

Horse Power: How Horses Facilitate Psychotherapy and Emotional Learning

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While no one knows exactly when the horse was domesticated, its relationship to humans dates back at least 4,000 years. This relationship was based on humanity's need for transportation, work, and war. Due to this historical use, most people are unaware of the horse's many unique qualities that also make it an excellent partner for the experiential teaching of emotional and social skills, learning to be fully present in one's body, and leadership skills. This is not a new fad, though it is recently being much more widely recognized as a valid clinical treatment. In fact, there is evidence of horseback riding being used to rehabilitate wounded soldiers as early as the fifth century B.C. (Gamache, 2004).

The therapeutic use of horses in the United States dates back to the 1960's. This article addresses equine therapy for emotional and personal development purposes only. Currently, there are many different names for such work: Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP), Equine Assisted Learning (EAL), Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy and Learning (EFPL), therapeutic riding, and so on. All of these involve the presence of a highly experienced horse professional, a specially trained horse or horses, and a client or student. Most of these programs also include a mental health professional with varying degrees of horse experience. Programs, such as PATH, Epona Quest, EAGALA, and The HEAL Model, train professionals for this field. They also carry out research on the effectiveness of such treatments.

Why Horses?

As prey animals, horses have evolved brains and sensory systems that make them incredibly aware of their environment. Wild horses need to instantly assess the risk of a distant predator. Is that mountain lion just out for a Sunday stroll and no danger? Or is it hungry and circling the herd to find its weakest member? Horses can't afford to waste energy fleeing from every potential predator. They assess quickly and accurately.

This awareness allows horses to instantly know where clients are emotionally. They can detect if people are behaving in a manner incongruent with their inner emotional state. Since humans could potentially be predators to horses, this incongruent behavior is as easily recognizable as a lion sizing up the herd would be. This sensitivity and awareness is one of the benefits of horses participating as therapeutic partners.

Horses are highly social beings, living in herds with complex relationships between members. A relaxed, grazing herd spreads itself out over a field. When they need to communicate over such distance, they rely on subtle changes in body language. With humans, they have the same amazing acuity in reading body language, heart rate, and breath (Kohanov, 2013). This allows them to respond to the smallest nuances of a client's behavior that fellow humans may miss.

At the same time, horses, as social beings, are highly motivated to establish relationships. A healthy horse seeks bonding with others, including humans. Developing a deep connection with an animal can be life changing, especially for clients with attachment issues or abuse histories. Some researchers believe this connection with horses may be so powerful because the size ratio of horse/human is similar to the size ratio of mother/infant (Lentini & Knox, 2009).

Horses also have the ability to 'mirror' human emotions (Kohanov, 2013; Roth et al., 2004). For example, if a female client comes to a session believing everything is fine while denying her own terror of being near a horse, the horse may display fear and run to the far end of the paddock. While the woman and her therapist explore why the horse may have acted this way, the woman becomes aware of her own fear. The horse can sense the shift to emotional congruence in the client and then returns. The horse has sensed the emotion and the behavioral incongruence, mirrored the unexpressed fear, and then noticed the shift to congruence. The horse then seeks connection and returns, allowing their relationship to start off with authenticity.

Another reason horses are helpful partners is simply because they are not human. Many children and adults who are not comfortable being affectionate with other humans can more easily begin with an animal. Grooming a horse can often be helpful in establishing this bond. And because horses are social, they want to connect.

The mere size and strength of horses evoke powerful feelings in many humans. Just their presence can bring up the issues of power, control, and vulnerability (Lentini & Knox, 2009). These issues can be instrumental to the healing process of many clients. In addition, the non-predatory use of power displayed by horses can teach powerful leadership skills (Kohanov, 2013).

Horses are very much in the present moment, and to interact with them *in relationship*, the human partner must also be fully present. Most facilities that practice equine therapy are also practicing natural horsemanship for this reason. Natural horsemanship honors the natural way of being for the horse and awareness of patterns of natural horse communication. To be *in relationship* with a horse one must always strive for greater awareness of oneself, the horse, and the environment. This requires one to be fully present in their body, and fully engaged in what's happening around them. This set of behaviors dovetails with skills clinicians often teach clients to assist with trauma, dissociation, anxiety, and stress.

In fact, some clinicians believe this deep emotional connection with the horse literally changes the client's brain to produce greater emotional health. Leigh Shambo (2013) proposes that the close emotional connection between client and horse can rewire the limbic system, correcting earlier trauma. Shambo states the empathic human-horse relationship first creates limbic resonance, then limbic regulation, and finally limbic revision.

Is Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy and Learning for all clients?

While therapeutic work with horses may benefit many clients, clinicians must be aware of several contraindications to this type of work. First of all, the client must be able to safely manage any allergies to horses, dust, and hay. Asthma sufferers should consult their doctors. Secondly, the client must be able to act in a manner to preserve his/her own safety and the safety of others around them. This means they must have symptoms under control enough to allow themselves to act in their own best interest and not put themselves or others at risk. Thirdly, if the client is on medication, they must not be so heavily medicated that they are motor-impaired. Finally, they must have enough control to not act in a way to endanger the horses.

In conclusion, horses can be highly therapeutic due to their unique qualities. Their high sensitivity and awareness, ability to mirror clients, and desire to establish deep emotional connections make them excellent partners in the therapeutic process. After all, throughout history horses have carried humans to new lands and vistas. Now it's just on a different level

References

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