

Horses as Healers

Equine Therapy has Physical and Emotional Benefits

by Julie Peterson

Horses are being increasingly used to help people work through emotional and physical challenges, and for good reason: Numerous studies have shown that equine-assisted therapy helps with anger, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and dissociative or other emotional problems. It works whether the therapy involves riding or simply feeding and grooming. Building the relationship increases people's self-confidence, social skills, trust, empathy and emotional regulation, and helps them establish routines, structure and a sense of responsibility—all skills that are transferable to daily life.

EQUINE PSYCHOTHERAPISTS

Equine-assisted psychotherapy involves counseling with a mental health professional and time riding or caring for a horse. The horse is considered a co-therapist. Forming a relationship with an animal that weighs 1,000 pounds or more may be intimidating, but the required vulnerability and trust is part of the process.

"Horses show us how to live together in harmony. They teach us about acceptance of others and of ourselves," says Marcy Tocker, clinical mental health counselor and founder and executive director of Grey Muzzle Manor Sanctuary, in Mohrsville, Pennsylvania.

"In some cases, I see results more quickly using equine therapy than solely with office therapy. I also see more motivation from typically resistant clients because this can actually be fun, too," says Meagan Good, a counselor and owner of Take Heart Counseling & Equine Assisted Therapy, in Wernersville, Pennsylvania. "Horses are relationship-oriented and intuitively sense and honestly respond to the emotions of those around them, which makes the horse-human bond a powerful healing mechanism."

"Horses have similar emotions to humans—they get stressed out, happy, impatient. That's why equine-assisted services are so popular," says Traci Leigh, equine manager and instructor at Dream Riders TLC, in Crystal Lake, Illinois.

THERAPEUTIC RIDING

Beyond working as co-therapists for emotional issues, horses are excellent for occupational, speech and physical therapy. "Riding a horse rhythmically moves the rider's body in a manner similar to a human gait. Their pelvic movement is the same as ours, so riders with physical needs often show improvement in flexibility, balance, muscle strength, circulation and breathing," says Pamela J. Rogan, founder, executive director and certified therapeutic riding instructor at Harmony Farms, in Cocoa, Florida. "It will also



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"New Day Equine Therapy's therapeutic program in Ashland, VA, has enabled cancer survivors and siblings to ride together. We have seen improvements in core strength and overall coordination in a very short amount of time. The interaction with the horses and ponies has brought greater self-confidence and self-esteem to all of our students. The overall sense of well-being that each animal contributes is beyond measure."

~ Bruce D. Nachman, Director, New Day Equine Therapy

enhance a rider's quality of life, build confidence, independence and self-esteem. This is particularly true of riders with emotional or behavioral disabilities."

Research shows that children and adults with cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, stroke and other conditions that affect motor control saw improvements in balance, gait, gross motor function and posture after several weeks of equine-assisted treatment.

HORSES AT WORK

"I look for horses who are not afraid of new things, but curious about them ... a horse that thinks through a new situation, that expresses himself freely and that enjoys interacting with humans," says Good.

"From there, my professional team works on building a relationship with that horse so that the horse feels safe to build relationships with clients who may or may not have any horse background."

There are certifications and advanced courses that ensure appropriate training of the therapists and instructors, the safety of the people receiving services and the training and well-being of the horses. Reputable organizations include the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (eagala.org), the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (pathintl.org) and Natural Lifemanship (NaturalLifemanship.com).

"In addition to requiring that the horses are quiet, gentle animals and physically and mentally sound, they are trained to be desensitized to noise, wheelchairs, walkers and different types of therapeutic equipment that riders may need for safety or postural assistance," says Leigh. Her horses get four weeks off every year and work a schedule that ensures ample time to rest and recharge during the day.

"The horse is a co-therapist. They are doing a job, and it's a not an easy job," says Tocker. "To ensure the well-being of our equine therapists, they get ample time off and massages. They're taking on a lot, so we want to make sure they don't burn out."

"I have horses that seem to step in and 'protect' clients when they are feeling vulnerable. I have horses who try to help regulate the anxious client by breathing or yawning or nuzzling," says Good.

"For the most part, we trust the horses to just be themselves, and what they bring is always helpful for the client."

"Horses are able to be present and focus solely on what is going on around them. They do not think about the future or the past or judge people based on what they look like or what experiences they may have had," says Tocker. "I feel like I witness miracles every time I do a session at the barn."

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