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Riding in the Moment: Exploring the Influence of an Equine-assisted Intervention on the Quality of Life of Institutionalized Adults with Dementia

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Introduction: Institutionalized adults with dementia can become agitated, depressed, and disengaged. Often, formal caregivers turn to pharmacological interventions to treat many of these problematic behaviors (Padilla, 2011). Animal-assisted interventions, a nonpharmacological and environmental approach, are developing and expanding to help enhance quality of life (QoL) for institutionalized adults with dementia (Wood, Fields, Rose, & McLure, 2017).

Objectives: The objectives of this study were: 1) to describe a community-based, equine-assisted intervention for institutionalized adults with dementia, and 2) to elucidate the influence of direct contact with nature on their QoL.

Method: A qualitative case study design was used. Semi-structured interviews with five key informants from a long-term care facility and therapeutic horseback riding center were gathered. Descriptions of the equine-assisted intervention and perceptions of the influence of equine-environmental elements on QoL were investigated. Analysis involved a basic qualitative description approach (Sandelowski, 2000) in the software program, NVivo.

Results: Findings revealed interactions of the equine-assisted intervention, physical, social, and interpersonal environmental stimuli that supported and promoted institutionalized adults with dementias' engagement, well-being, and functional competence in the moment.

Conclusion: The experience of dementia can create challenging and unpleasant situations for institutionalized adults. To mitigate distressing experiences, Wilson (1984) asserts an inherent human need to affiliate with nature and correspondingly, life satisfaction depend upon relations with the natural world. Returning to nature through an innovative, equine-assisted intervention may be an avenue that accounts for adults with dementias' needs and provides necessary environmental supports that give rise to positive QoL experiences.