

**FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS  
ABOUT EQUINE-ASSISTED THERAPY AT NCEFT**

**What therapy strategies does NCEFT use?**

NCEFT is one of the oldest and largest equine-assisted therapy programs in the nation. We specialize in the physical, occupational, and speech therapy using horses as a dynamic treatment strategy. The American Hippotherapy Association, Inc. (AHA, Inc.) states: "PT, OT and SLP professionals use evidence-based practice and clinical reasoning in the purposeful manipulation of equine movement to engage the sensorimotor and neuromotor systems to create functional change in their patient. Used with other neuromotor and sensorimotor techniques, hippotherapy is part of a patient's integrated plan of care."

In addition to equine-assisted physical, occupational and speech therapy, NCEFT offers equine-assisted mental health and resilience services. Equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) is the use of horses and the equine facility to treat human psychological problems. In EAP, licensed mental health professionals work alongside appropriately credentialed equine professional partners with suitable equine(s) to address psychotherapy goals set forth by the mental health professional and the client.

**What is the difference between equine-assisted therapy and adaptive riding?**

In physical, occupational, or speech therapy sessions that incorporate equine movement, patients are not learning to ride a horse. Instead, the movement of the horse is a therapy tool to help improve function in everyday life. Therapy is delivered by licensed physical, occupational, or speech therapy practitioners. Adaptive riding focuses on increasing individual riding and horsemanship skills while gaining a therapeutic benefit. Adaptive riding is taught by a PATH-certified instructor rather than a therapist.

**What diagnoses do you treat?**

NCEFT has treated thousands of individuals with cognitive and physical disabilities, including, but not limited to, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, Down syndrome, attention-deficit disorder (ADD)/attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, developmental delay, sight loss, hearing loss, traumatic brain injury, stroke, post-traumatic stress disorder, amputation and learning or language disabilities.

**Why use a horse for physical, occupational or speech therapy?**

Sitting astride a horse provides patients with repetitive, rhythmic and variable input via multidimensional movement. In a typical 30-minute therapy session a horse will take about 3,000 dynamic steps that expose patients to movement that cannot be replicated on a piece of equipment. In a forward-facing seat, the movement simulates what a normal human walking pattern should feel like. The repetitive nature of the movement allows the patient ample opportunity to practice and refine balance responses, leading to improvements in core stabilization and postural control. The horse serves as a dynamic base of support, encouraging:

- Increased postural and protective reflexes
- Improved balance
- Building of overall postural support and endurance
- Weight bearing and motor planning



The movement of the horse also provides sensory input to [vestibular](#), [proprioceptive](#), [tactile](#), and [visual](#) systems, thereby facilitating changes in sensory integration and attentional skills. As the horse moves through geometric figures and changes of tempo, the patient must adjust their own posture to maintain an upright, balanced position. The movement of the horse cannot be duplicated by any piece of equipment. During an equine-assisted therapy session, the patient can be placed in a variety of positions (facing forward, facing sideways in side-sit, facing backwards, lying prone over the barrel of the horse, lying supine along the barrel of the horse, etc.). Each position targets specific cognitive and physical systems.

### **What does a horse contribute to mental health sessions?**

EAP addresses a variety of mental, emotional and behavioral needs. Horses offer a physical experience that moves the therapy process beyond self-reporting and allows for direct and real-time observation of behaviors, emotional responses and patterns. Sessions take place outdoors at the barn or on the property with a licensed mental health professional, a horse and, typically, an appropriately credentialed horse handler. Activities with horses are specifically designed to expand awareness, improve communication, ease distress and build self-esteem. EAP is appropriate in the treatment of:

- Youth and adolescent issues, including social skills development, ADD and ADHD, oppositional-defiant disorder, anger management and other at-risk behaviors
- Family issues, such as communication, marital conflicts, child behavior and parenting
- Anxiety and depression, ranging from fear and worry to intense panic, phobias, social isolation and suicidality
- Grief and loss
- PTSD/trauma, including military Veterans and first responders as well as victims of physical, emotional or sexual abuse



Offerings include one-on-one therapy, family therapy, and group therapy. Current group programs focus on social skills, depression, suicide support and PTSD among Veterans and first responders.

### **Are there any limitations for participants?**

The list of contraindications for therapy incorporating equine movement includes, but is not limited to: atlantoaxial instability, coxarthrosis, cranial deficits, hydrocephalus, uncontrolled seizure disorder, spina bifida, chiari II, tethered cord, hydromelia and certain allergies.

NCEFT does not treat adults or children who cannot sit unassisted, do not meet the physical therapy (PT) or occupational therapy (OT) clinical intake requirements or who cannot safely work with the therapy team, including the horses. For example, we cannot treat patients with extremely impulsive or violent behaviors or symptoms (such as uncontrolled seizures) that put staff or the patients at risk. Patients must also be an appropriate weight for the horses that are available. NCEFT is equipped with an overhead lift for individuals who are unable to mount from a standing position.

### **What is a typical therapy session like?**

Typically, NCEFT's physical, occupational and speech therapy sessions are 30 minutes long and include a variety of strategies to assist the patient in meeting their individual goals. Some sessions may begin in the clinic, some with the horse. Most sessions are conducted in NCEFT's covered arena, and many also take advantage of the sensory trail, weather permitting. The therapy team comprises patient, horse, therapist, horse handler and two trained side walker volunteers whose primary job is to maintain the patient safely on the horse.

EAP therapy sessions typically last 60 minutes or 90 minutes and may be conducted one-on-one or in a group session. A horse or horses are part of each session, but the type of contact with the horse varies according to the goals for the session. All sessions include a licensed mental health expert and most sessions also include a certified equine expert.



### **How often are therapy sessions?**

Frequency and duration are determined by the referring physician and the treating therapist. Clients receive therapy until their goals are met, they have a change in status or are no longer progressing, at which time they are discharged from therapy.

### **Is therapy conducted year-round?**

NCEFT operates year-round, weather permitting for approximately 45 weeks of the year. Sessions are held Monday through Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. We are closed periodically throughout the year (roughly every 10 weeks) to give the horses time off. Weather conditions that might prevent us from holding sessions include high wind and extreme heat. Our arena is covered, so rain alone usually does not prevent sessions).

### **How much does therapy cost?**

Please contact <mailto:info@nceft.org> for pricing. NCEFT treats military Veterans and first responders at no charge.

### **Is therapy at NCEFT covered by insurance?**

Some insurance plans cover physical, occupational, and speech-language therapy. NCEFT does not bill insurance. Patients pay NCEFT directly and NCEFT provides them with a superbill (a billing statement marked with appropriate therapy codes) that they can submit to their insurance company for reimbursement.

### **Is financial assistance available?**

Yes, NCEFT has a financial assistance program that defrays session fees on a sliding scale. NCEFT utilizes US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) guidelines to make decisions about financial aid.

### **What is the procedure to receive therapy at NCEFT?**

Required screening forms for all NCEFT programs and services are available online. Please visit [nceft.org/our-services/apply-for-a-program](http://nceft.org/our-services/apply-for-a-program) to fill out a screening form securely online. After submitting the screening form and/or participating in a phone interview, our therapists will determine if the patient is a candidate for an in-person evaluation. If so, we will send you an intake packet to complete and return to NCEFT. Once NCEFT receives the completed intake packet, we will schedule an evaluation. Patient scheduling is then based upon coordination of client, horse and instructor availability. Please note, many NCEFT programs currently have waiting lists.

### **Does NCEFT require evaluations?**

Yes, we are required to provide an evaluation of the patients we treat to determine needs and goals. We appreciate evaluations completed by school and other professions, but NCEFT requires our own multi-disciplinary evaluation for all patients prior to providing services.

### **What is the American Hippotherapy Association, Inc. (AHA, Inc.)?**

The AHA, Inc. provides education, facilitates research, sets standards and provides education for therapists and promotes equine-assisted therapy as an effective treatment strategy that improves the quality of life for individuals with disabilities. AHA, Inc. provides therapists with education regarding the safe and effective use of equine movement in a medical setting. For more information about AHA, visit their website at [americanhippotherapyassociation.org](http://americanhippotherapyassociation.org).

### **What is EAGALA?**

Founded in 1999, the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) is the leading international nonprofit association for professionals incorporating horses to address mental health and personal development needs. For more information about EAGALA, please visit [home.eagala.org](http://home.eagala.org).

