



TheHorseCourse

at HMP/YOI Portland



Interim Evaluation Findings

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September 2012

updated January 2014



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About TheHorseCourse

Devised and facilitated by Harriet Laurie, this course relies heavily on Parelli Natural Horsemanship as its theoretical basis and context. Instructors are not therapists or educators; they draw on their horsemanship to guide the intervention. Following success at HMP/YOI Portland the course is now being administered by a registered charity, TheHorseCourse (No. 1141654) and replicating into other prisons through the training and support of additional instructors.

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Acknowledgements:

Thanks to Heather Bryant, John Dolder, Eryl Doust, Steve Holland, Jan Knake, Jackie Simpson, Mike Summers, Russ Trent and to all the staff and prisoners at HMP/YOI Portland, who helped us to conduct this research.

Update 2015

At 12 months post-release, reoffending among TheHorseCourse participants stands at 36%, **a drop of 27 percentage points** from the cohort's 63% predicted reoffending rate (OGRS)¹.

Note that observed reduction in reoffending is typically fewer than ten percentage points (Ministry of Justice 2013), and that THC referrals include those who are considered too disruptive or disengaged for accredited programmes.

Given the relatively small sample (n=25), we cannot say with certainty that this reduction in reoffending will be maintained as the cohort increases, but this is a statistically significant result ($p < .01$) and earlier evidence from the evaluation also includes statistically significant reductions in adjudications and negative behaviour entries. THC stands out as a promising intervention with particular success among some of the hardest to engage offenders, for whom so little is currently available in prison settings. Earlier findings are published in the interim evaluation report which follows.

These include a dramatic increase in Positive Entries and a nil drop out rate, consolidated with positive staff feedback on conduct and rapport. Post-participation interviews consistently report increased confidence and new skills in self-relaxation. Many participants express the benefit of learning self-efficacy in the moment rather than attempting to learn through classroom work. We also undertook field observations and noted that participants consistently gain observable skills in managing emotion, maintaining attention, perseverance and confidence.

TheHorseCourse seems particularly appropriate for those who have failed to engage with interventions, learning and activities and are medium to high risk. We would also recommend this course for those presenting with aggressive and disruptive behaviour within the prison.

Peer reviewed papers are in the writing and submission stages.

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¹ At this stage two of the 25 offenders in the study group have not reached 12 months post release, so we assume they will reoffend.

Introduction

A significant body of research has emphasised the physical benefits of using horses in therapy, but the potential psychosocial, cognitive and behavioural impacts have been largely neglected and robust academic evaluations of such initiatives are remarkably absent from the emerging literature base.

Despite widespread acknowledgement over recent years that Equine Assisted Therapy (EAT) has the potential to be especially effective in prison settings, accompanied by a multitude of descriptive studies illustrating the benefits (e.g. Tramutt, 2003; Viridine et al., 2002; Tyler, 1994; Taylor, 2001), a considerable lack of quantitative research and empirical evidence on its effectiveness has remained to date. There is clearly a need for more rigorous evaluation research on EAT and development of standardised measurement tools that are able to provide accurate assessment of the psychosocial improvements that the qualitative research base has reported.

Prisons are tasked with providing opportunities to reduce the reoffending rates of prison populations by motivating those in their charge to make positive changes to their attitudes and behaviour. TheHorseCourse has developed its unique approach to work with a specific population of prisoners: those who are unwilling or unable to engage in the wider prison regime; young men who have a history of conflict with staff and / or other prisoners; and those who may be especially

vulnerable or at-risk of victimisation and/or self harm. This small but significant population can thus prove to be among the most difficult for staff to engage with.

While young adults aged 18-24 account for one in ten of the UK population, they also account for a third of those sentenced to prison each year; a third of the probation service caseload and a third of the total economic and social costs of crime (T2A, 2010). On the 30th June 2012 there were 7,443 18-20 year-olds in prison in England and Wales (Ministry of Justice, 2012), and reoffending rates among this age group remain stubbornly high with 58% of young adults released from custody in the first quarter of 2008 reoffending within a year. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons has commented that “the high reoffending rate among young adult men is unlikely to reduce without significant changes in approach, funding and focus” (HMCIP, 2010), highlighting the importance of exploring innovative and effective ways of engaging with young prisoners, particularly those who are not engaging with or responding to other prison-based interventions.

The use of horses in the therapeutic and rehabilitative process within prisons has clearly facilitated a unique opportunity to work more effectively with some of the more challenging and complex individuals within the criminal justice system.

TheHorseCourse aims to teach psychological and emotional self-control through an intensive course with two specially trained horses. The horses give

reliable and accurate feedback on participants' calmness and focus and the course is highly structured and challenging, allowing participants to develop and test their ability to stay calm under pressure, set goals and stick at them despite frustrations, and to become confident as learners.

This interim report presents a summary of the preliminary research which aimed to explore the extent to which TheHorseCourse effectively promotes improved behaviour on the wings, fewer instances of conflict and violence, improved relationships with other prisoners and prison staff, and increased engagement with educational, vocational and rehabilitative opportunities within the prison, as a step towards reducing re-offending.

Background literature

Although the integration of equine activities in a therapeutic framework is a relatively new development, the therapeutic benefit of the horse as a 'healing agent' (Burgon, 2011, p.167) to humans has a long legacy. The field of Equine Assisted Therapy (EAT) was officially acknowledged in the mid-1990s with the formation of the Equine-Facilitated Mental Health Association and since then there has been growing interest in the horse-human relationship and the potential of employing EAT as a therapeutic intervention. Following claims that horses have the ability to evoke physical and psychosocial changes that can valuably contribute to the rehabilitation process, horses are now being regularly incorporated into therapy programmes to address low self-esteem, depression and a host

of other social and psychological issues, achieving demonstrable success (Taylor, 2001; Yorke et al., 2008).

Interest in the potential of employing horses as a therapeutic medium to aid the rehabilitation process has grown dramatically in recent years, with a corresponding rapid development and implementation of programmes in a range of contexts (Bizub et al., 2003; Burgon, 2003). A significant body of research has already demonstrated the physical benefits of EAT, although the potential psychosocial, cognitive and behavioural benefits of an equine-based therapeutic approach have remained largely neglected. However, these areas are now receiving more attention on the criminological and psychological research agenda, with recognised psychosocial benefits including the ability of EAT to adapt behaviour (Kaiser et al., 2006), develop trust (Brooks, 2006), promote self-esteem, confidence and psychological resilience (Bizub et al., 2003; Burgon, 2011, Rutter, 1985) and even in encouraging desistance from crime (Masten et al., 1990; Hayden, 2005).

EAT is aligned to the discipline of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) which has a longer history of eliciting therapeutic benefits through the use of animals. Chardonens (2009, p.324) asserted that animals - but especially horses - are great 'aids', in part through their ability to encourage hostile people to engage with the therapeutic process. The benefits that the horse affords in these situations shares similarities with AAT but also exhibits additional qualities (Burgon, 2011), such as its

size and power relative to humans evoking respect (Frewin and Gardiner, 2005) and conversely its vulnerability, which induces feelings of empathy (Vidrine et al., 2002; Frewin and Gardiner, 2005). In their exploration of the benefit of EAT for adults, Klontz et al.'s (2007) psychological assessment carried out prior to, immediately following, and six months after therapy identified significant reductions in psychological distress and improvements to psychological well-being.

It has been claimed that the presence of a horse can be especially effective in creating a calm therapeutic environment (Levinson, 1969; Fine, 2000), an atmosphere which many practitioners struggle to achieve in the traditionally 'anti-therapeutic' environment of a prison. In this sense, the horse can be understood as a 'co-therapist' (Chardonnes, 2009; Karol, 2007) in facilitating effective therapeutic situations. Indeed it has been suggested that one of the reasons why using a horse can be so effective is due to the fact that the horse promotes consciousness and self-awareness by acting as a 'mirror', accurately reflecting and providing unbiased feedback to human behaviour (Vidrine et al., 2002). McCormick and McCormick's (1997) research with hostile adolescent youth has evidenced this, claiming that defiant behaviour eroded with the understanding that openness and vulnerability elicits positive behaviour from the horse, whereas aggression does not. It has been suggested that when participants act in congruence with their feelings, the horse will respond by engaging in an authentic relationship, leading participants to have a 'corrective emotional experience' (Tramutt,

2003) which can have a particularly strong impact on self-esteem, cooperation and enthusiasm in new pursuits (Bracher, 2000).

Practitioners and researchers now assert that the inclusion of horses in therapy can provide a myriad of psychosocial benefits. The most significant benefits include the horse's ability to adapt behaviour (Kaiser et al., 2006; Schultz et al., 2007), be non-judgmental (Bowers and MacDonald, 2001; Yorke et al., 2008), develop trust (Brooks, 2006; Chardonnes, 2009; Yorke et al., 2008; Tramutt, 2003) and establish self-esteem, confidence and mastery (Trotter et al., 2008; Bizub et al., 2003; Viridine et al., 2002; Klontz et al., 2007). In order to work effectively with the horse, participants must model behaviours that the horse will respond positively to, such as calm and confident leadership (Rashid, 2004) which can create an opportunity for learning new behaviours and feelings of self-efficacy (Burgon, 2011). Ewing et al. (2007, p.60) have evaluated the effects of EAT on emotionally disturbed youths, claiming that the primary objective of this therapeutic intervention is to 'instil a sense of order, to create an understanding of boundaries, to improve focus and to instil trust'. EAT sessions are also claimed to decrease feelings of depression, anger and isolation through the enhancement of general psychological wellbeing (Bowers and MacDonald, 2001; Frame, 2006; Tyler, 1994; MacKinnon et al., 1995) which is transferred from the therapeutic situation to participants' daily lives (Ewing et al., 2007, p.71).

The scope of EAT is gradually expanding from its traditional use in the rehabilitation of less able-bodied individuals, with initial advancements in utilising the discipline in social-work contexts such as in the rehabilitation of ‘at-risk’ youth, or when traditional forms of therapy fail to impact (McCormick and McCormick, 1997). Myers (2004) has successfully utilised horses to promote patience, empathy, cooperation and responsibility among alcohol-dependent adolescents, and Moreau (2001), Edney (1995) and Chandler (2005) have each promoted the use of EAT with offenders, demonstrating reductions in violence and anti-social behaviour and improvements to communication skills and perseverance,

self-esteem and self-confidence following the introduction of an animal to the rehabilitation process of prison inmates.

Based on these accumulated findings, there is clearly more positivity surrounding the use of horses in a therapeutic capacity within prisons, particularly in attempts to promote psychological well-being and rehabilitative efforts. Techniques relating to effective communication and developing trust promote positive interaction, and individuals learn that respect and compassion yield more rewarding experiences and cooperation with the horse than dominance and aggression. Indeed, the remarkable success of EAT programmes has led to claims that they represent one of the more effective rehabilitation techniques within the penal system today (Levinson, 2004).

Despite the rapid development of EAT and an accompanying body of research over the past decades, problems with the evidence base have been identified which limit the credibility of the findings. There are a multitude of descriptive studies indicating EAT’s benefits (e.g. Tramutt, 2003; Virdine et al., 2002; Tyler, 1994; Taylor, 2001) but a considerable lack of quantitative research and empirical evidence on its effectiveness. There is clearly a need for more rigorous research on EAT and development of standardised measurement tools that are able to assess most accurately the psychosocial improvements that qualitative research has reported.



TheHorseCourse

Summary of programme delivery

TheHorseCourse is designed to be delivered intensively using horses to provide motivation, feedback and structure. Programme delivery is based on the development of key life skills and is typically delivered across seven sessions of approximately 2-2.5 hours in duration, facilitated by an instructor who engages with two participants working with two horses, over a four day time period. Sessions all take place outdoors, with use of a 50' roundpen and sports pitch.

Development of the skills associated with the programme is embedded in work towards a horsemanship goal of Parelli¹ Level 1. Tasks are guided by the instructor and the horses are selected and trained to provide especially clear and easily observed physical feedback to participants, many of whom will not have interacted with horses prior to taking part in the programme. The methodological focus is on shifts being made 'in the moment', in response to situations encountered. Participants are unmounted handlers, learning to communicate with the horses on the ground, to Level 1 of the recognised Parelli programme. The course employs an approach using a series of specific tasks as a tool for developing communication skills, promoting the development of strategies to

¹ Parelli Natural Horsemanship (PNH) is at the forefront of the global "Natural Horsemanship" movement and represents an approach developed in the US over the past 30 years. PNH is a comprehensive system of horse training which aims to achieve a harmonious partnership, and is formally assessed at four levels, gradually developing the horse/human relationship from Level 1 which covers safety and basic competence to Level 4 in which horse and human work in complete harmony in movements on the ground as well as ridden.

create calmness, confidence and willingness, and developing patterns of positive habits.

Upon successful completion of the course, participants are presented with a certificate, usually by a prison Governor or visiting dignitary. In recognition of the importance of celebratory rituals which are typically absent in criminal justice settings (Maruna, 2011), the concluding session involves participants demonstrating their newly learnt skills in front of a small crowd, which may involve participants teaching a horsemanship task to a member of prison staff or visitor.



An outcome of the programme is that a ten minute video submission for each participant is submitted to Parelli USA for external assessment. Successful assessment results in participants receiving a Parelli Level 1 certificate as well as a brief report on their display of horsemanship. Participants receive their own copy of the filmed submission, and many are keen to share this with their family.



Referral and assessment

TheHorseCourse 'Star' (overleaf) has been developed and piloted by the delivery and evaluation team to use as a referral and monitoring tool. The star is a participatory tool which is used to identify pre-programme perceptions of demonstrable aspects of the

key skills incorporated into the programme, specifically: assertiveness; engagement; communication; analysis and planning; calmness; empathy; taking responsibility; focus and perseverance. Upon completion of the course, the star is also used to demonstrate a participant's progress against these factors, which have

1: The Star: perceived benefits

Prison staff perceptions: "Usually when I interview prisoners after courses it is like trying to get blood from a stone! Some will talk, but mostly it is hard work. The THC Star really opens up the discussion and gives me an indication of the progress that was made. The young men clearly get a lot of insights from this course and the star helps them to see it in black and white, to remember what they learned and keep on progressing. I use it very much as a basis for discussion, a way to celebrate success and also a reminder if things start to slip. It provides a language to talk about things that can be difficult and 'evidence' that progress can and has been made. All my lads have been very positive about TheHorseCourse, one told me it was the best thing he has ever done - monumental for him. It opened his eyes to who he can be, and the star is something he can keep in his 'glory file' and look at every now and then, to remind himself how far he has come. The instructor had written 'Keep going!!' on there and that's exactly what he is doing now".

Facilitator perceptions: "Before we developed the star, the exit interviews were more free form, with each participant highlighting what they felt to be the biggest change they had made. With the star there to guide the conversation, I find we cover more ground and really think through what shifts have been made and how to continue working on them beyond the course. I have been surprised at how willingly participants engage with it - although wordy it still allows for them to express themselves, they aren't stuck in the confines of a tickbox. Seeing progress, however small, along each arm convinces them that it really is possible to change. Ending up with a bigger 'shape' seems to really hammer it home how much progress has been made".

Prisoner perceptions: "This tops off the whole week, cos it's like a video, it shows me what I've been doing the whole week, like the pieces of the puzzle if you know what I mean. It's good, I can see for myself, it's like looking inside the box. Tops it off."



TheHorseCourse

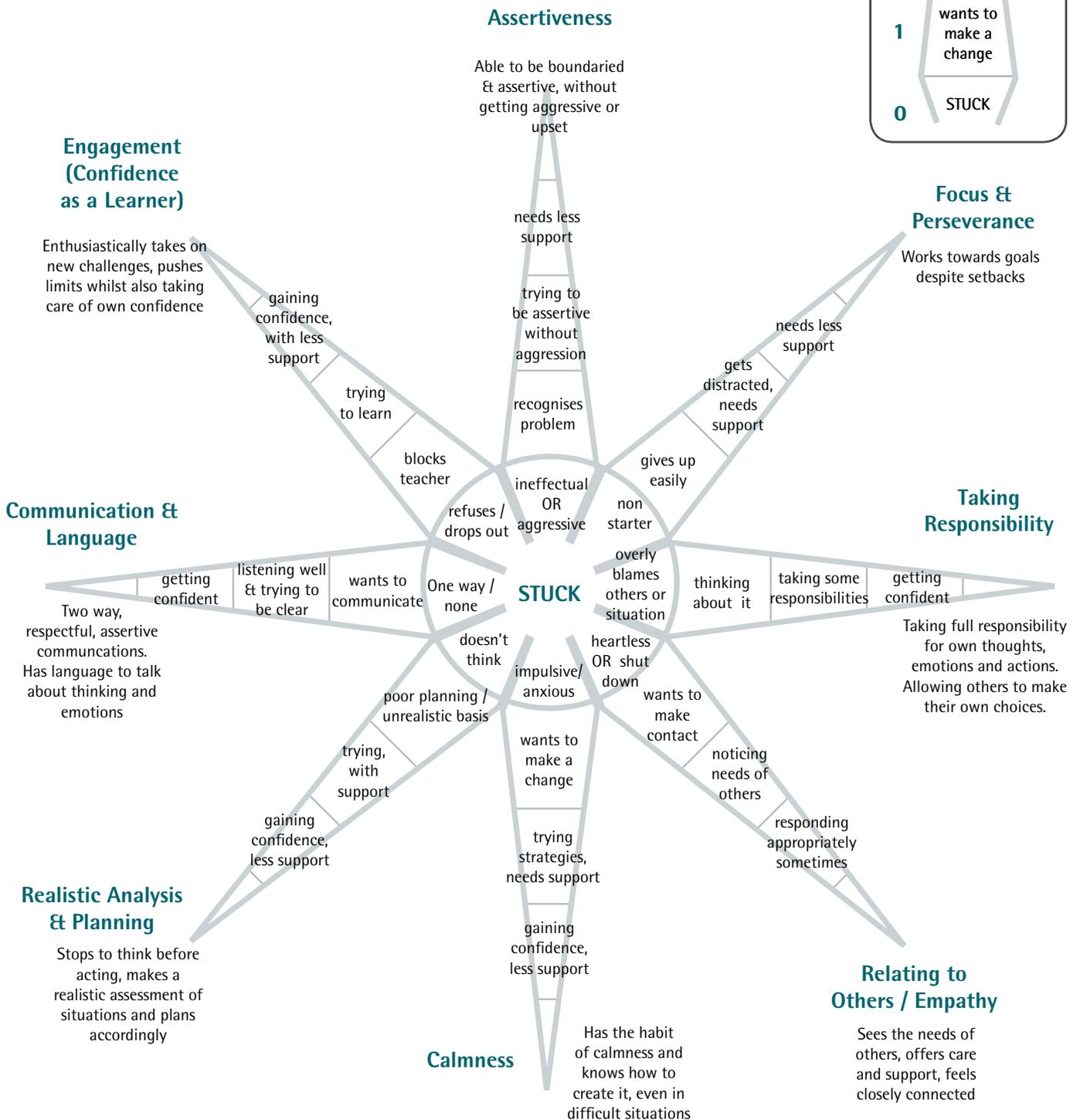
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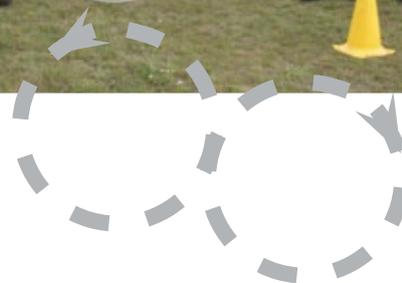
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been designed to align with some of the key criminogenic risk factors associated with insight, management of emotions, self-confidence and goal-setting.

Whilst it is acknowledged that as an assessment tool the star offers a relatively subjective form of measurement, it has received favourable feedback from prison staff, instructors and participants themselves, as a working document to refer to throughout the course, but also as a tool by which to demonstrate significant targets and progress.

The type of horsemanship promoted in the course places responsibility on participants to gain mastery not only of the Parelli technique but, more importantly in this context, of their own emotional and psychological state. All instructors are practicing Level 3/4 Parelli practitioners, working alongside two appropriately trained horses, with a successful track record in teaching horsemanship to a high standard. The role of the instructor is to ensure the safety of the prisoners and horses participating in the programme, promote natural horsemanship techniques, encourage and equip learners to learn to ‘read’ physical feedback from the horse, and to set



tasks that are sufficiently challenging to test and develop the key skills which underpin the programme, specifically those concerning psychological and emotional resilience.

In turn, the horses are trained and utilised in order to engage and motivate participants, and are selected as much for their physical presence as for their training. The demands of the horsemanship create an immediate and visceral learning environment where the participant is drawn into the ‘here and now’. Indeed, Instructors spend large portions of the course working non-verbally and all horsemanship tasks are taught through simulation and rehearsal, rather than through verbal explanations or written materials. The instructor’s verbal communications are kept to the minimum, offering simple practical directions based in the present moment and avoiding any discussion of personal histories or narratives. Only at the end of the course is there a conversation between the participant and instructor about past offending and the application of new skills learnt on the course in reducing the likelihood of reoffending.



2: Staff perceptions

“As an Offender Supervisor I referred seven prisoners to TheHorseCourse between July 2010 and October 2011. Primarily I was asked to identify individuals who displayed poor management of emotions and whose behaviour was currently challenging. I was also asked to consider referral of prisoners who had previously completed other interventions and who had shown limited or no evidence of improvement and additionally those who did not meet the criteria for mainstream accredited Offending Behaviour Programmes. Of the seven prisoners I referred, one had previously attended an accredited Offending Behaviour Programme, but due to poor behaviour he was removed before completion. Another prisoner had previously completed several accredited Offending Behaviour Programmes prior TheHorseCourse, but although he had shown improvement in behaviour there were still areas causing concern which were raised by the Security Department. The remaining five referrals had not completed mainstream programmes for a variety of reasons, ranging from lacking confidence to attend, not meeting the specified criteria and not wanting to engage. I have found TheHorseCourse to be an effective tool in working towards and reducing reoffending and the risk of serious harm the prisoners pose to others. I have noticed that those I referred, post course, have presented as more confident and assertive, and better able to express their feelings, manage their emotions and have a greater ability to see the perspective of others, including their victims. Additionally I have seen an increased motivation to set and work towards achieving goals including engagement with prison interventions and plans for release. This course seems to give the prisoners the energy and belief that they can make changes which in turn has a positive effect on their daily interactions with staff and ability to move forward. Whilst I see this as an effective stand alone tool (especially for those who may not meet the criteria for other interventions) I also consider it to compliment other programmes/courses as it appears to create a change in attitude which can be then be built on”.

The evaluation research

The full evaluation research is based on a qualitative and quantitative approach encompassing analysis of existing data on behaviour within the prison and engagement with the wider regime, supplemented with in-depth semi-structured individual interviews, non-participant observations and analyses of programme materials. The primary focus on participants was supplemented with the perceptions of prison and delivery staff. Qualitative interviews were conducted in order to explore the impact of the course from the perspectives of the young men who have participated, as well as prison and delivery staff. This interim report focuses specifically on the quantitative findings, with subjective accounts of the impact of the intervention reported elsewhere.

Ethical procedures

Prison-based researchers have a particular responsibility in recognising that research ethics are especially crucial in prison settings where there is an increased risk that issues of power and control can undermine the ethical integrity of research. The research process was designed to ensure that the participants submitted informed consent, and remained aware of their right to withdraw from the study. The fact that participation in the research was entirely separate to participation in TheHorseCourse was made explicit, in writing and verbally, at each stage of the research.

Full ethical approval was sought and gained from the HM Prison Service Research Applications and Ethics Panel, the Head of Psychology and Interventions at HMYOI Portland, and the researcher's University Research Ethics Committee and Research Governance Office. The research was also carried out in line with the British Psychological Society's code of ethics and conduct. The researcher introduced herself to participants and explained her role as external evaluator, the aims of the research, and what the research process would entail. It was made clear that the research process was separate from the course delivery, independent from the Prison Service and TheHorseCourse, and that participation was entirely voluntary. Information sheets including prison research contact details in case of questions or complaints, and an explanation of how to withdraw from the study were given to all participants to keep. In verbal and written instructions participants were reassured of anonymity, with the exception of instances where information relating to a breach in prison security or plans to harm themselves or others was revealed in the course of the research (in which case the researcher would be obliged to inform prison staff). Individuals who agreed to take part in the research completed and returned a consent form, and those who were willing to be photographed or filmed completed additional statements of release.

Programme participants

In making referrals, prison and delivery staff have prioritised those prisoners presenting with medium to high risk of reoffending who are not engaging fully with the prison regime and may be demonstrating high levels of conflict with staff and/or other prisoners. From commencement of delivery of TheHorseCourse at HMP/YOI Portland to the time of preparing this report, a total of 28 young men, aged between 18-22 years (mean age: 20 years) have completed the course (one further individual commenced the programme but was released before completion). This represents an especially high completion rate, well above that of many other prison-based interventions.

Participants were serving sentences ranging from seven months to that of an indeterminate length. Reconviction risk assessment data, number of previous convictions and age at which first convicted / in contact with the police was also collected where available from the

NOMS Offender Assessment System (OASys). OASys is the primary risk/need assessment and management tool used for adult offenders in England and Wales, and is used to assess – amongst other things – suitability for programme participation. It has been in operation for over a decade, but is not mandatory and coverage is not yet universal. OASys assessments were available for the majority (n=22) of the participants. The Offender Group Reconviction Scale is a risk assessment measure used to predict the likelihood of reconviction after one year for individual offenders based on static risks (age, gender and criminal history).

For TheHorseCourse participants, pre-participation OGRS3 scores ranged from 7-87%, with a mean score of 62%. Of the 22 participants for whom OGRS3 data was available, 18 presented with a pre-participation score of over 50% (identified as medium to high risk).

Preliminary quantitative findings

Previous research into the role of animal assisted programmes such as TheHorseCourse has relied predominantly on qualitative observations, with a lack of robust quantitative evidence available to quantify the impact of participation. In an effort to address this imbalance, quantitative data concerning adjudications, positive entries and negative entries was drawn upon as an interim indicator of the impact of the programme, until a point at which longitudinal analysis of reconviction data is available.

Statistically significant results

Adjudications down 74%

Negative entries down 72%

Using a paired sample t-test there was a statistically significant difference between pre- and post- course participation on number of adjudications¹ recorded in the months before participation and after completion of the course: $t(16) = 2.23, p < .05$. The mean number of adjudications pre-participation was 2.5, compared to a mean .65 numbers of adjudications post-participation.

There was also a significant difference between pre- and post- participation numbers of negative

¹ Adjudications are disciplinary hearings. One of the primary purposes of an adjudication is “to help maintain order, control, discipline and a safe environment by investigating offences and punishing those responsible” (PSI 2011-47).

entries²: $t(16) = 2.46, p < .05$. Mean number of negative entries pre-participation: 10; Mean number of negative entries post-participation: 2.8. Although the mean number of positive entries pre-post participation increased from 1.5 to 2.2, this difference was not statistically significant.

Due to instances of missing data, the most methodologically reliable measure was the comparison of the three month period pre-participation and the three month period post-participation, excluding data from the month of participation. This analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between pre- and post-participation scores for negative entries, which decreased from a mean of 3.4 in the three months pre participation to a mean of 1.65 in the three months post-participation: $t(16) = 2.50, p < .05$. The pre- and post-participation differences in adjudications and positive entries reflected trends in the anticipated directions but were not statistically significant. Although reflecting a relatively small sample size, it is suggested that the reduction in negative entries is an effective indicator of improved behaviour on the wings, thus reflecting improved engagement in the regime of the prison – further reflected in the staff perceptions illustrated in Box 2.

Qualitative data from offender interviews illustrated the perceived positive impact of participation on factors such as empathy, management of emotions, self-esteem, and improved communication. Box 3 illustrates

² Negative and positive entries are notes added on to a prisoner’s file by members of staff in response to specific incidents.

a typical successful outcome of a participant, specifically in relation to improved engagement with the wider prison regime and in responding to the sentence plan.

Costs and anticipated benefits

The benefits of a programme which engages with the more disruptive prisoners is clear. When prisoners are involved in disruptions, considerable prison staff time must be taken from contributing to positive aspects of the prison regime and allocated instead to dealing with the incidents.

Furthermore, in terms of overall outlay in the context of efforts to reduce re-offending, the running costs of delivering TheHorseCourse are calculated at £750/person, to include the associated costs of a trained instructor, horses and travel.

It currently costs an average of £47,137 (Ministry of Justice, 2011) per year for each prisoner to be held in a Young Offender Institution (under 21 years of age) in overall resource expenditure, although this figure is considerably higher for prisoners who are frequently involved in disruption and adjudications. This is also a conservative cost of reoffending since it only reflects the cost of imprisonment, and does not include the social and actual cost of criminal offences. However, taking this figure in relation to the total cost of £750 per participant for TheHorseCourse to operate, suggests that if just one out of every sixty participants who would have reoffended is prevented from doing so in one year, the project will have already more than saved the initial expenditure.

3: Prisoner case study

A was referred to The Horse Course with a record of continuous adjudications for aggression and assaults on staff and other prisoners. None of the measures available within the prison regime had altered this behaviour and staff were questioning how to manage this prisoner. The practice of ‘shipping’ from one prison to another was the next option. Even during the course he was accused of an assault on a staff member. However, for the first time he showed remorse and when hearing that his mother’s visit would be affected, he wept. This expression of emotion was entirely new according to staff, where normally he would have shown only bravado and anger. At this point, five years into his IPP (indeterminate for public protection) sentence, A made the decision to change the patterns of behaviour he had become established in, leading him to engage with education and training, which he had previously resisted. Soon afterwards he achieved his English Level 1 and completed the accredited Thinking Skills Programme as part of his sentence plan. His adjudications reduced from an average of one to two per week down to the occasional outburst every few months. He stopped refusing work and increased his earned privileges from being a long term “basic” prisoner up to the highest “enhanced” level. Following his participation in TheHorseCourse and improved behaviour he had a Parole hearing and was allowed to move to a lower security prison nearer his home. In their decision the Parole Board stated:

‘You engaged well with The Horse Course to address your mental and emotional self-control, goal setting, problem solving and communication with specially trained horses and the panel found the report to be very insightful in identifying your behavioural traits’.



Conclusion

The current research has complimented existing findings on the social and psychological benefits of equine assisted therapy by confirming evidence of observed improvements in the behaviour and constructive engagement within the prison regime of programme participants. Statistically significant improvements to measures of engagement in the prison regime have been observed, and members of prison and delivery staff have verified the benefits of TheHorseCourse in engaging with offenders. Recommendations have been made by the evaluation team in response to user comments and we have found the organisation to be adaptable and highly focused on outcomes. The newly developed referral and assessment 'star' has been favourably received by staff and participants alike, highlighting the benefit of an interactive assessment tool which participants can engage with more effectively.

The emerging numeric data is positive: adjudications post-participation down 74%, and negative entries down 72%. Qualitative data was also positive and post-participation interviews and field observations consistently report increased confidence and new skills in psychological resilience and emotional management.

The findings reported here represent the interim observations of a relatively small sample of participants and the full impact of the intervention will become apparent as the research progresses longitudinally. By conducting analyses at an individual and group level, it is possible to comment with some confidence

that this intervention appears to create positive outcomes conducive both to engagement and to the longer term aim of reducing reoffending. It seems particularly appropriate for those who have previously failed to engage with interventions, learning and activities, present with aggressive and problem behaviours and are at medium to high risk of reoffending.

These preliminary findings serve to highlight the perceived and actual benefits of the specialist techniques developed by TheHorseCourse, the careful design of which – closely aligned with resettlement agendas – sets it apart from other EAT programmes. Further research is required to establish what aspects of the course are the most influential, including an exploration of the extent to which the success of this course relies on the involvement of an equine, and the methodology employed in guiding the equine interactions. It would be naïve to assume that every intervention employing an equine will necessarily achieve the same results.

Ongoing evaluation activities aim to focus on longitudinal followup, incorporating a reconviction analysis and the development of appropriate psychometric quantitative indicators to compliment the existing assessment tools. A key aim of the evaluation is to assess the replicability of the intervention with other prisoner populations but in the meantime TheHorseCourse has established itself as a promising option in engaging with some of the more disruptive and disengaged prisoners held in the young adult estate.

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