



HEART-TO-HEART WITH A HORSE

Their Gentle Empathy Helps Us Heal

by Sandra Murphy

Physical therapists have long used horses to help patients improve balance or strengthen core muscles. Now they're helping to teach empathy.

Given a horse's significant size, sometimes distracting surroundings and the need for safety, humans need to learn the animal's non-verbal cues, and to regulate their own. Close interaction without riding is proving to be helpful for those dealing with addictions, trauma and grief, and for employees to improve their communication and teamwork skills.

Kelly Wendorf and Scott Strachan, co-founders of Equus, in Santa Fe, work with both individuals and organizations. Strachan emphasizes, "This isn't magic. Horses reflect our feelings back to us. If we're nervous, the horse will be more skittish."

"We've had executives arrive with cell phones firmly in hand and leave holding soggy tissues instead," comments Wendorf. "For them, it was unexpectedly emotional."

For addicts caught up in a debilitating cycle, "Equine therapy gets the brain firing in a new direction," says Constance Scharff, Ph.D., director of

addiction research at Cliffside Malibu, in California. "Patients may say they're fine when they're not, but you can't lie to a horse. They have boundaries; if you're angry, a horse won't tolerate your behavior and will walk away."

Scharff notes, "Equine therapy is complementary to psychotherapy medicine, and one tool we use in approaching addiction. Depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder can be the underlying issue, so we can address it, to understand why the person became an addict."

Wendorf relates the story of an 18-year-old client facing body image issues. "Five horses approached her and touched her with their noses on her arms and legs. Where they touched was where she had been cutting herself to try to relieve her emotional pain."

"People feel a powerful connection when they let down their defenses and a horse responds," says Sheryl Jordan, equestrian director at Salamander Resort & Spa, in Middleburg, Virginia. "Our Equi-Spective life lessons program brings self-awareness and the power to better

Horses help bring back memories for clients with dementia.

~Hearts & Horses, Loveland, Colorado,
nonprofit therapeutic riding facility

control emotions. During the session, they may hug, pet and cry on the horse, but they leave the corral smiling.”

The program teamed up with the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) serving bereaved military families. Kelly Griffith, a surviving sister of U.S. Marine Corps Major Samuel Griffith, points to the power of equine therapy in a video at Tinyurl.com/Equi-SpectiveVideo.

Susan Wight, a former professional steeplechase rider and ambassador for TAPS in Leesburg, Virginia, says, “My husband was my riding coach. When he passed away, I was numb when facing decisions, but at the session, it felt like one of the horses was the one to choose. The initial flood of emotions and memories from being around horses again wasn’t pretty, but empathy is a specific language, and I’m grateful for the opportunity. Horses are a huge part of my life.”

At Ranch Hand Rescue Counseling Center & Animal Sanctuary, in South Argyle, Texas, founder Bob Williams considers animal therapy a ministry.

“We rescue abused and neglected farm animals, including horses that come into play when patients are not responding to usual therapies,” he says. “It’s important for damaged people to learn to live in the light, and our partnering with the special needs animals helps put them on the emotional path to health.” The rescue’s mission is to provide hope, healing and a sense of security for children and adults that have suffered severe trauma

such as abuse, domestic violence and witnessing violent death (Tinyurl.com/RanchHandRescueVideo).

Riding Beyond’s four-session program, in Ashland, Oregon, is free to women recovering from the rigors of breast cancer treatment. Expenses are covered by donations from the community. German research published in the journal *Psycho-Oncology* reported that 82 percent of participating breast cancer patients studied displayed symptoms of PTSD following diagnosis.

“They often don’t want to touch or be touched, and have trouble with friendships and intimate relationships; issues that can cripple a woman’s life,” says Trish Broersma, founding director and a certified therapeutic riding professional at Riding Beyond (Tinyurl.com/RidingBeyondVideo). “The medical team that saved their lives doesn’t treat these issues.”

The first client, unfamiliar with horses, met Mystic, who touched her on the site of the former tumor. She says, “Even weeks later, when I brought her image to mind when stressed, sad or even happy, it brought feelings of contentment, peace and well-being.”

Horses have been serving humans in many ways for centuries. Equine therapy shows they have even more to give if we are open to receive.

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