

## Equine-Assisted Activities and/or Therapies (EAA-T): Understanding the Terminology to Improve Health Among Veterans

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### Abstract

The population of United States (U.S.) veterans is multifaceted and complex. Twenty-two veterans commit suicide daily. Addressing various significant veteran needs requires a multitude of resources and solutions beyond traditional healthcare. Research on veterans who participated in equine assisted activities and/or therapies (EAA-T) demonstrated a reduction in PTSD symptoms, stress, depression, and anxiety while indicating improved quality of life. Given the potential benefits of EAA-T it is important for healthcare professionals to have a basic understanding of the terminology and industry.

**Keywords:** EAAT, Healthcare, Therapies, Anxiety, Depression, PTSD, Stress, Veterans, Benefits

### Background

The population of United States (U.S.) veterans is multifaceted and complex. Mental health and social disorders have continued to rise in the veteran population [1]. Twenty-two veterans commit suicide daily [1]. Many other veterans suffer from traumatic brain injury (TBI), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mental health disorders, substance use disorders, exhibit high risk taking behaviors, chronic pain, and

homelessness which may alter their sense of social connectedness and put them at greater risk for depression. They have complex deployment and social issues including, but not limited to, very high divorce rates, unemployment, and basic civilian reintegration issues related to multiple deployments [2].

Traditional therapies and prescription drugs have largely failed in preventing the

incredible numbers of suicides and suicide attempts in veterans. Addressing various significant veteran needs requires a multitude of resources and solutions beyond traditional healthcare. The use of Equine-Assisted Activities and/or Therapies (EAA-T) are uniquely suited to address the entire physiology of the veteran and foster the skills needed to achieve lasting social connection and the reduction of traumatic sequelae. Given the potential benefits of EAA-T it is important for healthcare professionals to have a basic understanding of the terminology and industry.

### Literature Review

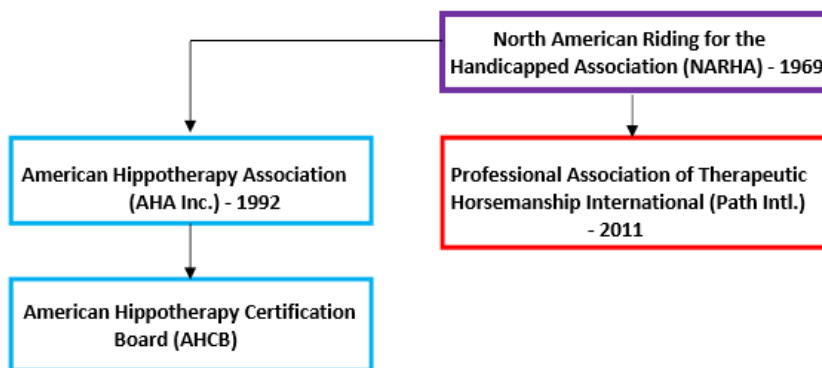
Research on veterans who participate in equine assisted activities and/or therapies (EAA-T) demonstrate a reduction in PTSD symptoms, stress, depression, and anxiety while indicating improved quality of life [3-8]. Clinical studies suggest that individuals of all ages and levels of cognitive development can benefit from EAA-T and have found EAA-T to be effective in treating a multitude of mental health and behavioral issues. Given the potential benefits of EAA-T it is important for healthcare professionals to have a basic understanding of the industry.

### Organizations

There are three main organizations: a) Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.); b) American Hippotherapy Association (AHA, Inc.) whose members certify through the American Hippotherapy Certification Board (AHCB); and c) Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) [9-11]. PATH Intl. and AHA, Inc. were originally known as the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA), established in 1969. In 1992, AHA, Inc. became its own entity, but it was not until 2011, that NARHA officially changed its name to PATH Intl. EAGALA was founded in 1999.

Path Intl. accredits centers and certifies professional in equine-assisted services through rigorously developed standards, credentialing, and education. AHA, Inc. offers a the only standardized curriculum dedicated to hippotherapy (as a treatment tool) within occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech-language therapy. EAGALA certifies Mental Health Professionals or Equine Specialist, to incorporate horses into treatment.

**North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA)**



**Terminology**

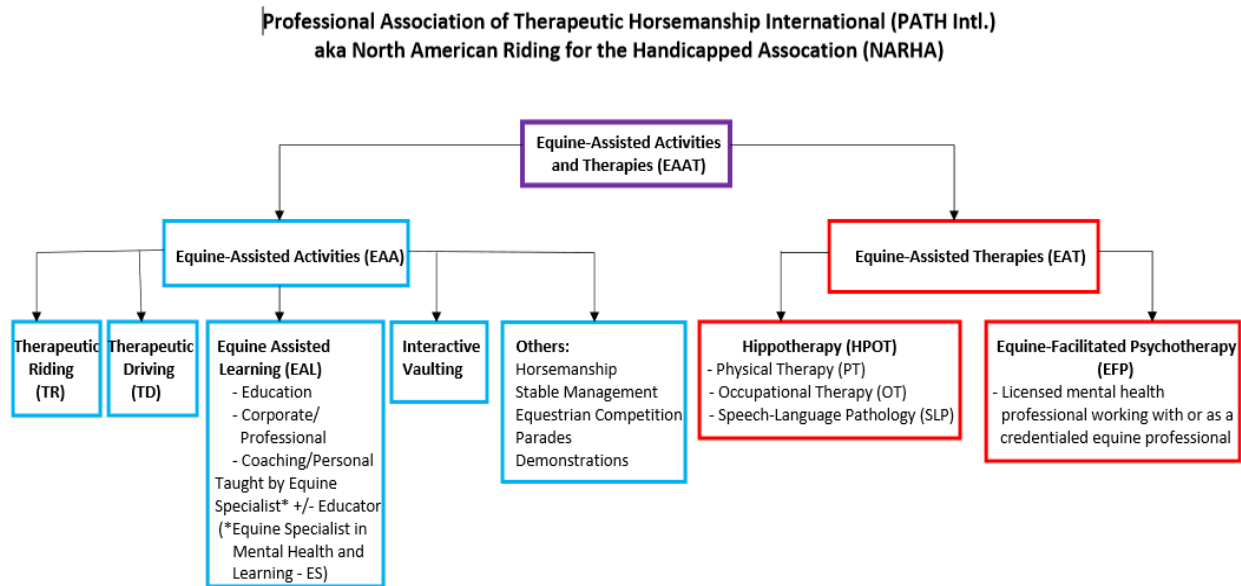
Since healthcare professionals are mandated to use the billing codes that most accurately describe the medical treatment services being rendered, it is important to understand the difference(s) among each organization and determine whether the service rendered is considered therapeutic or therapy.

Here is where it gets complex. Each organization has its own set of terms and regulations regarding equine assisted activities and/or therapies. This article attempts to stay neutral, however, for the purposes of this discussion it will use EAA-T as an acronym for equine assisted activities and/or therapies, equine

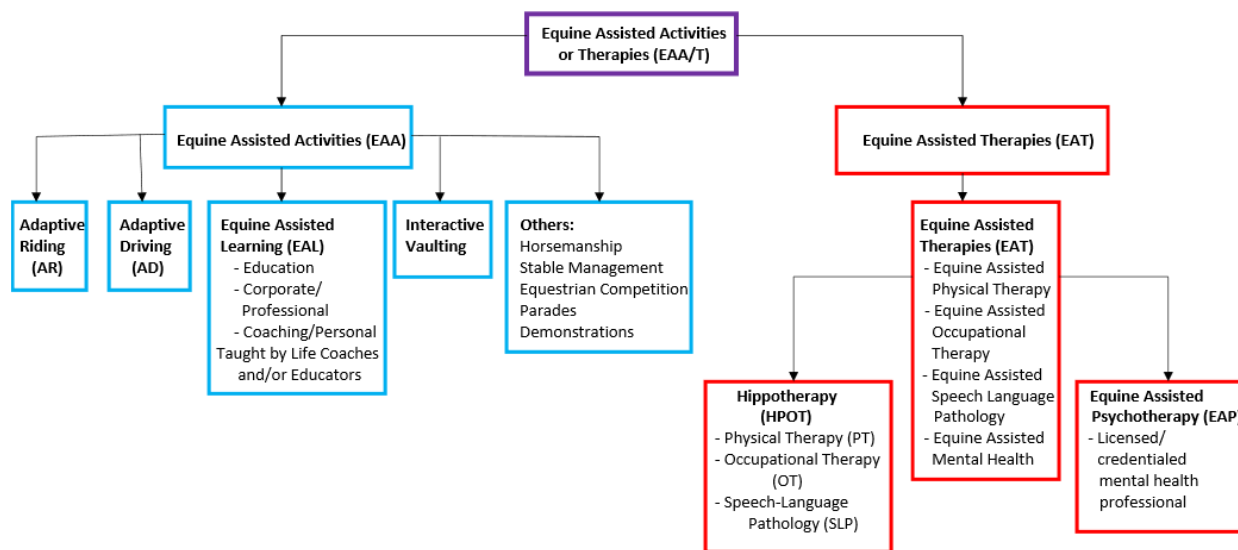
assisted psychotherapy (instead of equine-facilitated psychotherapy), and will not incorporate hyphens in the terms (as PATH Intl. does).

**Equine Assisted Activities and/or Therapies (EAA-T)**

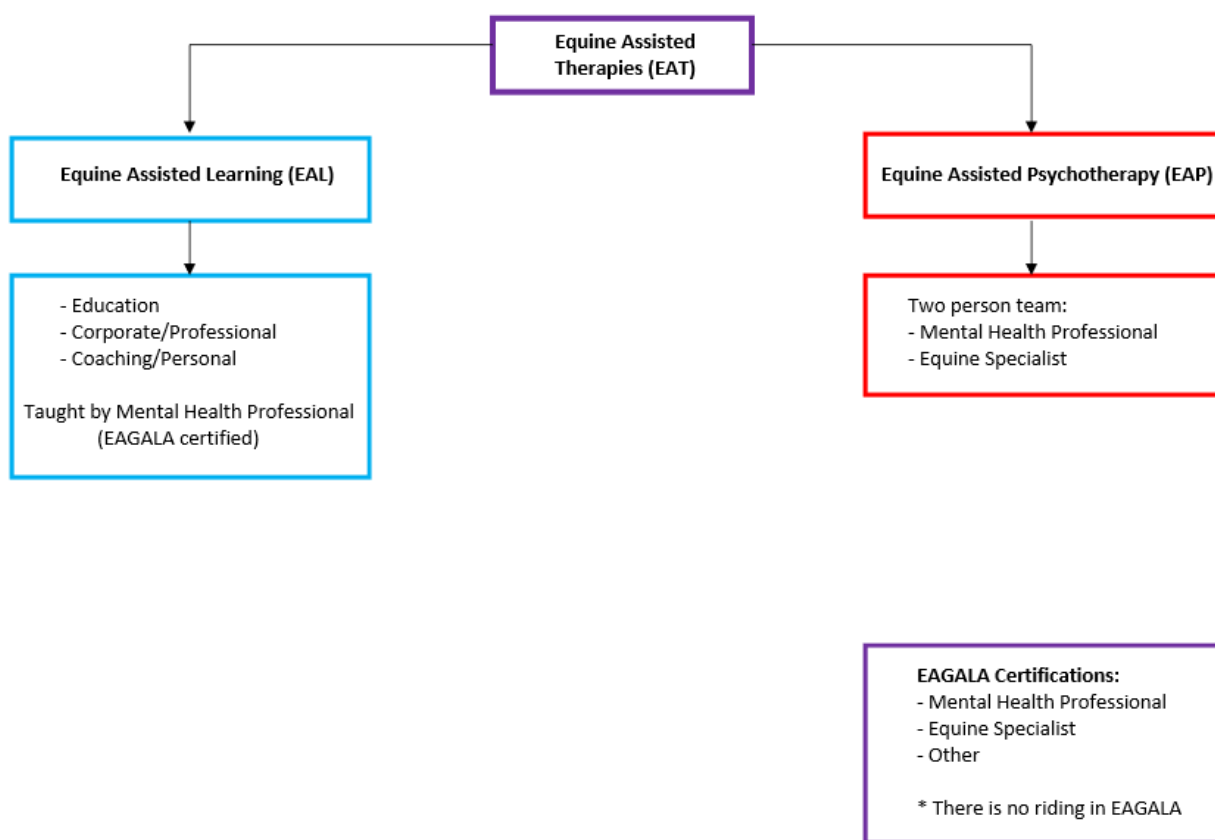
PATH Intl. uses the umbrella term Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapies (EAAT), whereas, AHA, Inc. uses Equine Assisted Activities or Therapies (EAA/T). Both PATH Intl. and AHA, Inc. subdivide EAA-T into equine assisted activities (EAA) and equine assisted therapies (EAT). EAGALA does not use this umbrella term.



**American Hippotherapy Association (AHA)**



**Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA)**



## **Equine Assisted Activities (EAA)**

There are some significant differences with EAA among PATH Intl. and AHA, Inc., most notably the use of ‘adaptive’ versus ‘therapeutic.’ There are also differences among their certification requirements: a) PATH Intl. requires EAA instructor certification (e.g. Therapeutic Riding Instructor, Therapeutic Driving Instructor, Interactive Vaulting Instructor); b) AHA, Inc. does not require EAA instructor certification, allowing life coaches and teachers to lead some EAA sessions (e.g. Equine Assisted Learning). EAGALA does not incorporate EAA into its model.

## **Equine Assisted Therapies (EAT)**

All three organizations include EAT and mandate that EAT be provided (at least) by a licensed healthcare professional in their respective field (i.e., Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Speech/Language Pathology, or Mental Health).

## ***Hippotherapy (HPOT)***

While the term hippotherapy is often used to describe an occupation, there is no such thing. PATH Intl. and AHA, Inc. use the term hippotherapy as it refers to how a Physical Therapist (PT), Occupational Therapist (OT), Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP), use equine movement as a therapy. Hippotherapy is a treatment tool or treatment strategy applied by the aforementioned therapist(s). It is not a therapeutic procedure and does not have its own billing code [10]. PATH Int. and AHA, Inc. endorse certification of the licensed therapist through the American Hippotherapy Certification Board (AHCBC). EAGALA does not incorporate HPOT into its model.

## ***Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP)\****

All three organizations incorporate EAP and mandate that EAP be provided by a licensed Mental Health Professional (working with or as a credentialed equine specialist). Mental Health Professionals include, but are not limited to, Clinical Psychologists, Professional Counselors, Clinical Social Workers, Marriage and Family Therapists, Psychiatric-Mental Health Advanced Practice Registered Nurses, or Psychiatrists. \*PATH Intl. refers to EAP as equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP).

## ***Equine Assisted Learning (EAL)***

Whereas PATH Intl. and AHA, Inc. define EAL as an equine assisted *activity*, EAGALA defines it as an equine assisted *therapy* led by a Mental Health Professional (that is EAGALA certified). Both PATH Intl. and AHA, Inc. do not mandate a college-degree/license to lead an EAL session, however, PATH Intl. does require working with or as an Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning.

## **Conclusion**

Given the potential benefits of EAA-T it is important for healthcare professionals to have a basic understanding of the industry and terminology.

## **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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