

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Can you explain the basis for the EAGALA method?

The EAGALA Model is an experiential modality. According to the Association for Experiential Education (see www.aee.org), the principles of experiential practice are:

- Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis and synthesis.
- Experiences are structured to require the client to take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for results.
- Throughout the process, the client is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning.
- Clients are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully and/or physically. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic.
- The results are personalized and form the basis for future experience and learning.
- Relationships are developed and nurtured: client to self and client to others.
- The client may experience success, failure, adventure, risk-taking and uncertainty, because outcomes of the experience cannot be predicted.
- Opportunities are nurtured to explore and examine personal values.
- The facilitator's roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, support, ensuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process.
- The facilitator recognizes and encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning.
- Facilitators strive to be aware of their biases, judgments and pre-conceptions, and how these can influence clients.
- The learning experience design includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes and successes.

To these experiential principles EAGALA adds the dynamic of horses, which provide various benefits in the process.

2. What is it about horses that makes this effective?

Naturally intimidating to many, horses are large and powerful. This creates a natural opportunity for some to overcome fear and develop confidence. Working alongside a horse, in spite of those fears, creates confidence and provides wonderful insight when dealing with other intimidating and challenging situations in life.

Like humans, horses are social animals, with defined roles within their herds. They would rather be with their peers. They have distinct personalities, attitudes and moods; an approach that works with one horse won't necessarily work with another. At times, they seem stubborn and defiant. They like to have fun. In other words, horses provide vast opportunities for metaphorical learning, an effective technique when working with even the most challenging individuals or groups. Horses require us to work, whether in caring for them or working with them. In an era when immediate gratification and the "easy way" are the norm, horses require people to be engaged in physical and mental work to be successful, a valuable lesson in all aspects of life.

Most importantly, horses mirror human body language. Many complain, “This horse is stubborn. That horse doesn’t like me,” etc. The lesson is that if they change themselves, the horses respond differently. Horses are honest, which makes them especially powerful messengers.

3. What if one has a fear of horses and never learned to ride?

The EAGALA Model does not include riding – all sessions take place on the ground with horses. Allowing horses to be themselves and respond to the clients’ non-verbal messages enhances the opportunity for growth and learning as fears surface and are addressed in the context of other fears clients may face in their lives.

4. What are Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and Equine Assisted Learning?

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) incorporates horses experientially for emotional growth and learning. It is a collaborative effort between a qualified Mental Health Professional and an Equine Specialist working with clients and horses to address treatment goals. Activities with horses are designed to reflect life issues. This allows the client and therapist to “see” where problems are and find workable solutions. Clients quickly recognize unhealthy patterns and enact new behaviors. Horses don’t accept “talk” - clients have to make authentic changes to affect horses’ responses. Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) involves a similar process but focuses on educational and human/organizational development goals in this highly interactive and impactful learning approach.

5. What are the model’s benefits?

The EAGALA Model provides a structure and standard. This standard includes a certification process, code of ethics and ethics committee, and ongoing professional education and development requirements, assuring a level of professionalism.

Because of their size and history with humans, horses have a unique appeal worldwide. This can help make the therapeutic process more engaging. The EAGALA Model is solution-focused and client-centered which assumes clients possess their own best solutions, and need only the opportunity to discover them. Because of this and the non-verbal nature and appeal of horses, the EAGALA Model has grown worldwide, crossing cultures and countries.

EAGALA provides clients the opportunities to do more than talk – they learn from their experience, which tends to have longer-lasting impact.

6. How many sessions are necessary to see results?

Like any mental health treatment or human development support, the number of sessions is quite individualized. However, professionals and clients alike report that the time spent in an EAGALA session has an impact that would commonly take several sessions, even months, in typical office therapy settings.

7. Will insurance cover this therapy?

Rules and regulations that govern mental health coverage in a person’s insurance apply to this work as well. The EAGALA Model is a psychotherapy process and can be billed as such by the proper professionals following the individual insurance guidelines.

8. When was this model first conceived?

Horses have been used to help humans in different contexts for millennia. However, a structured approach with certification and professional association with oversight review is a newer concept. Therapeutic riding and hippotherapy for various physical disabilities started this trend in the 1960s. In 1999, EAGALA was founded in Utah as a nonprofit professional association to focus on Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. The model first involved working with troubled youth in residential programs. Since its founding the model has evolved and expanded worldwide.

9. How does EAGALA choose horses for the program?

Any breed of horse may apply! Program horses are chosen by the Equine Specialist. Because the EAGALA Model does not include riding, this opens up the arena to many horses that may not be wanted elsewhere. Each horse brings unique attributes to which certain clients may be able to relate and in which to find a metaphor in their own lives.

10. Does EAGALA use rescued horses? What is the TRF?

Yes, because the EAGALA Model does not involve riding, it has opened up a niche for horses whose competitive days are over. Rescue horses have faced certain challenges which may provide a powerful parallel in the lives of some clients. For example, a traumatized child in foster care may relate to a traumatized horse which was abandoned. EAGALA has established a partnership with the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation (TRF) to promote the adoption of retired racing thoroughbreds into a life helping people. TRF in turn waives adoption fees for EAGALA professionals, and may provide additional financial assistance for ongoing care as well.

11. What types of issues does this modality address?

EAGALA Certified professionals are incorporating the model into work on diverse issues, goals and populations. This can range from trauma, abuse, depression, anxiety, addictions, eating disorders, and other mental health and behavioral needs to educational objectives like working with business groups and leaders, schools, and other growth and learning needs.

12. Is there any research to prove this model's efficacy?

EAGALA Model EAP is solidly grounded in well-established and researched theories of psychotherapy including Gestalt Psychotherapy, Solution-Focused Psychotherapy, Cognitive-Behavioral Psychotherapy and Experiential Psychotherapy. The EAGALA Model is a clinical advance on these established practices where the incorporation of horses in psychotherapy is a deliberate, principled, thoughtful and professional catalyst to change.

As with many advances in clinical practice, clinical success precedes systematic study.

- EAGALA Model EAP has effectively been employed in the treatment of numerous behavioral and emotional disorders that are traditionally resistant to intervention and change including conduct disorder, oppositional-defiant disorder, personality disorders and eating disorders.
- Clinical practice has led to academic interest where numerous studies have explored the effectiveness of EAP. Despite a variety of methodological weaknesses, the findings of these studies are remarkably consistent, providing support for the effectiveness of EAP with a variety of clients, highlighting the need for further study.
- Two studies to date have employed randomized control group designs to examine EAP effectiveness. Focusing on different populations (distressed couples and at-risk youth), both studies compared EAP with empirically validated interventions using valid and reliable measures. EAP was found to be equally or more effective than established interventions in both studies.

- Trotter, K., Chandler, C., Goodwin-Bond, D., & Casey, J. (2008). A comparative study of the efficacy of group equine assisted counseling with at-risk children and adolescents. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, Vol. 3(3), 254-284.
- Russell-Martin, L.A. (2006). *Equine facilitated couples therapy and Solution Focused couples therapy: A comparative study*. Doctorate of Philosophy, Northcentral University.

EAGALA is committed to empirical research as an important tool in identifying best practices.

13. Is this the same as therapeutic riding?

No, therapeutic riding focuses on the physical therapeutic benefits to the rider that come from the movement and motion of the horse. The EAGALA Model does not involve riding and is focused on metaphors and creating specific experiences to address treatment or learning goals.

14. Who runs the sessions?

All EAGALA sessions are facilitated by a team of qualified Mental Health Professional and Equine Specialist working with the horses and clients. At times, an additional specialized professional will be added to the facilitating team when their expertise supports the context of needs.

15. What is it about horses that make them good “team members”?

Horses are honest and express themselves non-verbally in response to our non-verbal messages (which we may not be aware we are sending). This dynamic response provides vast information for the client and treatment team. Because the treatment team can never predict how horses will respond, each session is very individualized and keeps everyone engaged in the process. Thanks to the horses, the work is powerful, making the experience rewarding for the treatment team and clients alike.

16. Is there mandated training for EAGALA professionals?

The EAGALA Model requires a team of Equine Specialist and Mental Health Professional, each with minimum standards. The Equine Specialist must have at least 6,000 hours hands-on work with horses, along with over 100 hours of continuing education. The Mental Health Professional must follow regional laws for mental health practice, have education in the mental health scope, and be licensed, registered or certified (depending on country) by a governing body. The EAGALA training course involves six days of training and submission of a professional development portfolio for initial certification, then ongoing continuing education through a certification renewal process.

17. Is this modality being used to treat active military or veterans suffering from PTSD?

Yes, there is growing interest and programming aimed in particular at returning combat veterans. Because there is a stigma normally attached to mental health treatment, the use of horses is especially beneficial, and experiential learning has proven a natural fit with this population. You can read more online: <http://eagala.org/military>.

18. There seem to be many different types of equine therapy. Could you clarify the terms?

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP): Incorporates a team of Mental Health Professional, Equine Specialist and horses to focus on mental health treatment goals and issues through activities designed to reflect real life issues.

Equine Assisted Learning (EAL): Incorporates a team of Mental Health Professional, Equine Specialist, horses and possibly a specialized professional, to focus on specific educational and learning activities designed to reflect the

objectives being learned.

Therapeutic Riding: Mounted therapy in which disabled individuals ride horses to relax, and to develop muscle tone, coordination, confidence and well-being.

Hippotherapy: Physical, occupational and speech therapy treatment strategy that utilizes equine movement. It is provided by a specially trained physical therapist, physical therapy assistant, occupational therapist, certified occupational therapy assistant or speech and language pathologist.

Therapeutic Horsemanship: A program where students learn horsemanship skills, such as riding and caring for horses. Horsemanship skills are the primary objective, however life lessons and other therapeutic benefits may be gained through learning the skills of being with horses.

19. Is this model accessible to both nonprofit and for-profit centers? Yes.

20. What are the specific requirements to start an EAGALA practice?

At least one horse and a fenced area with enough space for horse and client to move around easily and keep some distance (60 foot/18 meters diameter) is the minimum. However, having multiple areas of different sizes and multiple horses with different personalities will increase the range of possibilities. Generally, three to five horses are used in a session.

21. How does the EAGALA Model compare to ropes courses? Don't they both cover the same ground?

The EAGALA Model is very similar to ropes courses, with the added dynamic of another living being, the horse, involved to respond to emotional, behavioral and other nonverbal messages from participants. Because the horses respond or "mirror" participants, they provide a level of information inanimate objects don't. Additionally, they provide ample metaphors as their behavior parallels the human participants'. They do tackle the same issues, in different ways.

22. Is EAGALA a nonprofit? From where does funding come?

EAGALA is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization. Most of the funding comes from membership dues, certification fees, donations, educational resources and other brand merchandise.

23. How does EAGALA ensure client safety if the horses run free?

There is always a level of risk when working around horses. However, the EAGALA Model limits this with the 'no riding' standard and because the horses are free in the arena. Horses, by nature, are not aggressive – their first line of defense is to move away. When horses are tied up or in a small area, this limits their ability to move away. The model supports a horse's natural instinct to walk away by the nature of being loose in the space, and able to be their natural selves.

24. Is EAGALA more or less cost-effective than talk therapy and why?

Because EAGALA involves a professional team, the cost per session is higher than a psychotherapy session in the office. However, because of the impact that occurs for clients in less time, most report the EAGALA approach is more cost-effective when taken as a whole treatment process.

25. What does a session look like?

The Mental Health Professional and Equine Specialist set up activities with the horses designed to reflect real life issues. This allows the client and therapist to “see” where problems are and find workable solutions. Clients quickly recognize unhealthy patterns as the horses mirror them. When the client makes a sincere, consistent change, the horses immediately reflect this as well. EAL involves a similar process but focuses on educational and human/organizational development goals in this highly interactive and impactful learning approach.

Here’s an example: the horses represent a client’s “children” and the struggle in getting the children to “listen” may be represented by working to get the horses over some obstacle. The horses will respond to the client’s non-verbal messages and generally behave just like the client’s own children. Until the client can discover new tools and abilities to become more confident as a parent, the horses (“children”) will not “behave.” Sessions like this are created to parallel any issues or goals clients wish to address.

26. Can an outside therapist take part in the session?

Yes, the EAGALA Model is a great adjunct for other models and therapeutic settings, and having the client’s primary therapist or other program therapist participate as an additional facilitator is beneficial.

27. Does EAGALA have family therapy programs?

The EAGALA Model is effective for family therapy and most programs offer family therapy services.

28. How does EAGALA monitor its standards worldwide?

The EAGALA ethics committee can address concerns brought to the Association’s attention in every country. EAGALA also has networking groups in many of the countries; these assist with peer mentoring and support the standards.

29. Many people claim to be equine specialists because they have ridden for many years. Does this qualify them to be an EAGALA Equine Specialist?

No, the EAGALA standard for Equine Specialists states the professional must have 6,000 hours+ hands-on experience with horses (this is equivalent to three years of full-time work with horses), 100 hours+ of continuing education in the horse field, 40 hours of that in the last two years.

30. Can one be certified if they are neither a Mental Health Professional nor an Equine Specialist?

Yes, certification is in the EAGALA Model which requires the professional to commit to upholding EAGALA standards and code of ethics. The standards require a team of Mental Health Professional (MH) and Equine Specialist (ES) which each meet their own minimum standards. If a person cannot serve in either role, they can serve as a third member of the team where their area of expertise as a specialized professional enhances the human development goals.

31. Does EAGALA have a Board of Directors?

Yes, as a nonprofit organization, EAGALA is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors ensuring longevity of the association, efficient use of resources, focus on EAGALA’s mission and objectives and high standards of business practice. Currently there are nine directors. Information and biographies can be found on the EAGALA website, <http://eagala.org/BoardOfDirectors>