EQUEST

Project result 3: Module 2 of 6

Module 2: Real-Time Arena Safety & Self-Regulation

Practical Guidelines for Situational Metacognition, The Triangle Model, and Autonomic Self-Regulation

Exercises in this module:

- 2.1 Triangle Model Situational Mapping [OBSERVING A LIVE SESSION]
- 2.2 Autonomic Self-Regulation Stress Simulation [STAFF ONLY]

Exercise settings:

- [STAFF ONLY] no participants or horse
- [STAFF + HORSE] no participants
- [OBSERVING A LIVE SESSION]
- [WITH PARTICIPANTS]

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1. Theoretical & Scientific Baseline

1.1 Real-Time Safety & The Triangle Model

Safety as a Dynamic Process: Within equine-assisted activities, safety is not a static checklist completed before a session, but a continuous, real-time tracking requirement.

The Triangle Model: The Triangle Model[1] is the core cognitive framework for situational awareness in the arena. It requires the person in charge of the session to simultaneously monitor and dynamically assess three core entities in the arena.

The Model described here applies primarily to specific clinical scenarios where the participant cannot ride autonomously. In settings where independent riding is practised or where the horse is guided by a fully qualified equestrian professional, it can also be used to practise real-time safety.

- **The Horse:** Shifting physical state, mood, ears, head height, and subtle stress signals.
- **The Participant:** Core balance, emotional regulation, physical comfort, fatigue, and posture.
- **The Horse Handler:** Exact physical position, task performance, and readiness to act in an emergency.

1.2 Psychological Foundation of Self-Regulation

The Horse as an Emotional Mirror: Because horses are highly sensitive prey animals, they can detect and respond to human states, such as changes in posture, muscle tone, and breathing patterns.

Reciprocal Self-Regulation: If the person in charge of the horse-assisted intervention session experiences stress, frustration, or fear, these physiological changes can transfer to the horse, which can destabilise the horse and trigger an unsafe reaction in the arena. The practitioner should be able to explore their deep fears and develop authentic, long-term autonomic stability before the session, which requires conscious work. Therefore, their ability to maintain autonomic self-regulation is a direct safety prerequisite; establishing a safe, stable environment depends on the practitioner maintaining internal calm under pressure.

2. The Autonomic Self-Regulation Loop

To manage sudden, chaotic situations in the arena (such as a horse spooking, a participant experiencing a difficult moment, or a horse handler dropping a lead line), the EQUEST project suggests that practitioners instantly deploy the five-step mental loop[2].

THE 5-STEP AUTONOMIC GROUNDING LOOP

1. STOP! Pause your immediate physical action and verbal output. Do not make sudden movements or yell.
2. BREATHE! Take a deep, diaphragmatic breath to lower your heart rate and muscle tension, sending a visual and sensory signal of calm to the horse.
3. OBSERVE! Scan the arena using the Triangle Model to assess objective facts.
4. USE KNOWLEDGE! Recall your professional training, safety protocols, and horse/participant profiles to determine the safest action.
5. REACT! Deliver a calm, assertive, and precise command to the horse handler and, if applicable, the participant.

3. Collaborative Dynamics & Role Priorities

Maintaining safety in the arena requires a clear, collaborative ecosystem with reciprocal accountability among all team members:

- **The Therapist:** Responsible for clinical and psychological safety, providing a secure, filtered containment for the participant's emotional releases.
- **The Equestrian Instructor:** Maintains assertive leadership, clear command of the arena, and unyielding protection of physical safety boundaries.
- **The Horse Handler:** Must have absolute clarity regarding specific tasks and priorities.
- **The Horse:** Granted the freedom to express its personality and communicate boundaries, limited only by strict safety criteria.

4. Practical Exercises for the Arena

Exercise 2.1 Triangle Model Situational Mapping

[OBSERVING A LIVE SESSION] | **Who:** Trainees in all roles (not participating in the session) | **Time:** A 5-second scan every 3 minutes | **You need:** A log sheet; a live session or a recorded session

Objective: Develop rapid, real-time situational awareness using the Triangle Model during riding arena sessions.

This 3-minute pause exercise is strictly an observational simulation for trainees not participating in the session, as enforcing it during a live session would destroy action flow and session dynamics.

Instructions:

1. During a live therapeutic riding session, stand at the centre of the arena (or watch a recorded video session).
2. Every 3 minutes, pause and perform a rapid 5-second mental scan, logging:
    a. **Participant Status:** Balance (symmetrical/leaning), verbalisation (vocally withdrawn/natural/vocal), muscle tone (loose/tense).
    b. **Horse Status:** Ear position (back/forward), tail movement (swishing/still), muscle tension (soft/rigid).
    c. **Horse Handler Status:** Appropriate distance from horse's shoulder (optimal/too far), grip on line (loose/tight), position of eyes (looking ahead/down), overall attention.
3. Review the log at the end of the session to identify operational patterns impacting the session.

Builds on Professional Profile (R1) competency 2.2

Exercise 2.2 Autonomic Self-Regulation Stress Simulation

[STAFF ONLY] | **Who:** Therapists, instructors, horse handlers | **You need:** Video recordings of unexpected arena incidents

Objective: Practise the Stop-Breathe-Observe-Use Knowledge-React loop under simulated pressure outside of participant-facing sessions.

Instructions (Interactive Video-Based Scenario Analysis, Pause-&-React Method):

1. Trainees analyse real-time video recordings of unexpected arena incidents.
2. At the exact moment of the disruption, the video is paused, and trainees must articulate or execute their immediate self-regulation steps and action plan: Stop (freeze movement), Breathe (deep diaphragmatic breath), Observe (scan horse and helper), Use Knowledge (recall horse tendencies), React (deliver a quiet, clear 1-sentence command).
3. Trainees then review how the situation actually unfolded.
4. **Debrief with colleagues:** did your breathing stay steady? Which signals did you notice first?

Framing the evaluation through this method ensures psychological safety, respects student trust, and would provide a rigorous, repeatable measure of self-regulation competence.

Without a horse: Alternatively, practise the loop in the arena without a horse: one colleague acts as a therapist and another as a horse handler, while a third, without warning but with prior consent, creates a sudden, low-risk distraction (e.g. dropping a bucket outside the fence). Never create deliberate distractions near a real horse.

Builds on Professional Profile (R1) competency 2.3

Notes and sources

1. See EQUEST Result 1: The Professional Profile, competency 2.2 (Real-Time Situational Awareness – the Triangle Model).
2. See EQUEST Result 1: The Professional Profile, competency 2.3 (Autonomic Self-Regulation & Stress Inoculation).