



2024 VA ASG Grant Program Evaluation Report

The main aim for the programs supported by the Horses for Mental Health (HMH) Veterans Affairs Adaptive Sports Grant (VA ASG) was to enhance quality of life and overall well-being for US veterans by fostering resilience, meaning, and hope through equine-assisted interactions.

A total of 14 program sites participated and of those, 11 sites provided completed pre- and post-program evaluations conducted by the participants. The programs enrolled a total of 354 participants. At the time of completion of the grant timeline, some of the participants had chosen not to complete the program (dropouts) while others were still enrolled but had not yet completed their post-program evaluation.

The following report is based on data from 213 participants across 11 Equine-Assisted program sites, all of whom completed pre- and post- program evaluation assessments. The grant-funded program provided 16 hours of services to each participant, delivered either weekly or in a daily retreat-style format.

The aim for collecting program evaluation data was to assess the effectiveness of the services supported by the grant. The intended purpose of the data collection was solely to conduct a program evaluation. All the data provided for statistical analysis was completely de-identified before being submitted by the programs. Aside from the program sites, there were no identifiers shared or included in the data analysis.

This document provides a summary of self-reported outcomes from participants. The results include their responses to questions about their program experience and themes derived from qualitative feedback (**Section A**). Additionally, statistical analyses were performed on the Ryff Scale of Psychological Well-Being (Ryff, 1995). The Ryff scale has been used extensively to examine the impact of well-being interventions (van Dierendonck & Lam, 2023). Paired sample statistics using SPSS version 30.0 (Field, 2018) were conducted to compare mean pre- and post-program Ryff scores, both for the total sum and its subscales and results are presented in **Section B**. Effect sizes were also calculated using Cohen's d (Cohen, 1988) to assess the magnitude of changes in Ryff score for the total sum and the 6 subscales.

A. Results from the Qualitative questions

Question 1: What were some of your struggles with mental health and overall well-being before coming to the program?

Some direct Quotes from Participants:

- "PTSD, anxiety and depression"
- "Tend to isolate, self-harm, lack of confidence"
- "Struggling with substance use"
- "Anything & everything, I was barely a shell of a man when I came here and now I am more confident, clear minded, w/ goals in sight, and this is a 1st in over 2 decades"
- "Anxiety, Depression, Anger Issues, Self Doubt"

Themes derived from the participants free text replies to the question: *What were some of your struggles with mental health and overall well-being before coming to the program?*

- Mental health difficulties (depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress)
- Isolation and loneliness (social withdrawal, loneliness)
- Difficulty with interpersonal relationships (conflict & communication challenges)
- Identity struggles (low self-esteem, identity and sense of purpose)
- Coping (substance use, attempts at seeking help)
- Difficulties with emotional regulation (anger management & stress management)
- Life transitions (loss, grief, survivors guilt, adjusting to change)
- Challenges with resilience (recognition of progress and learning acceptance of disabilities and patience with oneself)

Question 2: Has the program helped with those struggles?

Answer: 93% of participants replied "Yes"

If so, how did the program help?

Some direct Quotes from Participants:

- "Not as depressed or anxious as before PTSD is better controlled, am socializing better, standing up for myself, advocating for myself, interacting with my friends and family again. Suicidal ideation is completely gone. Interested in doing things again."
- "Provided insight for alternative ways to think about things."
- "Practiced managing anxiety in group and feeling comfortable and welcome with horses."
- "It has given me a safe place to venture out to, where I can have genuine and meaningful connection with other veterans, have a sense of community. Even when I didn't know what I needed, or what to ask, the horses somehow sensed and knew and surrounded me with love, safety and a herd/family."
- "Between the horses and the facilitator, I was able to think deeper and process the emotions through spending quiet time with the horses."
- "Synchronizing with the horses help me stay in my body and heart. To see them respond to that energy, reinforced it."
- "Helped me be in the moment and to relinquish control."

- "I was able to be around like-minded people who have gone through many of the same struggles I have. It opened my eyes to seeing my true inner self. I was able to connect with the horses on a seriously deep level which has now allowed me to be able to let go my fear of losing friendships, friends lives, and the fear of failure."
- "The farm is the calmest place on earth. Horses, people that I trust/ Able to relax. Talk."

Themes derived from the participants free text replies to the question: *Has the program helped with those struggles and if so, how?*

- Emotional healing and growth (overcoming fear and anxiety, emotional awareness and regulation, building confidence and self-acceptance)
- Connection with others (community and support, communication and relationships)
- Interaction with horses (therapeutic relationship with animals, grounding and mindfulness)
- Personal development (self-discovery and reflection, tools for coping and problem-solving)
- Positive outlook and hope (hope and future orientation, transformational experiences such as breakthroughs),

Question 3: Did the interaction with horses benefit you during the program?

Answer: 99% of participants replied "Yes"

If so, how did the program help?

Some direct Quotes from Participants:

- "The horses helped me feel calm and get outside my own head, being near horses made me keep my mind in the (sic) present moment."
- "The horses are a reflection of us, and sometimes you need to see it from a different perspective to believe what you are capable of achieving. The horses provide this ability."
- "The horses help me stay calm when I felt unstable."
- "Being in their presence is the greatest PEACE I have EVER experienced!"
- "I've never felt more calm, grounded or in the present moment more in my life than when I am spending time connecting with these horses and good people."
- "I found peace within myself while I was spending time with the horses."
- "Showed me how to trust."
- "Did not realize the emotional intelligence of horses."
- "They showed me how I was showing up to others, and I did not realize that at first. It was eye-opening, for sure."
- "I had to learn to match the horse's level of confidence, and that helped me realize it was inside all along."
- "The feedback from the horses wasn't biased. They don't know my story or my struggles."
- "Helped calm me down and concentrate. The horses gave me confidence and I felt I actually belonged in a group/herd."
- "Those herd animals don't need words to communicate and convey support."
- "Taking the time to empathize and get to know the horses. Then doing the same with family."

Themes derived from the participants free text replies to the question: *Did the interaction with horses benefit you during the program?*

- Emotional benefits (confidence building, calmness and relaxation, acceptance and love, connection and trust)
- Social interaction (community and relationships, non-judgmental environment)
- Self-discovery and self-awareness (insight and reflection, emotional processing)
- Therapeutic effects (therapeutic experience, reduction of anxiety and stress)
- Nature and animal connection (connection to nature, communication with animals)
- Personal growth and development (overcoming fears and life lessons)

Question 4: Did you experience a highlight during the program?

Answer: 89% of participants replied "Yes"

If so, what was the highlight?

Some direct Quotes from Participants:

- "When the horses came to me I felt accepted and elated."
- "Realizing I can be positive."
- "Being amongst others who were dealing with similar issues."
- "When one of the horses began following me without me holding it's rope."
- "Being able to address issues that I had hidden from and tried to not deal with."

Themes derived from the participants free text replies to the question *"Did you experience a highlight during the program?"*

- Connection and Affection
- Emotional Growth and Healing
- Trust and Mutual Respect
- Personal Transformation
- Teamwork and Community
- Mindfulness and Reflection
- Empowerment
- Parallels Between Horses and Humans
- Nature as a Healing Space

Question 5: What would you like to add or change about the program?

Some direct Quotes from Participants:

- "I want to come forever and I didn't really want to come at first."
- "Program is amazing and wish Equine therapy was available throughout the VA."
- "I would add more funding for the program so more veterans can use it."
- "Longer (it's been extended 1 day) Follow up program."

Themes derived from the participants free text replies to the question *"What would you like to add or change about the program?"*

Compiled for *Horses for Mental Health* (www.horsesformentalhealth.org), December 2024, by Nerds for Herds (www.nerdsforherds.com). Authors: Dr. Anastasia Georgiades, Dr. Angela Sherman, & Lynn Thomas.

- Requests for Additional Activities or Time
- Change Time of Day/Seasons/Weather
- Wishes for more funding for the program

Question 6: Did this program impact your sense of flourishing, meaning, and hope?

Answer: 92% of participants replied "Yes"

If so, how did the program help?

Some direct Quotes from Participants:

- "I am hopeful of improving my mental health, I found meaning in horses and healing."
- "I'm not nearly as anxious as I was when we started. I feel more at peace and hopeful for the future."
- "New exercise and work to do for better mental health. A new more effective way to see my own story being told."
- "I now have hope for my future."
- "I was hopeless before I attended and left believing that I actually could live again."
- "There's more to life that is available to me, and I shouldn't limit myself because of negative beliefs."
- "I felt a new energy to take action on changing my life for the better."
- "It gave me hope that I can heal in ways that counseling hasn't."
- "I have been able see that there is light at the end of the tunnel since attending I haven't thought that life isn't worth living. Actually the exact opposite."
- "I'm living, not just surviving."
- "I never thought I would feel joy again but now I can."

Themes derived from the participants free text replies to the question "*Did this program impact your sense of flourishing, meaning, and hope?*"

- Hope and Positivity
- Personal Growth and Self-Discovery
- Community and Connection
- Healing and Support
- Sense of Purpose and Direction
- Mindfulness and Presence
- Understanding and Awareness
- Creativity and Exploration

Question 7: Did this program impact your quality of life and well-being?

Answer: 93% of participants replied "Yes"

If so, what was the impact on your quality of life and well-being?

Some direct Quotes from Participants:

- "It gave me my self-worth back."
- "I feel lighter and more free to be myself."
- "Horses brightened my mood and gave me something positive to look forward to."

- "It's shown me that I have an amazing quality of life; I just need to stop feeling sorry for myself and enjoy it!"
- "I have a new sense of purpose that I have not felt in years."
- "Being around horses is grounding, and to be able to do therapeutic activities at the same time... Every bit helps."
- "The program gave me clarity and a sense of peace about who I am."
- "It gave me the opportunity to step back and evaluate how I feel about what I am doing."
- "I don't feel alone anymore; I feel calmer and have people I can rely on."

Themes derived from the participants free text replies to the question "How did this program impact your quality of life and well-being?"

- Hope and Positivity
- Personal Growth and Self-Awareness
- Improved Relationships
- Mental Health and Emotional Regulation
- Connection and Community
- Therapeutic Benefits of Nature and Animals
- Resilience and Purpose
- Accomplishments and Progress
- Mindfulness and Presence
- Empowerment and Accountability
- Renewal and Rejuvenation

Question 8: "Would you recommend to other Veterans to participate in this program?"

Answer: **97% of participants replied "Yes"**

Some direct Quotes from Participants were:

- "This program will absolutely change your life for the better, opening your heart to endless possibilities."
- "Everyone needs to go regardless of what else you have tried before."
- "It was a safe place and welcoming community. You are welcomed and loved and valued and wanted here. There is always a place here for veterans."
- "I try to get as many people as I can to go through the program because it's helped me so much."
- "Who could ever go wrong with a horse to lean on?!"

Percentage of participants responding "Very Good" on the following questions

(on a scale from Poor to Very Good):

- How do you rate your program facilitators? **Very Good - 93%**
- How do you rate the facilities? **Very Good - 92%**
- How do you rate the horses? **Very Good - 93%**
- How do you rate your overall experience in the program? **Very Good - 92%**

B. Results from the Ryff Scale of Psychological Well-Being

In addition to the qualitative feedback listed above, participants completed the Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being before beginning the program and at end of the program. The scale measures various dimensions of personal growth and well-being across six subscales. The results presented here are based on 213 participants who completed the program and filled out both the pre-and post-program questionnaire. Below is a summary of the results and what they signify.

The results below include a Probability value, or *P*-value, which helps explain the probability that the results were not due to a fluke or chance. The sample size of 213 participants gives us confidence that the findings are reliable and not just due to randomness in a small group. The level of significance with *P*-values of <0.001 indicate that the Ryff results presented here are very statistically significant and that the change in Ryff scores are extremely unlikely to have happened just by chance.

We also calculated Cohen's *d* to evaluate the magnitude of the effects for both the full Ryff scale and its subscales. Cohen's *d* is measured on a scale from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating more significant and meaningful changes. A Cohen's *d* of 0.2 represents a small effect, 0.5 indicates a medium effect, and 0.8 or higher signifies a large effect. In our analysis of the Ryff scores, all Cohen's *d* values ranged from 0.50 to 0.70, suggesting that the observed changes in the sum score and all the subscale scores were meaningful and substantial.

Pre-to post program comparison of the Ryff Scale (Total score)

The total score for the Ryff scale increased significantly from 164.4±33.9 to 187.1±26.5 ($p<.001$). An increased total score on the Ryff Scale suggests an overall uplift in psychological well-being, indicating balanced personal development and improved satisfaction with various aspects of life. These results demonstrate that the programs led to positive change and increased participants resilience, and growth, supporting better mental health and fulfillment.

Results presented separately for each of the 6 subscales:

1. **Autonomy:** Higher scores on this scale suggest increased independence, self-confidence, and ability to withstand social pressures. The "Autonomy" scale scores increased significantly from 29.5±6.7 to 32.9±5.4 ($p<.001$), which reflects that the participants enhanced their self-reliance and had a stronger sense of self-direction after the program.
2. **Environmental Mastery:** Improvements in this area indicate better adaptability and control over one's surroundings. Results showed that "Environmental Mastery" scores increased significantly from 25.0±6.0 to 28.9±4.4 ($p<.001$). This suggests that the participants felt more capable of managing their environment, handling daily challenges, and creating circumstances conducive to well-being.
3. **Personal Growth:** Higher scores here denote a heightened drive for personal development and self-improvement. Scores for the "Personal Growth" scale improved significantly from 30.8±6.9 to 34.4±5.0 ($p<.001$). This increase indicates that participants showed renewed openness to experiences, willingness to challenge themselves and a continued focus on growth and expansion of skills and knowledge.

4. **Positive Relations with Others:** Improved scores in this dimension point to deeper, more satisfying relationships. The scores from this subscale improved significantly from 26.6 ± 6.8 to 30.1 ± 6.1 ($p < .001$), suggesting that participants showed enhanced empathy, trust, and positive engagement with others, fostering healthier and more supportive connections.
5. **Purpose in Life:** An improvement here suggests a stronger sense of direction and meaning. The scale “Purpose in Life” increased significantly from 27.2 ± 7.1 to 30.6 ± 5.8 ($p < .001$). This reflects greater clarity in goals and values, as well as a reinforced belief that life has purpose, providing motivation and resilience.
6. **Self-Acceptance:** Higher scores in self-acceptance reflect greater self-respect, self-worth, and acceptance of personal strengths and limitations. The scores from the “Self-Acceptance” scale increased significantly from 25.1 ± 8.1 to 30.0 ± 6.8 ($p < .001$). This indicates that the program led to better self-esteem overall.

References

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