

Horse Power

BY DR. LAURA TRASK

Helping with Horses: Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP)

Look out, Freud. There's a new therapist in town and he's a formative 1,600 pounds. That's right, I'm talking about a horse. Incorporating horses to assist in psychotherapy is an approach that has been used in agricultural societies for centuries and is just now beginning to hit mainstream society. Recently, you may have heard about Equine Assisted Psychotherapy in the news because President Obama has allocated significant funds to use EAP for veterans' rehabilitation and because it has been instrumental in the rehabilitation of Jaycee Dugard in her infamous abduction case. As research studies continue to validate the efficacy of EAP, this alternative form of psychotherapy is undoubtedly on its way to becoming the new "must do" form of healing.

How does EAP work? EAP is the combined use of horses, a licensed therapist and a horse specialist working with clients to address various individual psychotherapy treatment goals. This unique method enables clients to learn about themselves and others by actually participating in activities with the horses, and then processing (or discussing) feelings, behaviors and patterns. The presence of a horse is considered "therapeutic" in itself, since it is a dynamic and powerful living being. There's also a healing bond that can develop between humans and horses. EAP utilizes this relationship with the horse as a tool to mirror client's experiences and facilitate change. Therapeutic results begin immediately. Because of its intensity and effectiveness, it is considered a short-term or "brief" approach. Anyone can participate in EAP; no prior horse or riding experience is necessary. It is completely safe and all activities are done from the ground. No riding is involved.

Who benefits? People of all ages can benefit from EAP. Some specific client challenges include: behavioral issues, Attention Deficit Disorder, anger management, conflict resolution, relationship problems, couples therapy, depression, anxiety, stress, substance abuse, eating disorders, at-risk youth, victims of abuse, those in bereavement, those lacking self-esteem, veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, people who are unresponsive to traditional therapies, and people with other mental health challenges. EAP is also used for corporate retreats, group and family sessions.

Why horses? Horses offer several advantages. Obviously, their size offers a perfect opportunity for someone to overcome fear and develop confidence. Plus, just like us, horses experience a large variety of emotion, are intuitive and social animals with distinct personalities, attitudes and moods. They have defined



roles within their herds comparable to human dynamics. Because of these similarities, horses can demonstrate and teach self-awareness, honest communication, trust, healthy boundaries, leadership, patience, assertiveness, play, affection, nurturance and more. Most importantly, horses have the ability to mirror exactly what human body language is telling them and therefore provide us with metaphors and lessons about ourselves to help facilitate change.

As an avid horsewoman and equine assisted therapist (trained and certified by The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association), I have personally seen the benefits of the interaction between horses and people and am dedicated to sharing this experience with others. eagala.org.