

Healing Horses: the power of equine therapy in healing addiction, substance abuse and trauma

by Nancy Jarrell O'Donnell MA, LPC, EAP, CSAT

Any horse lover will tell you that being around horses is “therapeutic.” Indeed, equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) has proven highly effective in treating individuals suffering from PTSD and trauma-related addictions, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, relationship issues and more. The benefit and insight acquired through EAP is immediate and profound. EAP and using our horses in a variety of therapeutic activities is an important modality in the integrated treatment model I developed for healing deep emotional trauma and related afflictions.

Interactions in equine-assisted psychotherapy can lead to breakthroughs in recovery

Equine-assisted psychotherapy is an experiential modality involving a metaphorical process using a horse or horses as conduits for emotional growth and healing. In my work with clients with behavioral health issues including addictions, I have witnessed horses providing the missing link for clients stuck in their maladaptive behavioral patterns and resulting thinking distortions.

In many ways, equine therapy can also be a metaphor for the process of recovery. As in recovery, working with horses inherently involves learning how to engage in healthy relationships and connection with ourselves and others. In addictive disorders, genuine connection does not occur. Changes in our brain chemistry lead us to seeking whatever it is we are addicted to; and doing so at the cost of our relationships, our health, our safety, and connection to self. Horses are herd animals; they require other horses for safety and survival. Humans also need connection; recovery cannot happen in isolation. We need other humans to survive, thrive, and to feel safe in the world. Our wounding happens in the context of relationships, so it only makes sense that we find healing within the context of relationships, and horses are non-judgmental creatures that can assist in this process.

Typically, I work with small groups of clients struggling with dual diagnoses involving some combination of chemical dependency, childhood and/or adult trauma, PTSD, depression, eating disorders, sexual abuse, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and more. Rarely are clients truly horse-experienced; this has nothing to do with the process. No skills are required for an individual to receive substantial benefits from equine-assisted psychotherapy. Yet, many of those who have participated in EAP credit it as cathartic in their healing and recovery. I've seen clients who have spent years in therapy finally make a breakthrough in EAP, or tell me the equine experience was the defining moment that led them to the genuine desire for lasting recovery.

As prey animals, horses by nature “attune” to their environment. When we're in their environment, they attune to us. This creates a magical dynamic that allows for

information about the client's most authentic beliefs, attachments and feelings to be revealed through the interaction that takes place. This begins with the need for both horse and client to establish trust. For the survivor, just being allowed into a relationship by the horse can itself be a healing connection.

Equine psychotherapy differs from talk therapy in obvious ways, including that it takes place outdoors, and it requires physical movement and attention. Less about talking, it allows clients to move away from intense cognitive thinking and analysis and connect more with their physical body. In individuals with addictions and trauma, the body and physical sensations are often avoided or numbed. When they experience these in therapy with support, empathy and compassion, it can become a corrective and healing experience.

The process

I am never sure what will unfold in the therapy process. I decide in the moment if I will use one horse, more, go into the arena, stay near a stall, set up a challenge, or utilize a specific exercise with a horse. In truth, I really don't decide at all. The process unfolds itself, silently dictated by the horse, the client and my response to whatever the client is bringing to the session.

What is key in the equine sessions is not only the presence of horses, but that the therapist knows how to look to the horse for information. As an equine therapist, I see my role as paying close attention to what the horse is doing, what the client is doing and saying, and what the interaction is between them. I am aware that my own transference and intuition are also an important factor in the magic of equine therapy.

The facilitator must glean information quickly from a client's statement and interaction with the horse. The horses will always react to what is really happening for a client, and to the way the client interacts with them, which reveals a great deal to the therapist. This is then fed back to the client, helping to identify a lifetime pattern that has resulted in dysfunction. One small interaction can tell a client's whole story of how he/she has behaved in the world and what emotional responses and behaviors have been used as coping mechanisms. Once an issue is identified, the facilitator can then support the client in practicing an intervention for change. This entire piece is circular in motion and may take only five minutes.

My agenda is never that clients learn something about a horse, but that they learn something about themselves. I tend to gauge the success of the interventions by whether a client talks about the horse or him/herself. I rarely accommodate questions about horses, confronting instead the need to ask questions about horse behavior and how the client might be using questioning as a form of deflection or avoidance.

The therapist might draw on a number of activities designed to garner information while harnessing the power of being in nature; for example, connecting with the horse through touch, talking, and paying attention to its breathing, or asking clients to describe what they see reflected in the horse's eyes. Similarly, he or she may lead the client to simply observe what the horses are doing. These exercises are effective in providing insightful feedback, as people often project their own thoughts, feelings and attachment issues onto the horses. In another activity, the therapist asks a group to build a path through which to lead a horse, and then processes with the clients how they and the horse handled any obstacles that arose.

My use of this therapeutic model is designed to heal the whole person, and is based on the latest neuroscientific research in treatment and recovery. To that end, the horses are also used to work with clients to help them re-learn how to have fun, an experience that is often scarce for those who arrive with trauma, addiction or depression. Integrating play into a treatment plan, along with a range of therapies and activities, works to accelerate neuroplasticity (the brain's ability to "rewire" itself through exposure to positive experiences). Clients are also encouraged to spend time with and caring for the horses. This time with the horses outside of group can be powerfully therapeutic in that it provides clients the opportunity to connect with, touch, be accountable and take care of another living being. The process of learning, mastering new skills and, in some cases, overcoming fears builds self-esteem.

How it works

Although the work focuses on a triangular relationship among the client, myself as facilitator, and the horse, the entire group can gain and share insight, growing in their understanding of pain, addiction and healthy choices.

Several factors play into the success of these sessions. As a facilitator, I take a psychodynamic and solution-oriented approach—a combination that works well for me. I never have a full history of a client before my sessions, because I believe I work better off-the-cuff from a more genuine place that allows me to access my intuition. I often see what I describe as an image or snapshot while I am looking at a horse and client, and although I may not know the meaning, I will comment on it and almost always will get what I call a "hit." Observing a client's gestures and body postures and asking a group member to focus on body sensations can enhance the equine experience.

The horse is an essential factor. It is always the horse's instincts in moving through the scenario that create the dynamic that allows us to discover the key issue. The way I facilitate equine-assisted psychotherapy is to look to the horse, observe the horse-client interaction, and then follow my gut and take risks with describing and exploring what I see. I continue to marvel at how a horse can behave in a certain way that results in the presentation of a crucial issue for a client. It is as though the horse already knows the history.

The horses do not behave in the same way with each client. I see this over and over, and so I have concluded first that the horse instinctively knows what a client needs, and second that the issue will not present itself if the client is not ready. I often tell my clients that the horse is merely providing them with information and if he is doing so, then they are ready to receive it.

While people can hide behind language in talk therapy, horses do not lie. Over many years of facilitating equine therapy, I came to understand that horses were emotional creatures, just as humans are, and thus connect to humans when they are emoting with authentic expression. Equine therapy works because horses give us genuine, accurate and immediate feedback and can teach us how to do the same. Horses live in the moment. They need to for safety. Our interactions with them assist us in being in the here and now as well, an unfamiliar place for many.

Informed by neuroscience

I have begun to formulate a theory on how and why this fascinating interaction occurs. Neuroscience and neurochemistry provide insight into how the horse and human connection might work. We frequently talk about horses having the ability to mirror back to us whatever feelings or dynamics we are presenting. I believe, in short, that the horse/human alliance and resulting accuracy of identified issues stem from the fact that a horse's brain is made up mostly of the limbic system. This part of the brain dictates emotionality; consequently, horses are emotional creatures. Through horses' innate ability to pick up on emotion and read intent within others, they are able to mirror for a client the feelings and history that need to be addressed.

The horse/client/facilitator relationship presents a beautiful therapeutic modality that reveals the intelligence, skill, strength, grace and beauty of this healing triangle.