professionals. This renewal of passion can reinvigorate mental health practitioners and contribute to their own healing journey (White-Lewis 2020: 8).

## **Theme 10: Social work**

The tenth theme that emerged within the data was the relevance of equine-based therapy in social work. There were three sub-themes that emerged within this theme.

### ***Sub-themes:***

#### ***10.1. Horses at the interface of social work***

Horses can be valuable in a social work context, providing a unique opportunity for social workers to engage with clients in a non-traditional and experiential way. The participants noted the following:

*“As a social work practitioner working with families and rebuilding families and family relationships, this is just such a lovely way to take it outside of the office and take it outside of the traditional therapy. It allows for the dynamics to unfold around the horses. It allows the social worker to educate upon some really interesting elements. So, rebuilding our family units, I think is excellent for marriage counselling as well. I think it's really interesting when you're dealing with troubled youth and youth that have been traumatized. I think this is really an excellent way of being able to feel that as part of that process of getting them back into society.”* (Psych 1)

Equine-based therapy in social work brings a creative and engaging approach to supporting clients' growth and healing. The unfolding dynamics around the horses provide rich opportunities for clients to explore themselves, their relationships, and their emotions in a manner that is both effective and enjoyable. Social workers who are skilled in equine-based therapy can use the power of this unique modality to enhance their practice and create a meaningful change in their clients' lives. Equine-based therapy in social work can be a versatile and effective intervention that addresses a wide range of issues that social workers commonly deal with. Equine-based therapy can be adapted to support individuals, families, and groups facing various challenges. By incorporating equine-based therapy into their practice, social workers can offer a powerful and complementary intervention that addresses a wide array of issues. The experiential and relational nature of equine-based therapy aligns well with social work principles, supporting clients' holistic well-being and promoting positive change in their lives.

One participant said that social work uses a variety of systems/theories which can be aligned with practicing equine-based therapy. She said as follows:

*“As I understand social work, you're very aware of the system you use, systemic thinking, and so if we were to integrate horses into that systemic thinking, it's at what level can are you going be impacting. So, are you probably on a meso systemic level? I would be holding that in mind, yet at the same time, because of the relational, and there's such a strong relational element you can learn so much about what's happening on a macro level too.”* (Psych 2)

Social work, systemic thinking, and equine-based therapy can intersect and complement each other to provide a holistic and effective approach to supporting individuals, families, and communities. Social work is a profession focused on improving the wellbeing and quality of life of individuals, families, and communities (Zastrow and Hessenauer 2022: 6). Social workers are trained to assess and address social, emotional, and environmental factors that impact a person's functioning and overall life circumstances. Social workers work with individuals and families who are facing various challenges, such as mental health issues, substance abuse, poverty, trauma, and relationship difficulties (Brown, Jonestone and Ross 2021: 9). Systemic thinking is an approach that considers individuals as part of larger interconnected systems, such as families, communities, and societies. It recognises that the wellbeing of an individual is influenced by the dynamics and interactions within their social and environmental contexts (Carter 2017). Equine-based therapy, as previously discussed, is an experiential therapeutic approach that involves interactions with horses to address various emotional, behavioural, and psychological challenges. It can be effective in helping individuals develop to self-awareness, build trust, improve communication, and process emotions (Grootveld 2015: 20). Social workers using systemic thinking will then consider not only the individual client's needs but also the dynamics within their family, community, and broader social systems and equine-based therapy can offer a unique lens through which to observe these dynamics and interactions.

Both social work and equine-based therapy also employ a strengths-based approach, focusing on the client's resources, capabilities, and potential for growth. Equine-based therapy can be particularly helpful in family or group settings, providing a safe space to observe and address family dynamics and communication patterns. Social workers can use the insights gained from equine-based therapy to guide family interventions and systemic changes. Social workers and equine mental health practitioners can collaborate to create a trauma-informed environment, recognising the potential for past trauma in shaping individual and systemic behaviours. Equine-based therapy sessions can be conducted in community settings, fostering community engagement and support. Social workers can use these community connections to further support the clients' needs (Lee and Makela 2018: 399).

Equine-based therapy also has a strong relational element that aligns well with the principles of social work. Both approaches emphasize the importance of building meaningful relationships and establishing a supportive therapeutic alliance with clients, according to Carlsson, Nilsson Ranta and Traeen (2014: 20). Equine-based therapy focuses on developing a trusting and positive relationship between the client and the horse, as well as the client and the equine mental health practitioner. In social work, building trust and rapport with clients is also fundamental to understanding their needs and collaboratively working towards their goals (Hansen and Natland 2017: 102). Equine-based therapy emphasizes the empowering of clients through interactions with the horse, where they take the lead and make decisions. Social work similarly focuses on promoting clients' autonomy and self-determination, empowering them to make positive changes in their lives. Clients may transfer their feelings and experiences with significant others onto the horse in equine-based therapy. This transference process can be explored to gain insights into their relationships and emotions. Social workers are trained to recognise and work with transference and metaphors in therapeutic settings (Dewane 2006: 543). Equine-based therapy can provide opportunities for clients to explore attachment patterns and relationship dynamics, including trust and intimacy issues. Social workers are trained to address attachment-related concerns and support clients in forming healthy relationships. Equine-based therapy involves non-verbal communication with the horse, emphasizing body language and emotions. Social workers are skilled in understanding non-verbal cues, which can enhance their ability to connect with clients and interpret their needs. The presence of horses can be comforting and emotionally supportive for clients, helping them to feel understood and validated. Social workers also provide emotional support to clients, offering empathy and compassion during challenging times.

Lee and Makela (2018: 131) said that to understand human behaviour in the environment, social workers must consider all systems at play. The environment extends beyond the human centred environment to include human animals, nonhuman animals, and the natural environment and when one aspect of the system is impacted, the entire system is impacted. Leggae (2016: 1926) wrote that in equine assisted social work, the natural environment, including the horses, can serve as a model for how systems operate and interact. By observing the horses in their natural environment, social workers can gain insight into how various systems interact and

how changes in one area can impact the entire system. This can provide valuable lessons and metaphors for clients in understanding their own environments and systems.

In 1996, Saleeby pioneered the strengths perspective, which aligns with social work practice by recognizing that every living being has a strength, purpose, and role in the universe (Spett 2023: 1). Working with a horse can help identify an individual's inherent strengths, such as recognizing stress or anxiety through a horse's behaviour. By implementing a plan for change and practicing deep breathing techniques, the horse may show signs of relaxation and a desire to connect physically, forming the basis for a relationship. Equine-based therapy is aligned with the strengths-based approach as it empowers clients through nonverbal communication and physical interaction with horses to recognize and build upon their inherent strengths, fostering a sense of self-efficacy and resilience. Spett (2023: 9) further wrote that equine-based therapy in social work brings to life the fundamental practice of social work. The social worker/client relationship is the heart of the connection. The social worker and client must establish an authentic relationship at the point of contact.

## ***10.2. The value of equine based therapy in social work***

This theme outlines the importance of incorporating equine-based therapy into social work practice. Professionals can accordingly expand their therapeutic toolkit and offer a holistic approach to addressing clients' needs. The importance of equine-based therapy lies in its ability to engage individuals, foster meaningful connections, and promote overall well-being in a way that complements and enhances social work interventions.

One participant said that the farm space can be used for therapy:

*“If you've got a farm space and you've got horses, depending on what model you use and equine facilitator to work with, you can use it as part of your process, whether it be therapeutically, you could use it for mediation.” (SW2)*

Equine-based therapy can be integrated into different environments. The key is to tailor interventions and approaches to meet the unique needs of each client or group and empower them to work towards positive change and personal growth. Other

participants shared that incorporating equine-based therapy in social work can provide an alternative method for clients to express themselves. Their responses were as follows:

*“The horses just opens the door somehow, they just do and then the social worker then has that opportunity to work with what's presented. It gets people out in the fresh air, it gets them out in the open, so it's completely different and that also is something that the horses work on more energetic level.”* (P2)

*“So, they offer a bridge, I would say that that's probably a good analogy to use, so they offer a bridge between where the client is and possibly what you are wanting to unpack. For you in a social work practice, you know if you expose in group work, family dynamics and things like that you would be able to then unpack the conversation that comes up. Because it's very interesting how people will perceive a horse's behaviour and in their perception and the interpretation of that often opens the door for the mental health practitioner to start a conversation.”* (P3)

*“And so, I think equine-based therapy can assist a social worker in picking up things that the client may not verbalise. And they can pick those things up without often having to probe. So, the horses will have a specific response to a person and that makes the person then open up and they share more openly, so I think the intuitive part of the social work is definitely been aided by the horse and has and is benefiting from it.”*

(P4)

Horses have a special way of connecting with humans and can create a powerful therapeutic environment. Equine-based therapy then opens the door for social workers to engage with clients in a unique way. The presence of the horse can create a nonjudgmental and safe space where clients may feel more comfortable exploring their emotions and vulnerabilities. Equine-based therapy can serve as a powerful intermediary step between the client's current state and the therapeutic goals the social worker aims to achieve. Horses have a natural ability to connect with humans and create a sense of trust and safety. When clients interact with horses, it can lead to an immediate and meaningful connection.

This engagement paves the way for the social worker to establish rapport and build a therapeutic alliance with the client. As clients interact with the horses, they may project their thoughts, emotions, and experiences onto the horse's behaviour. These

perceptions and interpretations can be rich material for the social worker to explore during therapy sessions. It can open the door to discussing underlying feelings, experiences, and patterns that the client may not have been aware of or felt comfortable addressing directly. Equine-based therapy's unique approach and the profound impact of the human-horse connection creates a bridge for the social worker to effectively address the client's needs, unpack their experiences, and facilitate meaningful conversations that promote healing and growth. It complements and enhances the social work practice by offering a dynamic and alternative therapeutic approach.

*“I think it's experiential. It's not just sitting on a couch with a mental health practitioner, but I think there is just a different element to it. Again, they don't feel judged by the horse, so for the social worker it's sometimes easier just to relay information from the horses versus social workers saying “Well, I think this” it's more of a guidance from the horses I think it's more supportive and suggested. So, I definitely think it has benefits to social work, definitely in family therapy and you know in any kind of social work. And it's highly beneficial and also human to human is sometimes difficult because we worry about judgement, we worry about opening up all our sort of deepest secrets and worries and anxieties, and with the horse's presence, it seemed to be easier.” (P5)*

In equine-based therapy, the role of the social worker is focused more towards facilitating the client's interactions with the horses and guiding them through the process of self-discovery. While traditional talk therapy relies heavily on the social worker's interpretations and analysis, equine-based therapy shifts the focus to the client's experiences and perceptions, supported by the interactions with the horses. This approach can be particularly effective for individuals who may have difficulty expressing themselves verbally or who benefit from more experiential and metaphorical forms of learning and growth.

Another participant said that equine-based therapy addresses the therapeutic goals that clients come with. She said as follows:

*“With regards to the therapeutic relationship aims, the immediate therapeutic relationship, the mental health practitioner includes a horse so there's also aspects around the fact that they continue to have the horse as a resource because they've had a lived experience, the body remembers that. So, when people then have stressful*

*events, other stressful events in their lives happening, their body remembers the resource of the relationship with the horse.” (P7)*

By incorporating the horse as an integral part of the therapeutic relationship, equine-based therapy in social work therapy offers a unique and lasting impact. The positive experiences with the horse become a valuable resource that clients can access whenever they encounter challenging situations in their lives. The positive experiences and connections with the horse create a source of support and comfort that clients can draw upon during times of stress or adversity. Moreover, engaging with the horse in equine-based therapy involves not only cognitive processes but also somatic experiences. The body remembers the emotions, sensations, and connections made during the therapy sessions. This somatic memory can serve as a powerful resource for the client when faced with future challenges as described. The combination of the therapeutic relationship, the transformative experiences with the horse, and the skills learned during the therapy sessions can lead to profound and enduring changes in clients' lives.

One participant pointed out the link between social work approaches and benefits of incorporating them into equine-based therapy. She said as follows:

*“I suppose for me, social work has always had a systemic approach and ecological approach, because it's a person in a situation, in sitting and so for me as a social work practitioner, when I was trained in social work, it was about the relationship with self, other and environment and that's horses. That's how horses are, and so for me the link or the path just is the same in that sense that that it just makes system sense.”*

(P6)

*“Social work is this beautiful place of systems thinking person in situation, you're always looking at what's available to people as support and self-help, self-support, self-actualization. How do you help individuals, families, communities to make sense of traumatic events? And so, for me in terms of social work, this beautiful system of you know an individual horse in a herd as a family interacting with and never disconnecting from nature, which in my opinion has been what has created a great deal of ill health in the human psyche. Is this disconnection from nature, from what's intuitively part of our biology and the horses help me bring that back to people. Help give them a physical and emotional and mental and a spiritual reexperience of what's*

*available. The work is totally, it's totally experiential, so having your own experience.”*  
(SW 1)

Social work's systemic and ecological approach aligns well with the nature of equine-based therapy and the inherent qualities of horses. Social work adopts a systemic perspective, recognizing that individuals are interconnected with their environments, including family, community, and societal systems (Gabarino 2017). Equine-based therapy complements this approach by involving not just the client and the horse but also the broader context of the therapeutic setting, the facilitator, and the horse's environment. The interactions between all these elements can influence and shape the therapeutic process. Social work's ecological perspective emphasizes the interplay between individuals and their environments, considering how each influences the other. In equine-based therapy, the horse's natural environment and the outdoor setting provide a unique context for clients to engage in therapy (Kopytin 2017: 23). This environment can influence the therapeutic experience and contribute to the clients' well-being. Both social work and equine-based therapy emphasize the importance of relationships. Social work focuses on fostering healthy relationships with self and others to promote wellbeing (Burnette, Clark and Rodning 2018: 369). Equine-based therapy extends this concept by including the horse as a relationship partner. Clients develop connections not just with the horse but also with themselves and their environment during the therapy process.

When integrated into social work practice, equine-based therapy can complement traditional therapeutic approaches and expand the range of interventions available to social workers. By incorporating equine-based therapy techniques, social workers can provide clients with a unique and effective means of addressing mental health concerns, trauma, interpersonal difficulties, and personal growth, ultimately enhancing the overall impact of their therapeutic interventions. Equine-based therapy promotes holistic wellbeing by addressing physical, emotional, and psychological aspects. Additionally, the nature-based environment of equine-based therapy can have a positive impact on mental health, reducing stress and enhancing overall well-being (Figueiras and Corredeira 2021: 17687).

Social workers support client populations who are considered hard to reach, vulnerable, or resistant to treatment (Cortis and Meagher 2012: 279; Eseonu 2021: 445). Buck, Bean and Marco (2017: 397) argued that social workers are responsible

to take the lead in advocating a robust, accessible, and inclusive approach to mental and behavioural health care delivery. With a main aim of improving human well-being and satisfying the basic human needs of all people, advocating the use of and conducting research on therapies like equine assisted psychotherapy is a natural match. Buck, Bean and Marco (2017: 397) also noted another important parallel between social work and equine-based therapy is the way the treatment team enables individuals to be the experts in the field while actively opposing a controlling role. Equine-based therapy also challenges talk therapy assumptions by emphasising the potential of non-verbal and non-human communication. This explicit shift in power relations helps the anti-oppressive and empowering strategy of social work, allowing suppressed knowledge in therapy to emerge (Dominelli 2002: 18).

According to Carlsson et al. (2014: 19) equine-based therapy has become increasingly popular in social work because it provides a unique and effective way to help individuals, families, and groups overcome various challenges. Equine-based therapy can be used in social work to help individuals with a wide range of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, trauma, and addiction (Smith-Osbourne 2010: 291; Acri et al. 2016: 603). The therapy sessions typically involve interacting with horses in various ways, such as grooming, feeding, or riding (Swindel (2010: 1), Carlsson (2016: 21) and Lee, Dalbelko-Schoeny, Jedlicka and Burns (2020: 400). The interaction with the horses can help clients to develop a sense of trust, responsibility, and empathy, which can lead to improvements in their emotional and social functioning Swindel (2010: 3) emphasized that social work students, educators, and practitioners are always seeking effective best practices that can be implemented with their populations. The use of equine-based therapy is encouraged for practitioners seeking cost-effective and successful programs to consider therapeutic riding. Lietz and Napan (2020: 51) said that equine-based therapy promotes authenticity and enables clients to step outside of performative roles and to connect to themselves and others with grace and integrity. It has the potential to be utilized to a much greater extent in social work practice.

Lietz and Napan (2020: 51) also argued that although the practitioner's interventions were based on knowledge, values, and skills familiar to social workers, additional training in equine-based therapy will be required for its effective application in social work practice. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), (2022) said that social workers have an ethical obligation to engage with clients, meet them where they

are, and seek to form a therapeutic partnership. To do this, social workers may need to be creative to satisfy the requirements and preferences of their clients. This is one of the main reasons why unique, additional, or alternative means of connecting a client to services are frequently included in treatment plans (Sirois and Purc-Stephenson, 2008: 11).

#### **10.4. Education**

Including equine-based therapy in social work curricula can prove beneficial, as it offers unique and valuable opportunities for therapeutic intervention. The participants said as follows:

*“It should be part of education. We include everything else. Why not equine-based therapy?”*

*I mean it's an upgrading field. It would be nice to include it in social work.”* (Psych 2)

It's important for social work education to evolve and adapt to emerging trends and effective therapeutic approaches. By including equine-based therapy as part of social work training, future social workers can graduate with a broader skill set, allowing them to better meet the diverse needs of their clients and provide more comprehensive and effective care.

*“Equine-based therapy can be integrated into the social welfare so that it works and it's in line of educational policy.”* (Psych 2)

By integrating equine-based therapy into social welfare and aligning it with educational policies in social work, we can promote a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to mental health and well-being. This integration acknowledges the potential benefits of equine-based therapy and empowers social workers to use a broader range of interventions to support the diverse needs of their clients.

*“I'm not sure that for it to be fully inclusive in a curriculum, however, exposure to it, so like I said, understanding of what it is. And of course, how to actually network, resource, collaborate. So even if you like within a practice situation, referrals can be made so there should be some sort of awareness about it.”* (SW2)

*“Something that they need to be exposed to and do to learn the basics of equine assisted therapy, but I do think that this is something that needs to be incorporated*

*into social work curriculum. Because it has a very strong therapeutic component.”*  
(Psych 1)

*“So maybe if it was included in a social work or a psychology curriculum, then it would be more like accredited. I'm sure if it was offered as part of the coursework for students during a practical you would obviously go out into the field to get some sort of experience, apart from just theoretical part of it.”* (Psych 3)

According to the data, equine-based therapy should be included as a part of the social work academic curriculum, either as an elective or as an additional specialisation. This would expose students to diverse therapeutic modalities and prepare them to integrate equine-based therapy into their future practice. Social work education should include sufficient information and training about equine-based therapy to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand, network, resource, and collaborate effectively in practice settings. Offer workshops, seminars, or guest lectures to introduce students to the concepts and principles of equine-based therapy. Encourage collaboration between social work departments and equine-based therapy centres. This could involve guest lectures by equine professionals, joint training sessions, or internship opportunities. This can provide an overview and create awareness of its benefits and applications. Organize field trips or experiential learning opportunities where students can visit equine-based therapy centres and witness the therapeutic process firsthand. This exposure can deepen their understanding of the approach and its potential impact.

According to Acri *et al.* (2016: 605) equine-based therapy can offer several benefits to social work education by providing unique experiential learning opportunities and enhancing essential skills. Equine-based therapy allows students to gain practical experience and apply theoretical knowledge in a real-life setting (Lee and Makela 2018: 606). This experiential learning approach can deepen their understanding of human-animal interactions and the therapeutic process. Carlsson, Nilsson Ranta and Traeen (2014: 20) said that equine-based therapy encourages students to reflect on their own emotions, thoughts, and behaviours during interactions with horses. This process of self-awareness can help social work students recognise their own strengths, weaknesses, and triggers, leading to personal growth and increased self-reflection.

Participants also said that practitioners are required to possess particular knowledge and skills to practice equine based therapy. The participants said as follows:

*“I don't think you need have experience with horses as a social worker but what's important is a fundamental belief that contact with nature and animals has an important role to play in well-being. I do think that it's important for you choose your own therapeutic frameworks that you work within. It would also be important that you've got this exposure and that you work with that a horse specialist.”* (Psych 2)

Equine-based therapy can be a valuable addition to a social worker's skill set, even without prior horse experience. The key lies in the social worker's openness to alternative therapeutic approaches, willingness to learn, and collaborative mindset when working with specialists. By embracing the benefits of equine-assisted therapy, social workers can enhance their practice and better serve clients seeking this form of intervention.

*“I think from a credibility perspective and from a safety perspective. And if it's going to be recognized as a treatment modality or therapeutic modality or as a prevention or even promote mental health promotion or intervention. You cannot say that well, we'll just go stand in the field because they become superficial. I think you have to think about what's the intent. So, you may be standing in a field with horses, but there's a thought process that's going behind there, that is informed.”* (P6)

Equine-assisted therapy should be approached with professionalism, intentionality, and a thoughtful understanding of the therapeutic process. Social workers should have a deep understanding of equine-based therapy's theoretical foundations and evidence-based practices. They should also stay updated with research and best practices in the field. Equine-based therapy sessions should be carefully planned and intentional. Practitioners should have a clear understanding of the therapeutic intent behind each activity and how it aligns with the client's treatment goals.

*“You can't do equine-based therapy without the mental health component of it, so you can't go there just knowing the horse and think that you can do counselling and therapy work. It's not going to work. You're not doing justice to the client.”* (Psych 3)

Equine-based therapy is not solely about being around horses; it requires a deep understanding of therapeutic principles, mental health concepts, and appropriate counselling techniques. Engaging in equine-based therapy without the necessary

mental health knowledge and skills would not do justice to the clients or ensure the effectiveness of the therapeutic process. Equine-based therapy is a form of mental health intervention. Its primary goal is to support clients' emotional and psychological wellbeing. Without the mental health component, practitioners may miss critical aspects of clients' needs and struggles, leading to inadequate support. By combining mental health training and expertise with a solid understanding of equine-assisted therapy principles, practitioners can provide comprehensive, client-centred, and effective interventions that promote well-being and positive change in their clients. This approach ensures that the therapeutic process is conducted responsibly, ethically, and professionally, ultimately benefiting the clients and fostering positive outcomes in equine-based therapy.

The Equine-based therapy Institute (2020) stated that becoming an equine mental health practitioner involves a combination of formal education, practical training, and developing specific skills. It involves gaining experience with horses: Develop a strong understanding of horse behaviour, handling, and care. Spend time working with horses to learn about their needs, communication, and body language. Schlote (2023) noted that one must develop counselling skills through coursework, workshops, or additional training in areas such as client assessment, communication, active listening, empathy, and therapeutic techniques. Equine mental health practitioners often combine traditional therapy modalities with the unique benefits of working with horses. Equine mental health practitioners must have knowledge about various mental health conditions, human development, and the therapeutic process, such as therapeutic approaches and techniques commonly used in counselling and psychotherapy.

#### **Theme 14: Challenges associated with implementing equine-based therapy**

This theme provides data linked to the challenges associated with implementing equine-based therapy. Participants noted that one of the challenges with utilising equine-based therapy is that new clients who are referred to equine based therapy for the first time may be resistant to this type of therapy. Hence, the client may not be open to engaging in equine-based therapy which results in a negative outcome. Furthermore, some clients who are not eager to work with horses may also find it difficult to engage in this type of therapy.

Participants shared as follows:

*“There are always challenges. Because often you are working with people who are either severely traumatised or they're there because they need some help and. I think often when clients are very stuck or they are not wanting to change their own process, that is, I think probably the hardest part of working in a therapeutic space is you can see how you can help someone, but if they are not ready to help themselves and then they don't come back or they leave”. (SW2)*

*“We have clients arrive who have had really bad experience with horses. They've never met horses, who don't like horses. But they have been told that this would work for them and we just believe in the process because it is the horses who help to create a feeling of safety and a feeling of change”. (Psych 1)*

Even though practitioners emphasized that some clients are resistant to equine-based therapy, the clients who are referred by other mental health professionals to equine therapy are encouraged to participate in the therapy and trust the process because equine-based therapy harnesses the unique qualities of horses to create a therapeutic environment that fosters emotional healing, personal growth, and positive change. Through interactions with horses, the clients can develop essential life skills, improve their mental health, and enhance their overall well-being.

Most participants emphasized that the costs of equine-based therapy were an expensive form of therapy for both the practitioner and the client. This is shared as follows:

*“It's quite an expensive modality because you're not just one social worker. You have to have in my model, a facilitator, and you have to have a couple of horses and it has to be on a farm. So that means travel for you, travel for clients, rental levies for ground, levy for farms. Race horses and your facilitators. So it becomes quite expensive and I think it is still very unique in terms of its approach”. (Psych 2)*

*“Cost because in a session you would be the psychologist and horse professional and in some cases you will also have to pay a fee. So, in terms of individual therapy the cost is huge.” (P8)*

As a result of the costs of a few participants were deterred. Practitioners themselves noted that in order to implement a session that a horse professional had to be present.

Hence, despite huge benefits shared in the data both practitioners and clients acknowledged that the costs related to implementing equine-based therapy pose a challenge.

Other participants added that there may also be cultural sensitivities in terms of clients and their families engaging in therapy with a horse. This is noted in the excerpts below:

*“I think there is a space with personal preference about what works and what doesn't work. I think there are and they're going to be cultural beliefs too about working with animals and religious beliefs around animals. And really, people can't be forced in that space, but I think it creates opportunity to widen your perspective”.* (Psych 2)

As evidenced in the excerpts above, equine-based therapy in social work is not always culturally appropriate or relevant for all clients. Horses and equine-based therapy may not be supported with every culture, hence, some clients may not feel comfortable or familiar with horses or equine-related activities. According to Sheade and Chandler (2012: 1) minority communities often face specific challenges when seeking mental health care. Cultural barriers may cause disparities when including horses in therapy. In addition, equine-based therapy can be expensive, as it requires large farms or space to keep the horses, and it is also expensive to maintain horses. Marchand, Andersen, Smith, Hoopes and Carlson (2021: 7) wrote that although treatment using equines yielded greater benefits, it's important to consider that this type of intervention pose challenges in implementation and may come with increased costs. This can make it difficult for clients to access this type of therapy, especially if they do not have insurance coverage or the financial resources to pay for it out of pocket. Moreover, some clients may not be open to therapy with horses. This can become a challenge when such clients are referred to a mental health practitioner involved in equine based therapy. According to Wilson, Buuultjens, Monfries and Karimi (2015: 9) clients often demonstrated resistance to equine-based therapy as they had difficulties embracing the metaphor of the situation when engaged in equine based therapy. The clients found it difficult to reflect on the horses behaviour but rather focused on the literal behaviour of the horse.

#### **4.11. Conclusion**

This chapter presented the data and a critical analysis of the findings made in the study. A total of ten main themes and twenty-three sub-themes were presented. Some of the main themes included the process of equine-based therapy, the values and principles associated with equine-based therapy, the integration of equine-based therapy in social work practice and the stories of healing from the perspectives of mental health practitioners. The following chapter will include the conclusions and recommendations for further research.

## **CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

***“There is something about the outside of the horse that is good for the inside of a man” Winston. S. Churchill***

### **5.1. Introduction**

The main purpose of this study was to explore the potential of equine-based therapy as a healing modality in social work practice. According to Chapter Four, there were ten main themes and twenty-two sub-themes. A discussion of the data analysis was provided in Chapter Four.

In Chapter 1, a bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework of healing was presented. The framework encompasses a holistic approach to healing, integrating the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions. When applied within the context of social work and equine-based therapy, it aligns with the underlying principles and therapeutic methodologies of social work and equine-based therapy. This was reflected in the data as it reflected the interconnectedness of the framework within equine-based therapy and social work. The biological aspect of the framework acknowledges the impact of physical health on well-being. According to Hunt (2014: 373), social work recognizes the importance of addressing clients' psychological needs, while equine-based therapy often takes place outdoors, promoting physical activity and fostering a connection with nature.

In terms of the psychological dimension, social work emphasises understanding and addressing mental health challenges, while equine-based therapy complements this by providing a unique setting for clients to explore their emotions and develop coping strategies through interactions with horses. This can lead to improved emotional regulation and psychological well-being (Adams et al. 2015: 58). In the social dimension, both social work and equine-based therapy recognise the significance of social connections. Social workers strive to enhance clients' support systems and relationships, while equine-based therapy offers opportunities for building trust, communication, and teamwork through interactions with horses and peers (Singer 2009: 18). Lastly, the spiritual dimension acknowledges individuals' search for

meaning and purpose. Social work respects diverse belief systems and values, integrating clients' spiritual needs into interventions. Equine-based therapy, with its emphasis on experiential learning and self-discovery, can also facilitate spiritual growth and exploration (Agmon 2009: 17).

This chapter provides concluding insights on the major findings that were presented in the study. These major findings are aligned with the objectives of the study. The chapter will also include a discussion of the recommendations from the study, as well as the limitations of the study and the conclusion.

## **5.2. Discussion of major research findings**

Outlined below are the primary findings of this research. They are organised into subcategories which correspond to the study's objectives. In the discussion below, we describe how the study objectives were met.

### **5.2.1. The values and principles that guide equine-based therapy**

The data revealed salient values and principles, which the participants viewed as important to the practice of equine-based therapy. Mental health practitioners work with clients from a variety of backgrounds and with different challenges. Equine-based therapy with these diverse clients is guided by the values and principles mentioned in Chapter Four. Participants emphasized respect for clients and horses, humility, and maintaining a non-judgemental attitude. Professionalism, self-determination, confidentiality, and non-harm to clients were the principles that were highlighted by participants.

These principles are integrated or interlinked with social work principles. Equine-based therapy emphasises the importance of treating clients with respect. This value parallels the social work principle of respecting the dignity and worth of every individual, thus promoting client self-determination.

Furthermore, the principle of confidentiality stresses the importance of respecting participants' privacy and maintaining confidentiality regarding information shared

during sessions. This includes protecting the identities of clients and the content of their discussions. Maintaining client confidentiality is also a fundamental principle in social work. Social workers safeguard the privacy of clients' personal information and only share information with appropriate parties as permitted by law and professional ethics.

Furthermore, maintaining professionalism and ethics both in equine-based therapy and social work overlap significantly. Both professions emphasise the importance of professionalism, confidentiality, and promote well-being. By adopting these values and principles, mental health practitioners in both fields ensure that their interventions are grounded in integrity, respect, and a commitment to the welfare of their clients and participants.

The study concluded that having well-defined values and principles in equine-based therapy is crucial for maintaining ethical standards, promoting participant well-being, and enhancing the therapeutic outcomes. These values and principles guide the implementation and evaluation of equine-based therapy programs, thus contributing to the overall effectiveness and success of the interventions. According to Wycoff and Gupt (2018: 198), values and principles provide guidance and direction in everyday life. These values are critical to being an ethical professional, hence it is important to acknowledge values and principles in the provision of equine-based therapy. Counselling, psychotherapy and social work share values and principles, but differ in the methods which practitioners use. The findings from a study conducted by Lietz and Napan (2020: 50) also highlighted that aligning with humanistic values may promote easy implementation of equine-based therapy into social work practice.

### **5.2.2. The process underpinning equine-based therapy**

The process underpinning equine-based therapy involves structured interactions between individuals and horses, with the goal of achieving therapeutic outcomes. The exact process can vary, this is based on the specific goals of the therapy, the approach being used, and the participants' needs. However, the data revealed the process of equine-based therapy.

The data revealed that there is a pre-session procedure to be followed before the actual therapy begins. Participants highlighted that clients need to be assessed before they can be introduced to the horse in therapy. Moreover, the clients need to go through an orientation programme and the horses need to be prepared before engaging with the clients. Furthermore, the mental health practitioner must take into consideration the setting for the sessions as participants noted that the setting plays an important role in the therapy.

During equine-based therapy sessions, the client is observed from the moment they enter the therapy room, and structured activities are arranged. Participants highlighted that the mental health practitioner may set up themes or topics to guide the session, depending on the challenges the clients face. The mental health practitioner may include complementary interventions to aid in the therapeutic process. The data revealed that all these activities and interventions were being carried out while the horse was present throughout the therapeutic process. The client and the horse interact on a continuous basis, while the mental health practitioner and the horse professional guide the therapeutic process and assist the client to draw conclusions on the interactions with the horse. The clients' interpretations are then unpacked within the therapeutic space. Participants also highlighted that the mental health practitioner may use their theories, knowledge, and frameworks from their background such as psychology or social work to guide the process.

The results of the study suggested considering various steps for the successful implementation of equine-based therapy. Carlsson (2016: 320) noted that despite an increasing number of studies, there was still a lack of knowledge about the unique features that underlie the process in equine assisted social work. The results of the study concluded that the processes may differ depending on the expertise of the mental health practitioner. Each discipline has its own therapeutic guidelines or frameworks which are incorporated into equine-based therapy. Moreover, the processes and techniques that are used in equine-based therapy will also vary based on the approach used by the mental health practitioner (e.g., hippotherapy, equine facilitated learning or equine facilitated psychotherapy). The findings in this study align with the processes used within a psychotherapeutic context, which can be applied in a clinical social work context. However, the processes cannot be applied for approaches such as hippotherapy and equine facilitated learning. According to Acri et al. (2016: 604), there

are two sub-categories of equine-based therapy: (1) equine-assisted therapies such as hippotherapy and equine-assisted psychotherapy, and (2) equine-assisted activities that include therapeutic horseback riding, interactive vaulting, therapeutic carriage driving, and other horse-related activities. Several equine-based therapy approaches are used as treatments for mental health and developmental problems.

The study's findings suggest that equine-based therapy can be a valuable complementary therapeutic tool within the field of social work practice. Mental health practitioners, including social workers can consider integrating equine-based therapy into their repertoire of therapeutic interventions and counselling techniques. According to Cantin and Marshall-Lucette (2011: 52), equine-based therapy involves the use of horses in the treatment of psychological problems. Therapists can integrate equine based activities to complement other approaches such as cognitive behavioural therapy and psychotherapy. Ezhay (2023:33) recommended that clinicians promote alternative and complementary therapies (e.g., therapeutic riding, equine-assisted therapy, and hippotherapy) as treatment interventions, in addition to mainstream interventions. However, it's essential to ensure that such integration aligns with the ethical and professional frameworks of their respective fields of expertise.

### **5.2.3. The emotional or social problems that are most suited for equine-based therapy.**

The data revealed that equine-based therapy is suited for various socio-emotional problems and groups of clients. Participants highlighted the significance of equine-based therapy in aiding in numerous mental health issues such as anxiety, gender-based violence as well as trauma. They also noted its importance in working with children who face trauma from being rejected or who lack emotional connections. Equine-based therapy was also seen as a versatile therapy for children dealing with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Furthermore, participants referred to the benefits of equine-based therapy when it involved individual therapy as well as group therapy. It was seen as beneficial to family groups i.e., blended families, and step parenting who required therapeutic assistance.

The study concluded that equine-based therapy can be a valuable tool for promoting social and emotional well-being. The unique and dynamic interactions with horses

create a supportive environment for individuals to develop essential life skills, enhance their emotional resilience, and improve their interpersonal relationships. Equine-based therapy contributes to a holistic approach to the social work practice by recognizing the mind-body connection. It acknowledges the therapeutic potential of physical and emotional interactions with animals which can complement traditional therapeutic approaches. Coffin (2019: 278) reported the social benefits that result when equine assisted programs are frequently delivered to clients. These social benefits include positive social interaction, communication skills, inter-personal trust, team-work, and healthy relationship building. There has been reported improvements in mental and emotional well-being in participants that have participated in equine-based therapy programs. These improvements include increased self-esteem, self-worth, and the ability to cope with challenges/adversity.

The study's results suggest that the awareness of and willingness of social workers to refer clients to equine-based therapy can enhance the value of micro-level social work practice. This approach aligns with client-centred care, expands therapeutic options, and has the potential to yield positive results for clients who are resistant to traditional talk therapy. Acri et al (2016: 604) suggested that equine activities and therapies enhance mental health and function, social function and behaviour among children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Woolen (2017: 6) also added that the environment in which equine assisted psychotherapy occurs also promotes openness and authenticity for clients as opposed to the environment of a traditional clinic. Clients that have endured abuse and neglect, witnessed violence, and who suffered from eating disorders often do not respond well to a typical clinic environment, and might benefit more from an unconventional treatment environment.

#### **5.2.4. The benefits individuals have experienced through equine based therapy**

The data revealed that equine-based therapy has a wide range of physical, emotional, psychological, and social benefits. These benefits are experienced by individuals of various age groups and backgrounds, thus making equine-based therapy a versatile and effective therapeutic approach. The participants referred to some of the general benefits of equine-based therapy, such as improvement in emotional regulation, enhanced social skills, communication skills, as well as physical well-being in terms of coordination, motor skills and balance.

Participants also highlighted some of their experiences related to their clients healing. Clients that arrived for equine-based therapy had issues of trauma, communication, eating disorders, stagnation in life and bullying. The participants noted that when their clients participated in equine-based therapy, a positive difference in their lives was observed in contrast to the traditional forms of therapy that they were previously engaged in. Their clients found that it was much easier to interact with a non-verbal form of therapy than expressing themselves verbally in traditional talk therapy.

The results from the study indicated that participants had positive views of horses and the associated therapeutic benefits. While the study found that most of the views correlated with that of psychologists and equine facilitated learning specialists, the data still presented a rich and positive view of the benefits of equine-based therapy within social work practice. The finding that participants' views correlated with those of psychologists and equine facilitated learning specialists suggests a degree of consensus among different groups of professionals. This alignment adds credibility to the perceived therapeutic benefits of equine-based therapy. A study conducted by Roberts and Honzel (2020: 136) found that equine-based therapy had a significant positive effect than participation in traditional group therapy. Chui et al. (2016: 45) also added that equine-based therapy has shown to improve therapeutic outcomes.

The data presented a rich and positive view of the benefits of equine-based therapy within social work practice which reinforces the potential of this therapeutic approach. This rich understanding can inform the development and implementation of equine-based therapy programs in social work settings. Yorke, Adams and Coady (2008: 28) noted that social workers and other helping professionals should consider the use of horses as a therapeutic adjunct, supportive follow-up to therapy, or alternative to therapy for their clients. Kendall, Maujean, Pepping and Wright (2014: 81) suggested that equine-based therapy in social work may contribute positively to the treatment of clients with numerous issues. It may be of value to develop social skills, feelings of mastery, meta-cognition, and reflectivity abilities, self-confidence, and self-esteem in clients.

### **5.2.5. The experiences of mental health care professionals with regards to their use of equine-based therapy**

The participants in this study highlighted their own stories of healing while being engaged in equine-based therapy. They found that equine-based therapy was not only beneficial for them but also for their own families. They referred to equine-based therapy being beneficial to their children who had challenges with ADHD, as well as learning disabilities. Equine-based therapy was also physically beneficial for a participant who had been through surgery. Therefore, there is always some type of healing or beneficial interaction happening between the practitioner and the horse. It is also important to note that for mental health practitioners to be engaged in equine-based therapy with clients, the mental health practitioner has to also be holistically well.

The results of the study suggest that participants had positive attitudes and perspectives regarding the potential for self-healing among mental health practitioners using equine-based therapy. This finding implies that equine-based therapy may be viewed as a beneficial and effective approach for mental health professionals to address their own mental well-being and self-care needs. While equine-based therapy can be beneficial for mental health practitioners, it's important to note that its effectiveness may vary from person to person. According to a study conducted by Simmons (2011: 35), there are positive improvements in one's personal life as a result of working with horses. The therapists' changes observed in their lives included words like empowered, improved self-confidence, sense of peace and centeredness in life. Additionally, it should not be seen as a replacement for traditional mental health treatments but rather as a complementary approach that can contribute to self-care and well-being. Roberts and Honzel (2020: 142) stated that equine facilitated psychotherapy is a beneficial complementary treatment.

### **5.2.6. Utilising Equine-based therapy to Enhance Social Work Practice**

Integrating equine-based therapy into social work practice can enhance the effectiveness of interventions and provide a unique and engaging approach to supporting individuals, families, and groups. Participants highlighted that including

horses in social work provides social workers with an opportunity to engage clients in a non-traditional manner, and it encourages an experiential form of therapy. As the data revealed, equine-based therapy is versatile and can be used in an array of situations and challenges and can be used with many different types of clients. This gives social workers an added tool to their therapeutic work because social workers are exposed to clients from diverse backgrounds with various adversities. Moreover, social work practice includes a variety of theories and frameworks which are aligned with the practice of equine-based therapy. Participants highlighted theories such as systemic thinking, strengths based approach, ecological approach and relational theories which can complement equine-based therapy and enhance the therapeutic process in social work.

Participants referred to the importance of including equine-based therapy in social work education. It will enhance the curriculum and provide an additional skill set to social work students, which will enable them to help clients who are more resistant to traditional forms of therapy. However, apart from its inclusion in the curriculum, students would be required to be engaged in field work so that they have an increased awareness of equine-based therapy and how to utilise it in the therapeutic process. Social work students would have to be introduced to ethics and guidelines for the practice of equine-based therapy. Participants also highlighted that it can be incorporated into social welfare and educational policies so that it promotes a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to mental health and well-being.

The results from the study showed that equine-based therapy is still an emerging field in the social work context, especially within a South African context. There are very few social workers using equine-based therapy as a therapeutic tool in their practice. However, the study was able to gain rich insights into the process of equine-based therapy. The study concluded that incorporating equine-based therapy within social work practice can enhance therapeutic outcomes as it offers an alternative to traditional therapeutic tools. The study's findings also suggested that there may be a need for increased awareness and training opportunities for social workers regarding equine-based therapy. This would enable more practitioners to explore and incorporate this approach into their practice if they find it suitable for their clients. Acri et al. (2016: 609) found that while some research is ambivalent, there is enough to warrant consideration of equine-based therapy as having the potential to contribute positively to social work practice. However, equipping social workers to provide

equine-based therapy may be challenging. Integrating promising interventions into social work education has been a difficult endeavour as tertiary sectors have struggled to keep pace with providing information about new therapeutic approaches in a changing practice landscape that is undergoing significant flux (Mirabito 2012: 245). Staudt and Cherry (2017: 412) also added that equine-based therapy is a relatively new modality that offers promise for treating clients in social work practice. However, as equine-based therapy becomes more integrated into traditional mental health treatment, schools of social work (and of other helping disciplines) will need to address whether to implement it into the curriculum.

### **5.3. Implications for social work practice and education**

The study provided a clear foundation for understanding equine-based therapy within a therapeutic context. The documentation of the principles, experiences and processes of equine-based therapy may inform social work practitioners of the potential benefits of equine-based therapy and serve as a guide for social work practitioners to consider the requisite preparation, process and activities for the application of equine-based therapy. Moshe-Grodofsky and Allasad Alhuzail (2022: 1492) also highlighted the value of equine-based therapy as a new avenue to help grow social work professionals as they continue to work with their clientele. Their study suggested that there is potential for equine-assisted interventions to support social workers. The research also amplified specific competency and implementation considerations for social work practitioners and social work education for them to be involved in equine-based therapy. Social work practitioners may find inspiration to develop pathways for the practice of equine-based therapy in their field.

Establishing a theoretical guide for equine-based therapy in social work practice within the South African context might be a potential next step in the research agenda. According to Haig and Skinner (2022: 6), there are two large agencies that have developed a treatment model and utilize horses for cognitive, emotional, and behavioural modifications. The first is PATH International, which has a specific program entitled “Equine-Facilitated Mental Health”, however, this agency largely focuses on physical and occupational rehabilitation. The second is the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA). EAGALA was developed in 1999, and

the specific treatment model is called Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP). Equine assisted psychotherapy is the primary model used amongst clinicians in the field of mental health and social work (Notgrass and Pettinelli 2015: 162). Both these models are based on international frameworks. Additionally, social work practitioners should consider if they have the space, time, and financial resources to adequately support the implementation of equine-based therapy. The preparation for equine-based therapy involves establishing adequate infrastructure for horses, such as the setting, maintenance of the horses as well as completion of training to use equine-based therapy.

Another implication for the current study is related to standards of practice. This research revealed the intricate intersection of two specialisations, that is equine-based therapy and social work practice. These two specialisations require a clear and direct definition of practice and competency as a blended intervention. Therefore, it is important to further understand how the complexities of the integration of equine-based therapy and social work practice intersect, and if there are issues particular to the implementation of equine-based therapy that imply a need for specialised training and its inclusion in the social work curriculum. Carlsson (2016: 328) stated that while methods and manuals alone do not ensure positive outcomes among users of services, future research should investigate the development of standardized and manual-based methods.

#### **5.4. Recommendations for future research**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations can be made:

##### **5.4.1. Awareness and dissemination**

There should be effective dissemination and communication of research on equine-based therapy in social work contexts, especially in the South African context as it is crucial for raising awareness. If research findings are not widely publicised or accessible, it can limit awareness among professionals and the public.

#### **5.4.2. Program development and implementation**

It is recommended that guidelines for designing and implementing equine-based therapy programs within social work settings are developed to provide clear direction on what the process entails and how it can be implemented practically.

#### **5.4.3. Cost-effectiveness**

It is recommended that the cost-effectiveness of integrating equine-based therapy into social work practice compared to other therapeutic modalities is assessed, to justify its use in certain settings.

#### **5.4.4. Cultural sensitivity and inclusivity**

It is recommended that the cultural sensitivity and inclusivity considerations when implementing equine-based therapy in social work across diverse populations is investigated, in terms of how it can be tailored to client's specific belief systems.

#### **5.4.5. Long-term effects**

It is recommended that longitudinal studies are conducted to assess the long-term effects of equine-based therapy within social work interventions, in terms of its positive sustainability over a period and its lasting benefits.

#### **5.4.6. Social work training and competence**

Examine the training and competencies required for social workers to effectively incorporate equine-based therapy into their practice. Develop guidelines and best practices for integrating equine-assisted interventions into social work settings.

### **5.5. Recommendations for social work education**

**5.5.1. Incorporate Equine-based therapy into the Curriculum:** Social work education programs should consider integrating equine-based therapy courses or workshops into their curriculum. This will expose students to the alternative therapeutic approach and allow them to explore its potential benefits.

**5.5.2. Collaborate with Equine-based therapy Centres:** Establish partnerships or collaborations with local equine-based therapy centres or organizations. These

collaborations can provide opportunities for social work students to gain hands-on experience and training in equine-based therapy.

**5.5.3. Professional Training:** Social workers who are interested in incorporating equine-based therapy into their practice should seek specialised training and certification in equine-assisted therapy. There are various organizations that offer training programs and certification in this field.

**5.5.4. Incorporate Theory and Research:** Integrate relevant theories and research on equine-based therapy into the social work curriculum. Encourage students to critically examine the evidence base for equine-based therapy and its applicability to different populations and issues.

**5.5.5. Research Opportunities:** Encourage social work students and professionals to engage in research related to equine-based therapy. This can help contribute to the growing body of evidence on the effectiveness of equine-assisted interventions.

## **5.6. Limitations of the study**

Although this study made important findings about the research objectives, it has a few limitations as follows:

5.6.1. The study adopted a qualitative approach, which meant that the sample size was small. However, participants provided rich data and data was collected to saturation.

5.6.2. The study used the case study tradition. Case study approaches do not allow for generalisability of the findings. However, the case study allowed for a deep exploration of a specific case, which can lead to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

5.6.3. The number of mental health practitioners who are in equine-based therapy is limited, especially within the social work field, hence, the research had difficulty sourcing participants and their availability was limited during the data collection process.

## **5.7. Conclusion**

Equine-based therapy has shown promising results in social work practice, offering unique benefits due to the human-animal bond. It can facilitate emotional expressions, build trust, improve communication skills, and foster self-awareness and empathy. Additionally, working with horses can help clients develop problem-solving skills and build confidence, making it a valuable modality for addressing a range of social, emotional and behavioural challenges.

Equine-based therapy aligns with the holistic approach to social work, addressing clients' physical, emotional, cognitive and social needs simultaneously. Social workers can integrate equine assisted interventions into practice to provide comprehensive support to clients. Moreover, the unique bond formed between clients and horses can facilitate engagement and rapport building, particularly with individuals who may be resistant to traditional talk therapy approaches. Social workers can leverage this connection to establish trust and enhance therapeutic relationships.

Equine-based therapy can also be particularly effective in treating trauma-related issues. Social workers trained in trauma-informed care can incorporate equine-assisted techniques to help clients process traumatic experiences. Additionally, social workers can collaborate with equine-based therapy practitioners, equine-assisted therapy centres and equine professionals to enhance service delivery and expand resources for clients. These partnerships can enrich interdisciplinary approaches to addressing complex social and emotional issues.

Equine-based therapy can be viewed as a valuable tool in the social work field, offering a novel way to engage clients, promote healing, and enhance overall well-being. However, its successful implementation requires a balanced understanding of its benefits, limitations, and ethical considerations. Although, interest in equine-based therapy is growing, and research is gradually expanding, more studies should be conducted to increase awareness. Hence, the scientific community, practitioners, and the public can gain a better understanding of the benefits and limitations of equine-based therapy as a valuable therapeutic approach. The current study provided insights into the principles that guide equine-based therapy, its process, benefits, and more importantly its value in social work practice.

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## Appendix A



### LETTER OF INFORMATION

**Title of the Research Study :** Healing with horses: equine based therapy as a therapeutic modality in social work practice

**Principal Investigator/s/researcher:** Lyrise Naidu (MTech: Management sciences (Peace Studies)

**Co-Investigator/s/supervisor/s:** Prof. R. Bhagwan (Ph.D) Community and development disciplines

#### **Brief Introduction and Purpose of the Study:**

**Greeting** Good Day, I trust you have been well.

**Introduce yourself to the participant** I am a PH. D. student at DUT doing research for my PH.D: Health Sciences)

**Invitation to the potential participant** I would like to invite you to participate in the research study.

**What is Research** (Research is a systematic search or enquiry for generalized new knowledge)

Your participation in the study will be of value to add to current research. Your participation in the study is voluntary, you are not forced to participate, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any point. You may ask as many questions as you like. A consent form will be provided to indicate you agree to participate in the study, however you are not obligated to continue with the interview if you are not comfortable.

**Outline of the Procedures:** The study aims to explore the potential of equine based therapy as a therapeutic modality in social work practice. It also seeks to understand the principles underlying equine based therapy. Interviews will be conducted to collect the required information. Each interview will be between 50-60 minutes. Participants are expected to share their experiences and thoughts on the research topic. Questions will also be asked to assist participants in sharing the required information and to guide the participants. Participants who qualify for the study are mental health

professionals from the South African Equine Facilitated Intervention Association and patients treated through the South African Equine Facilitated Intervention Association. The interviews will be facilitated at the offices of the participants. If necessary, a follow up session will be conducted. The sessions will be recorded on a tape recorder to gather all information that is being shared, these recordings will be handled with utmost confidentiality. The participants only responsibility is to be present on time for the interview and to share as much information as possible on the questions and topic that will be discussed. In case of travel restrictions due to covid-19, an online interview via MS Teams will be conducted.

**Risks or Discomforts to the Participant:** There will be no risk or discomfort to the participant.

**Explain to the participant the reasons he/she may be withdraw from the Study:** You are entitled to withdraw from the study at any time should you wish to do so if you are not comfortable.

**Benefits:** There will be no direct benefit to you, however, your experiences and ideas will be a valuable contribution to the research. The results of the study will be published in accredited journals.

**Remuneration:** There will be no remuneration for participating in the study (i.e. no payment).

**Costs of the Study:** Participants are not expected to cover any costs towards this study.

**Confidentiality:** All information discussed/disclosed in the interviews will be noted as confidential. Your identities will not be revealed for the purposes of confidentiality. The taped recordings will be stored in a safety vault. No person will have access to the recordings other than the researcher. The results of the study including personal details will be anonymously processed into a study report.

**Results:** the results of the study will be converted into a research report, and accredited publications.

**Research-related Injury:** There is no risk of injury.

**Storage of all electronic and hard copies including tape recordings** Data transcripts and recordings will be stored in a locked vault that only the researcher and supervisor has access to. After 5 years the transcripts will be shredded and electronic recording will be deleted permanently, the device (USB) will be destroyed.

**Persons to contact in the Event of Any Problems or Queries:** Please contact the researcher (081 372 0620), my supervisor (tel no. 031 373 2197) or the Institutional Research Ethics Administrator on 031 373 2375. Complaints can be reported to the Director: Research and Postgraduate Support Dr L Langaniso on 031 373 2577 or [researchdirector@dut.ac.za](mailto:researchdirector@dut.ac.za).

## Appendix B



### CONSENT

**Full Title of the Study: Healing with horses: equine based therapy as a therapeutic modality in social work practice**

**Names of Researcher/s: Lyrise Naidu**

**Statement of Agreement to Participate in the Research Study:**

- I hereby confirm that I have been informed by the researcher, Lyrise Naidu (name of researcher), about the nature, conduct, benefits and risks of this study - Research Ethics Clearance Number: IREC 065/20\_,
- I have also received, read and understood the above written information (Participant Letter of Information) regarding the study.
- I am aware that the results of the study, including personal details regarding my sex, age, date of birth, initials and diagnosis will be anonymously processed into a study report.
- In view of the requirements of research, I agree that the data collected during this study can be processed in a computerised system by the researcher.
- I may, at any stage, without prejudice, withdraw my consent and participation in the study.
- I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and (of my own free will) declare myself prepared to participate in the study.
- I understand that significant new findings developed during the course of this research which may relate to my participation will be made available to me.

\_\_\_\_\_

Full Name of Participant Thumbprint	Date	Time	Signature /	Right
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I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name of researcher) herewith confirm that the above participant has been fully informed about the nature, conduct and risks of the above study.

\_\_\_\_\_

**Full Name of Researcher**

**Date**

**Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Full Name of Witness (If applicable)**

**Date**

**Signature**

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\_\_\_\_\_  
**Full Name of Legal Guardian (If applicable)**

**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature**

## Appendix C

### Sample – Mental Health Practitioners using equine-based therapy

1. Please can you share with me what equine based therapy is.
2. Can you describe the types of people who benefit from equine based therapy?
3. Can you describe the processes are followed for equine based therapy?
4. What have been some of the new benefits or stories of healing with the use of equine based therapy?
5. How would equine based therapy enhance social work practice?
6. What are some of the challenges you face when implementing equine based therapy with your patients and the horse?
7. How can practitioners be capacitated to work with horses?
8. What are some of your experiences with using equine based therapy?

## Appendix D

6 June 2020

The South African Equine Facilitated Intervention Association

South Africa

3291

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### **Request for Permission to Conduct Research**

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Dear Liesl Van Zyl

My name is Lyrise Naidu, a PhD: Health Sciences student at the Durban University of Technology. The research I wish to conduct for my Doctoral thesis involves “Healing with horses: equine based therapy as a therapeutic modality in social work practice”.

My study will be using a qualitative method so I would be required to conduct interviews with some of your colleagues from the association. I am hereby seeking your consent to conduct interviews with the practitioners of equine based therapy to collect the necessary data for my study.

My proposal will be attached so that you have an idea of what the study is about. I also will provide a letter of information and informed consent upon data collection.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me my cell number: 081 372 0620 or email [nlyrise@gmail.com](mailto:nlyrise@gmail.com). Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Yours sincerely,

[Lyrise Naidu]

Durban University of Technology

## Appendix E

### The South African Equine Facilitated Intervention Association

P O Box 393  
Merrivale  
3291

22<sup>nd</sup> June 2020

To Whom it May Concern

RE- Proposed Research Project for Ms Lyrise Naidu

Ms Naidu, enrolled at the Durban University of Technology , for her Ph.D. , has approached our Association with a request to conduct research in Equine Facilitation with our members. Her thesis is entitled 'Healing with Horses, Equine Based Therapy as a Therapeutic Modality in Social Work Practice.

Ms Naidu has indicated that the research will be interviews with the members.

The Association is happy to allow Ms Naidu contact with our member's, and that their participation in her research would be on a voluntary basis.

Kindly contact the undersigned if there are any further questions. Kind

regards

Secretary for  
The South African Equine Facilitated Intervention Association

## Appendix F



[http://www.dut.ac.za/research/institutional\\_research\\_ethics](http://www.dut.ac.za/research/institutional_research_ethics)

**Institutional Research Ethics Committee** Research  
and Postgraduate Support Directorate  
2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, Berwyn Court  
Gate 1, Steve Biko Campus  
Durban University of Technology

P O Box 1334, Durban, South Africa, 4001

Tel: 031 373 2375

Email: [lavishad@dut.ac.za](mailto:lavishad@dut.ac.za)

[www.dut.ac.za](http://www.dut.ac.za)

7 September 2020

Ms L Naidu

80 Buckingham Road

Bonela

Durban

Dear Ms Naidu

### **Healing with horses: equine based therapy as a therapeutic modality in social work practice**

I am pleased to inform you that Full Approval has been granted to your proposal.

The Proposal has been allocated the following Ethical Clearance number **IREC 065/20**. Please use this number in all communication with this office.

Approval has been granted for a period of **ONE YEAR**, before the expiry of which you are required to apply for safety monitoring and annual recertification. Please use the Safety Monitoring and Annual Recertification Report form which can be found in the Standard Operating Procedures [SOP's] of the IREC. This form must be submitted to the IREC at least 3 months before the ethics approval for the study expires.



19 September 2023



Institute of Infectious Disease and Molecular Medicine

Dr. Eden Rebecca Padayachee  
PhD Medicinal Biochemistry (Specialized Field: Neuroscience)

Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Integrative  
Biomedical Sciences, Wernher & Beit Building South, Room  
N3.13, Anzio Road, Observatory, 7925,  
Cape Town

Mobile: [0607883829](tel:0607883829)

Email: [padayachee.eden@gmail.com](mailto:padayachee.eden@gmail.com)



TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Editorial Certificate

This letter serves to prove that the thesis listed below was language edited for proper English, grammar, punctuation, and spelling, as well as the overall layout and style by myself, proprietor of Dr Thesis (Pty) Ltd.

**Thesis Title: Healing with horses: equine-based therapy as a therapeutic modality in social work practice**

**Author: Lyrise Naidu**

The research content or the author's intentions were not altered in any way during the editing process. However, the author has the authority to accept or reject my suggestions and changes. I, the editor can guarantee the quality of my editing and mentorship abilities, however, I cannot guarantee that the examination board will accept the thesis with a pass. This will depend on the hard work, persistence and amount of effort put in by the mentee.

Should you have any questions or concerns about the edited document, I can be contacted at the listed telephone numbers or email addresses.

Yours truly,  
Dr Eden Padayachee  
(Proprietor/ PhD. Medicinal Biochemistry)

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