Helping With Horses: Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) from Psychology Today

Can a horse assist in psychotherapy?

Posted Oct 20, 2010

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 signiﬁ cant 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 beneﬁ t 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, I have personally seen the beneﬁts of the interaction between horses and people and am dedicated to sharing this experience with others. To watch an EAP session, go to my website ([www.drlauratrask.com](http://www.drlauratrask.com/) (link is external)) and click on my appearance on the Dr. Phil show!

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Funny!!

Submitted by André Pampel on October 20, 2010 - 7:18pm

Hi Dr Laura

Funny that you have posted this subject. I participated in horse therapy sessions a few months ago.

There were four of us all having problems related to alcohol plus relationship issues.

My expereinece was that my horse partner mirrored my own emotive state clearly.

Anyway he helped me see where i was blocking myself in my relations.

All in all a great expereince i can reccomend whole heartily.

Cheers

Reply to André PampelQuote André Pampel

Hi Andre, Thanks for your

Submitted by Laura Trask Ph.D. on October 20, 2010 - 9:03pm

Hi Andre,

Thanks for your comment. You are right, EAP is truly a unique experience where people get the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of themselves. I'm really glad that EAP was able to help you.

Look for more of my blogs as I will keep posting information on other effective nontraditional psychotherapy methods!!

-Dr. Laura

Reply to Laura Trask Ph.D.Quote Laura Trask Ph.D.

No horses in suburbia?

Submitted by You're not horsing around! on October 20, 2010 - 9:48pm

Thank you for helping get the word out about this dynamic adjunct to cognitive therapy with and without psychoactive drugs. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that a psychotherapist trained in Equine Therapy can help in a greatly reduced time frame compared to traditional cognitive-only approach. In comparison to drugs, in most instances, this approach is far superior, quicker, and no systemic symptoms such as dry mouth, loss of libido, and malaise, etc. Interestingly, it is quite beneficial to group therapy, especially in areas of corporate cohesiveness and team building. With all these advantages why do you think it has been so under utilized within the psychological profession?

Reply to You're not horsing around!Quote You're not horsing around!

I volunteer at a therapeutic

Submitted by Hanna on October 20, 2010 - 11:01pm

I volunteer at a therapeutic riding program for challenged children. it is amazing to see how they come out of their shells when they get on the back of a horse. I am a college student majoring in psych with an equine studies minor and I hope to incorporate some type of horse related therapy into my future profession.

Reply to HannaQuote Hanna

Thanks Dr laura

Submitted by André pampel on October 21, 2010 - 5:33pm

Yes it was very helpful to me. One thing i learned is i am not alway's very clear in what i expect from people. My horse showed this very clearly, by losing concentration, playing up!

When i was clear my horse and i worked well together.

Looking forward to more articles!

André

Reply to André pampelQuote André pampel

autism

Submitted by Anonymous on November 15, 2010 - 1:36pm

Horse therapy is awesome. I have an autistic grandson who was terrified of horses, until we got him a Chincotaegue pony and put him on her back. He was instantly thrilled and in love with her. He sits on her back like he has been riding his whole life, he has no fear, no need to hold on to anything, he is balanced and in control. I know that their relationshio will only get better with time.

Reply to AnonymousQuote Anonymous

Why it works

Submitted by Claire Dorotik on December 30, 2010 - 11:11pm

Having worked for many years as an EAP practitioner, and being both licensed as an MFT, and having trained horses for many years, I can say that the dynamics of the herd language never fail to amaze us all.

Claire Dorotik M.A., author, ON THE BACK OF A HORSE: Harnessing the Healing Power of the Human-Equine Bond

Reply to Claire DorotikQuote Claire Dorotik

Anyone Benefits

Submitted by Vicki | Be Well With Horses on January 31, 2011 - 11:45pm

Thank you for bringing attention to the wonderful things horses offer us. I became aware of how they can change your life when I got my own 2 horses. If you really pay attention to what's going on between you and your horse you can notice so many subtle and obvious things.

Happy Trails

Reply to Vicki | Be Well With HorsesQuote Vicki | Be Well With Horses

Equine Assisted Therapy

Submitted by Terry Knight Durr on December 14, 2011 - 3:44pm

J and K Kennels, Houston, Texas

Hi Kelley & Gregorie:

It has taken a while for me to put into words what my thoughts are about my EAP therapy. Which says a great deal considering I write and am never at a loss for words.

But, rather than one of my silly entertaining columns, I really wanted to make sure I measured every word. The power of my experience with EAP therapy had me wanting to make sure I could convey the impact and awareness it has brought me. It's not edited yet, but here are some thoughts:

The simpliest of tasks being asked upon the participant reveal an entire world of nature, nurture, lessons, decision-making, response, resolutions. personal insight and growth.

For me, it had the ability to unlock things that had escaped me for years. As Gregorie and Kelley both said, the scope and reach of the therapy has a very long gestation period and a long reach for some things. At times I felt euphoric at the end, knowing I had accomplished a task that provided a key to unlock a door immediately. Then at times, afterwards I felt speechless and still. Only to find the lessons were simmering below the surface, awaiting to reveal their meaning at a later time. Either way, the entire experience is the best thing I have ever done for myself. Spirtuall on levels I can barely explain. Rather than just tools for the toolbox used for differing situations, which is lovely, EAP provided me with the ability to open the barn door for my ultimate path that I wish to walk.

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy is a unique physical and sensory oriented therapy. The visual of the movements is something you can apply to future situations. How the horse acts and reacts is in direct relationship to your approach and decison making. Thus, the unlocking of understanding, appreciation, refection and personal power.

Discovery:

My wounds, my outlook, my triggers, my process,my warmth, my empathy and compassion, my personal power.

Cause of conflict:

Conflict it is the trigger to our emotions and our emotions are what drive us back to our most basic survival instinct; react and attack back to defend ourselves.

In these instinctual moments, we may lose track of our higher selves and become the human animal with an urge to protect ourselves when attacked. This too is natural. However, we are the only animal blessed with intelligence and having the ability to control our responses.

The Process:

My process and why; what it reveals about me; what I keep & what I put aside

The Pause:

I could go on and on about this...but: " The Pause; that impressive silence, that eloquent silence, that geometrically progressive silence which often achieves a desired effect where no combination of words, however so felicitous, could accomplish it. " Mark Twain

Personal Power:

That it lies within me. Always has, it just needed to be dusted off. I had not realized some pieces had been broken, but just like many a great horse, I can run again. Build an unshakeable foundation, pursue and fulfill my dreams, impact others,improve relationships and find time for renewal.

I plan to continue EAP when I can, making it a priority in my wellness as a human being. And intend to open this unique window to my three beautiful and amazing girls.

In the end, EAP gave me my graceful soul back.

Terry

Terry Knight Durr

Mom / Producer / Writer / Coordinator / Amazing Woman

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Reply to Terry Knight DurrQuote Terry Knight Durr

This is all pretty exciting!

Submitted by Marylin Blair on May 22, 2012 - 2:49pm

This is all pretty exciting! Thanks for sharing, Christina, Lov ya, Mom

Reply to Marylin BlairQuote Marylin Blair

I want to be an EAP

Submitted by Alexis on June 24, 2015 - 2:27pm

hi everyone,

I am a freshman in highschool and have a passion for horses and want to use them for therapy.........My school counciler said to start finding colleges I want to go to and that have the right studies for my career! I am having trouble finding colleges for this :( I would love to be close to west virginia or even in west virginia.

Thanks,

Alexis

Reply to Alexis Quote Alexis

Horses really do Help!!

Submitted by James West on September 23, 2015 - 10:18pm

After spending almost 2 years (four semesters) volunteering at an equine assisted learning facility I am speechless when it comes to what I experienced and elated with the progress each special needs student I worked with in riding therapy sessions achieved.

As I documented their progress throughout the six weeks of riding session there were notable milestones and progress in each students learning. For my senior project I built a rope maze on the campus of the equine assisted learning facility to offer yet another learning experience for the students, but in the end, the riding sessions remain the best experience of my college education. The horses changed my perception in learning and offers one of the best learning environments outside the four walls of the classroom.

I'm 100% sold on the value and utility of equine assisted therapies and learning!! It truly works!

Reply to James West Quote James West

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Laura Trask Ph.D.

Laura Trask, Ph.D., is a psychological assistant and author.

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