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Equine Assisted Psychotherapy: Horses Are Still Helping Us Today

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Since the beginning of civilization men have used horses as tools to forge their way through life and build a better life for themselves and their families. The relationship between mankind and horses has been largely beneficial to people in all aspects of making a civilized nation. They provided transportation, communication, muscle and speed to get hard jobs done; they have even provided steadfast friendship for the lonely nights on the trail. That relationship was changed slightly through the invention of the automobile, but aspects of that relationship still exist today. The main change in our relationship with horses is that they are not crucial to survival any longer. The role that they tend to play now is more for enjoyment than for working purposes. Recent studies are showing the chance for another change in the relationship between horse and mankind, and that is making them recognizable in our culture as therapists, teachers and even as a form of naturopathic medicine to treat ailments that can not be cured. Horses can still be a very valuable tool with many uses even in the new age of computers, technology, and innovation.

Around 5000 years ago man was just beginning to advance to a less primitive being. This was about the time that horses were introduced for a purpose other than for food. Man decided that these animals were capable of being more to them than food. So began the relationship between man and horse. As time went on and we advanced as a civilization, the beasts that were once our food became our beasts of burden. They were used to further our advancement in many ways and were seen as a symbol of freedom and strength of life force.

In our search to cure ailments of the mind and body people have gone to great lengths to come up with new ideas medically and non-medically. A lot of time and energy goes into the sciences every year to find cures for all that ails us in our constant battle for the betterment of our society. Some people have turned to a new age for a forgotten friend in their search and have come up with new ways of implementing old forms of therapy for people. I will be discussing some new and controversial forms of therapy using the horses as a tool, and teacher to help heal the minds of some common mental problems.

With new ideas of body image and women going to extreme lengths to look good in the eyes of others it comes as no surprise that people go to extreme lengths and sacrifice their own health in their conquest for the perfect body. “Horses and the props used in the equine therapy sessions provide excellent metaphors for the eating disorder, specific people and experiences in the patients life, and the recovery process” (Christian 65). They provide an excellent way to help in the treatment of eating disorders that if left untreated can kill women afflicted by them, with amazing results. They target issues with control, boundaries, fear, and surrender that are important to recovering from eating disorders.

“The treatment team begins each session with a goal and a list of rules for the client. The resident is asked to provide consequences for any rule that is broken” (Christian 65). By doing this the boundaries are set for the session. The consequences do not always have to be negative this allows for positive reinforcement.

The therapy team only acts when specifically directed by the client. The therapy team consists of the client and one or two therapists, and one horse professional. The horse professional assumes a dual role of managing safety issues between horses and people serving as an extra set of eyes and ears to assess the client. (65)

The session is used to assess the clients level of frustration in dealing with different situations and helps with developing problem solving skills, as the client is directed to solve hypothetical dilemmas related to everyday struggles with their disorder. They learn to ask for help, release control, and work through the issues that they struggle with every day.

During these sessions every player involved plays a role in the person's life that needs to be dealt with more effectively. Even the therapy team learns things about themselves that they did not know. Even failure to complete an exercise can teach a valuable lesson, and "the client gains a perspective of how powerful her eating disorder is, and some of its attributes, since she labeled them herself during the exercise" (Christian 65).

This type of therapy reaches people in ways that traditional therapy cannot. Tangible boundaries are set in these exercises, and often the client will tell the therapy team to get out of their space, or to move the horse out of that space (a metaphor for a person, disorder, or a feeling). Since horses are large and powerful they make good visible reminders of how powerful their disorder is. Sometimes it helps just to remove the client from their comfort zone to gain new insights, and learn new strategies for problem solving. (67)

The use of equine facilitated therapies in all forms can be helpful in early intervention of behavioral disorders in children that can lead to adult antisocial behaviors resulting in criminal conduct. If these troubled youths can be effectively steered in a more behaviorally healthy direction before adulthood criminality it could effectively reduce crime, and recidivism. Children are very impressionable and their reactions to their surroundings can have profound effects on their lives. Many children come from abusive situations, have behavioral, or learning disorders that can be addressed with equine assisted psychotherapies.

Children that come from abusive homes have a higher rate of conduct that suggests a predisposition to criminal deviance at adolescence. “These children are at greater risks for behavioral problems [such as delinquency...], and mental health disorders including; anxiety, anger, depression, and suicidal ideations, withdrawal, and ADHD” (Schultz 265-266). These problems can develop into social deviance later in life and can be addressed in this treatment. The children involved in therapy are given the Children’s Global Assessment for Functioning test (GAF), pre-treatment and post-treatment to help with assessing effectiveness of the therapy. The program usually lasts for around 19 sessions and the sessions are held twice a week. They are set up similar to other forms of equine therapy in that they have a licensed therapist and a horse specialist working together as a team. The child’s family or support network is encouraged to participate in the sessions.

Forms of equine therapy that are used for children differ slightly from therapy with adults in that the horse is used for different purposes. Children connect on a different level with horses they both communicate through body language; horses react and reflect nonverbal communications back at the subject. The horse is large and imposing to the child and during therapy the child must overcome fear and build a relationship with their horse. By doing this the child gains confidence, and problem solving skills. “Individuals are often unaware of their behavior until they can understand it through the way in which the horse reflects it back to them” (Shultz 266).

Just learning how to care for and ride a horse can be a great self esteem builder for these children. Another benefit to this type of therapy is that it helps in building a trust rapport with the child since many children that have been exposed to violence in their household have issues with trusting adults. They tend to look at any adult as an authority figure that can harm them

physically or mentally and this can cause mistrust. It is crucial for therapists to overcome these barriers and interaction with horses has shown to be helpful in breaking down these barriers to therapy. The long term effects of this therapy have not been studied in depth so there is no data to support long term benefits. However the pre, and post treatment GAF scores for these subjects showed promising improvements. The greatest improvement was shown in the younger participants in the study.

Horse therapies have also been used in treatment of youths with severe emotional disorders such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive disorder, Bi-Polar Disorder, and many others. Effectiveness of these programs was gauged by battery testing before and after treatment to “appraise the participant’s feelings of self-esteem, depression, loneliness, empathy, and locus of control” (Ewing 65). The treatment consisted of two sessions per week for a period of nine weeks. Each session was two hours long. The sessions concentrated on hands on approaches for learning boundaries, control, focus, trust, and self esteem for the participants. As with the other studies that focus on therapies for youths this program used the same activities and worked on the same basic functions. It differs in the higher levels of impairment in the participants. Most of which were in special schools because they were unable to function in traditional school settings.

“Although the quantitative results did not show statistical significance, qualitative analyses were illuminating” (Ewing 66). The following are two examples of case studies showing the dramatic effect that this therapy can have on the children that participate in it. The first, suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from abuse including sexual abuse. She responded well to therapy and through the interaction with her horse and therapist she was able to address her fears and anxieties in a more healthy way. The second was labeled as the feral

child due to her behavioral and mental handicaps she was unable to mainstream into traditional school. Through her therapy she was able to overcome these severe problems and at the end of a year of equine assisted therapy she was able to be placed in a traditional middle school. Even if the quantitative results do not show significant enough proof these two stories show profound effects from this type of therapy.

There has also been some research as to the effectiveness of programs that use horses to help prisoners to reform and prepare for release into society. The criminal justice system is in great need of programs to help with rising recidivism rates that are costing the taxpayers billions of dollars every year. The prisons are full to brimming and if we can implement new forms of rehabilitating offenders so that they do not re-offend and end up back in prison it would surely help with overcrowding in the criminal justice system.

There are multiple programs that have been implemented in Colorado, Wyoming, Oklahoma, and California. The program in Colorado is at the East Canon Correctional Complex and is administered by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. The general plan of the program is that the horses are gathered from the rangelands to balance the numbers of wild horses grazing with the available food, and are sent a facility where inmates go daily to train and prepare the horses for auction.

There are regulations to who can participate because some inmates are not receptive to this treatment and there are safety issues with dealing with large animals such as horses. "To qualify, prisoners must be within five years of parole eligibility and assigned to a minimum-restricted facility" (Lloyd 2). All qualifying inmates are not required to do the program they are only offered the chance to volunteer for the program. The goals of the programs associated with

prisons are, to teach patience, discipline, and problem solving skills, to help the inmates prepare for release to the parole system.

A two year participant in the program stated that it teaches you that you have to use something other than violence to deal with the challenge. The nature of wild horses is such that an inmate cannot intimidate, bully, or coerce a reaction from them. They are forced to find solutions that work with the nature of the animal. By doing this the inmates effectively learn the skills that they need to function better in society and this reduces their chances of re-offending. There is also a classroom requirement for the program where the inmates learn skills such as business management and other important things in running a stable. The programs raw statistics show “of the inmates who’ve been through the program, about 45% have landed back in the system-an impressive figure compared with the national recidivism rate of 75% “(Lloyd 2). In 1996 the program also showed an impressive \$50,000 profit margin.

“Traditionally, educational programs in correctional institutions which intend to rehabilitate [...] offenders stay within proven safe parameters” (Deaton 1). However these programs are starting to get the attention of criminal justice professionals due to their effectiveness. The program that was run in New Mexico from 1988 through 1992 had an even more impressive recidivism rate on participants in their wild horse program. The rate of re-incarceration was approximately 25% which was much lower than the rates in New Mexico of 38%. The numbers show that this form of rehabilitation is extremely effective in comparison to traditional forms of rehabilitation that inmates go through to help prepare them for release. Many prisons do not even try to mend offenders before they are released because prisons are looked at as a form of punishment rather than a rehabilitative measure.” Overall, the qualitative evidence

suggested the Wild Mustang Program contributed to better emotional and psychological states of the inmates and staff' (Deaton 51).

With the invention of the automobile our relationship with horses was changed forever. They helped to build our society but became obsolete to some of us. We do not need a horse to pull our plows, build our homes, and be a speedy form of transportation and communication or to help us fight our battles more efficiently. Now we have cars, airplanes, tractors, and all sorts of machines to do the heavy lifting required to build a comfortable life for us. Horses can still be just as vital to our society as a tool to help us heal our souls. They can help with physical ailments such as Downs Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, Autism, Stroke, and Multiple Sclerosis. Horses have also been shown in studies to have psychological healing powers that are beneficial for the treatment of many people that struggle with eating disorders, anger issues, Post Traumatic Stress Disorders, low self esteem, physical and emotional abuse, fear, and are effective in many forms of rehabilitative therapies.

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