

Horses & Mindfulness

How meditation and relationship with horses

can teach us about healing and serenity

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Authors are very thankful to Pr. Philippot and Alexandre Heeren (UCL) for their help in this study.

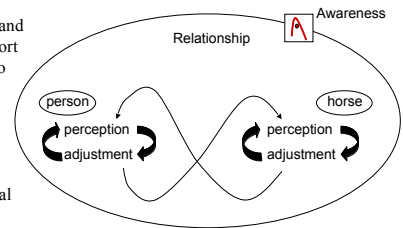
1. Introduction

Mindfulness is defined as a specific state of mind, resulting of “paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Mindfulness training programs (MBCT or MBSR) train attentional capacities by the means of several formal practices (body scan, yoga, sitting and walking meditations), and lead to a greater ability to cope with emotions and stress (cf. Baer, 2003; Grossman et al., 2004 for meta-analyses).

In parallel, our work based on the relationship with horses focuses on the interaction between the person and the animal, and on the awareness development of the continuous adjustments in such relational situations. The underlying attentional training aims at developing a deeper emotional and physical sensitivity in participants (e.g. Bronkhorst, 2006; Massie, 2005). This can support a greater congruence in people's different aspects of life (sensations, emotions, cognitions and behaviors).

	Mindfulness	Horse relationship
Pursued goal => why?	Attention training	Sensitivity training
Process, mean => how?	To focus attention and bring it back when it wanders	Perception ↻ Adjustment ↻ Cf. figure
Practice => what?	Ex. Body scan, mindful stretching/yoga, sitting meditation, walking meditation	Ex. Discovering a horse when blindfold; walking with a horse; riding a horse; being with the herd; lunging a horse; ...
Context => when?	Anything, anytime	Relation with horses

The interaction with the horse and its necessary adjustments support the person to be fully present to what is going on. Our work aims at promoting in the person a specific awareness to this process in order to support the development of a greater physical and emotional sensitivity.



2. Hypotheses and Predictions

The study was designed to examine the effects of a 10-week group program combining a mindfulness training with the horse relationship on participants' well-being.

→ Compared to the pre intervention, participants would report a decrease in depression and anxiety levels, an increased self-esteem, and a decreased psychological distress after the program.

→ These effects would be greater as compared to those obtained in participants engaged in a traditional MBCT program.

→ Due to the motivational aspect of the horse relationship, we predicted a decreased absence and drop-out to sessions, as compared to a traditional MBCT program.

3. Method

12 participants from a non-clinical population signed up for the 10-week program, based on the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy protocol. Each session lasted 2h30 and was structured as follow: 45' formal meditation and inquiry; introduction of a new theme; time period with horses and inquiry. Participants committed themselves to informal meditation practice and to 45' daily formal practice.

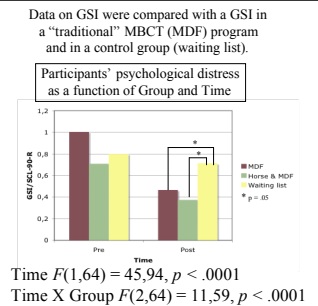
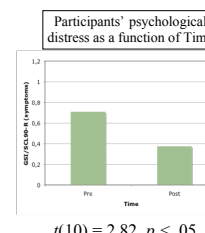
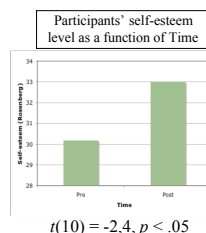
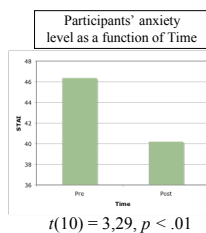
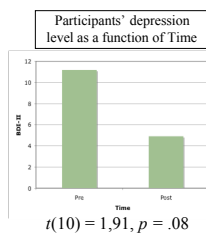
4. Measures

Questionnaires before and after the 10-week program ($N = 11$)

- BDI-II (Beck, 1979)
- STAI-Trait (Spielberger, 1983)
- Self-Esteem (Rosenberg, 1965)
- GSI (SCL-90R) (Derogatis, 1977)

Semi-structures interviews after the 10-week program ($N=8$): Data were analyzed according to the IPA method (Smith, 1995)

5. Results: questionnaires



6. Semi-structured interviews: Contribution of...

... time with horses => on mindfulness practice?

- **Horses as an access** to the mindfulness program, and as a support to the **motivation** and to the commitment to the program (0,7% of absentism, no drop-out vs. 15% in MBCT groups) and to the formal practice.
- **Horses as a stimulus**: its presence stimulates senses and emotional awareness (touching, smelling, moving with, ...)
- **Horses as a model** in their animal way to cope with their sensations and emotions, in their ability of being here and now, and in their non-judging attitude.
- **Horses as a mirror** reflecting people's non-verbal behavior and thus, supporting the development of their self-knowledge (emotions, cognitions, action tendencies)
- **Horses as a transition**: time spent with horses supported the generalization and the integration of the meditation teachings from the weekly sessions to people's daily life

... mindfulness => on experience when meeting horses during sessions?

- The **reflexive awareness** ability trained in mindfulness was transferred in the emotional arousal experienced in the presence of horses, naming:
 - taking distance with automatically activated emotions and thoughts
 - responding instead of reacting
 - tolerance of emotional discomfort
 - letting things evolve without acting on them
- The **qualities** trained in mindfulness were applied in the interactions with horses:
 - serenity and calmness
 - quality of presence (here and now)
 - body awareness; breathing awareness; senses awareness

7. Conclusion

In accordance to our predictions, after our 10-week program combining mindfulness and the horse relationship, participants reported a significant increased well-being (depression, anxiety, self-esteem and psychological distress). Yet, data on the GSI did not differ from those in a traditional MBCT program. Semi-structured interviews revealed several positive consequences of the meditation practice on the quality of the experience with horses. This supports the idea of implementing such a practice in the world of horses (trainers, therapy, sportive competition). The work with horses supported participants' motivation in their mindfulness practice, created an inspiring and stimulating context to train their ability of / support the development of their awareness, and supported the generalisation of the training to their daily life. Such reported effects will help to specify in future studies new evaluation tools, in order to determine in greater details the specific effects of such a combined program (ex.: attentional control; body awareness; ability to let go).