



NEW JERSEY
PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

What If Your Solution Is A Horse! Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and Learning

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Throughout history, we have seen the benefits of having our equine partners around, assisting in labor and transportation. Now they have a new role in supporting human beings. In the last twenty years or more Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) and Learning (EAL) have become legitimate techniques, guided by professional organizations that regulate the practice and set the standards for training. There is also a growing body of research to support what has been a felt sense of the obvious to those of us who work with horses ... that our four-legged therapists can help people in profound and unique ways. Recognized as a state-of-the art technique for psychotherapy and learning, the use of horses to assist people is increasing in leaps and bounds (pun intended!)

Who can benefit?

The short answer is pretty much everyone. The equine therapy team consists of a certified psychotherapist, horse specialist, and horse(s); *no riding is necessary*. During each session the therapist is monitoring the interactions for metaphors and avenues for exploration and learning, while the horse expert is watching the horses for their reactions and changes in behavior also. Safety of the client is paramount – both physical and emotional.

How does it work?

Some equine therapy teams may have an area of specialization such as treating addiction, working with teens, or facilitating corporate trainings. Equine Assisted Psychotherapy is most helpful for individuals, families, or groups with a clinical issue such as depression or anxiety or family conflict. I have found equine therapy particularly helpful to people who feel “stuck” in their talk therapy. Also, teens or young people resistant to traditional types of psychotherapy are more likely to turn up at our “outside office,” intrigued by the idea of seeing a horse as a therapist! Equine Assisted Learning is used with individuals, teams, organizations, or corporations who are looking to develop solutions or skills that they can transfer to their respective environments.

Horses are “prey” animals, and as such are mostly concerned with getting their basic needs met; their behavior is driven by their instinct to survive. They have their own motives, feelings, preferences, and past learned experiences. They also prefer to live with a herd and are social. They have leaders and followers; they make friends with one another, sometimes for years. They can be playful, curious, willing to go along, or down right “stand-offish.” Unlike a “prop,” this living being actually interacts with you!

EAP and EAL are *experiential* in nature. People may be more familiar with types of experiential therapies such as role-playing, psychodrama, guided imagery, the use of “props,” and other such active experiences. Experiential therapists operate on a few basic assumptions:

- Humans have an intrinsic ability to find their own solutions to their problems and have an innate capacity for growth and healing.
- Learning and changing behaviors is optimal when a person is *engaged in problem solving and reflection while doing*.
- The role of the therapist team is to provide an optimal environment to facilitate this process.

All of the therapy involves interacting with the horses (but no riding). We can often learn more about the client in the first few minutes of the session than in several weeks of talk therapy. Clients arrive with their needs for solutions to real life issues. Instead of talking about the problem the client is directed out into the horse arena or field with a few verbal prompts from the human team members (therapist and horse specialist). A typical first session might involve inviting a client to introduce themselves to the horses and come back to us with one of the horses identified as “their favorite.” We gather information about how they go about the task: do they run up to the horses or walk slowly and timidly; how do they respond to a novel situation or vague directions; do they ask for help or go it alone; why did they chose the horse they identified as a favorite; how do the horses “feel” who didn’t get picked; how does the horse who was chosen “feel.” Within a very short time period, a story or metaphor evolves where the client “projects,” so to speak, their inner life onto the horses. The horses come alive with information that probably has more to do with the client than the horses. Working with the clients’ insights and reflections we can take the metaphor further: asking them who the horse reminds them of in their life; looking at the interaction between them and the horse to understand the relationship between the client and, say, a family member. During the session, the client is asked frequently to observe the animals and to reflect upon the meaning of the horses’ behaviors. We can also look at how a horse is reacting to the clients’ advances to understand more about the client. The interaction(s) has so many avenues to explore and topics to focus on. And, often feedback from a horse (the horse behavioral response) is received more openly than from a human!

This alternate tool can serve as a breakout or adjunctive therapy, or used entirely on its own.

How can you find out more about EAP and EAL?

Please check our website at *SummitPsychologicalServices.com* to learn more about the Equine Program, “Horse Powered Growth & Learning.” You may also visit the Equine Assisted Growth & Learning Association website: *EAGALA.org*. Or alternatively, why not come and see me at work since I am “out standing in the field.”