
10 Ways Equine Assisted Experiential Psychotherapy Can Help People with Addictions

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Some of today's most effective psychotherapists never pass judgment on their clients. In fact, they never say a word. Some weigh close to 2,000 pounds. OK, so horses aren't exactly licensed therapists, but they are working on the same team.

In what's known as **Equine Assisted Experiential Psychotherapy**, residential and outpatient addiction treatment centers are increasingly utilizing horses to help clients overcome their addictions and regain control of their lives.

In a **collaborative effort** between a licensed therapist and an experienced horse handler, participants learn about themselves and others by participating in activities with the horses, and then processing (or discussing) feelings, behaviors, and patterns.

EAEP doesn't involve riding horses. It employs a set of activities on the ground, in which horse, horse expert, licensed therapist and client work together. Here are 10 skills this innovative, effective treatment method teaches people to help them overcome addiction and substance abuse problems:

- 1 **Non-verbal communication:** Unlike people in your life who can pass judgment on your actions or condemn you for poor choices you've made, a horse, of course, doesn't speak. Nevertheless, the horse and client learn to establish mutual trust and work together to achieve tasks, with the horse relying on the client's body language and physical cues for signals.
- 2 **Assertiveness (not to be confused with aggressiveness):** Clients learn to be confident in the decisions they make and the convictions they hold. This is a critical skill for avoiding people and situations that can lead a person to relapse. The client must make choices in how to accomplish goals with the horse, knowing that their success or failure depends partly on the decisions they make.

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- 3 Creative thinking/problem solving: Often people abuse alcohol and drugs as a way to cope with problems. This therapy teaches the client to think outside of the box in order to solve problems, and to discover positive ways to resolve conflicts.
 - 4 Leadership: The horse is depending on the client to make the decisions needed to accomplish tasks and overcome obstacles. The client learns how rewarding it can be to know they've lead someone else through a difficult situation to a positive outcome.
 - 5 Work: Nothing that's truly good in life comes without effort, sacrifice and sometimes some pain or discomfort. The client learns that in order to achieve goals, he must do things that aren't always easy or pleasurable, but the returns they deliver make that work worth it.
 - 6 Taking responsibility: If the horse and client fail at their task, the client learns to accept his share of the blame. Likewise, if a person relapses into drug and alcohol abuse, they must accept the fact that they made the choice to relapse.
 - 7 Teamwork: Neither the horse nor the client can accomplish tasks in the program on their own. They need each other. To get there, they must trust one another, realizing that individuals working together toward a common goal can accomplish more than going it alone.
 - 8 Relationships: The client learns that how he behaves toward the horse determines how the horse behaves. This is key to the realization that our behavior affects those who love us and depend on us, a realization that can be critical for helping a person maintain sobriety.
 - 9 Confidence: Many clients have never interacted with a horse and fear being so close to such a large and powerful animal. But they gradually learn they can manage this creature by learning how to behave around it, a lesson that carries over into their lives when they leave.
 - 10 Attitude: The client comes to understand that, despite initially feeling uncertain, it is much easier to achieve their goals by developing and maintaining a positive view of themselves and others.

Hudson Valley HorsePlay (Kerhonkson, NY) is the region's only equine assisted learning & psychotherapy center. Farm visits daily, by appointment.

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