

What is Equine Assisted Therapy?

Equine assisted therapy is an experiential (hands-on) psychotherapeutic intervention involving horses as co-therapists. Therapy can be on an individual or group basis depending on the treatment needs. Participants learn about themselves by interacting in a series of specially designed activities with horses. EAP is not about riding horses. It's about therapeutic activities that take place on the ground under the guidance of a licensed psychologist and an equine specialist. Activities promote beneficial therapeutic healing and growth, by teaching the individual how to deal with, and learn about their own emotions. It helps people increase awareness as to how their emotions affect others and their daily lives.

Services available year-round. Contact Cori Nichols (845) 616 – 3608.

Benefits of Equine Assisted therapy:

Increased self-awareness
Increased confidence
Improved social skills
Improved communication

Anxiety reduction
Greater trust
Assertiveness
Resilience

Why Horses?

Horses can put their 50 million years of successful existence down to healthy boundaries and expert communication on a non-verbal level. Engaging with them and our activities offer alternative ways of relating to the world around us. As prey animals, horses have an instinctual fear of danger and can read the intentions of another from a great distance. This means they are able to accurately tell what we are really feeling – even if we are not yet aware of it. Thus, they act as a mirror to what is going on in our lives, giving instant, honest feedback which is a catalyst to our healing.

Horses are masters at self-regulation or the ability to 'ground' themselves after any difficulty or trauma. Being close to their calm energy can allow us to do the same, eventually incorporating this learning into our everyday life. Due to their sheer size and physical presence the horse can incite different reactions and emotions from us depending upon our life experiences. This creates a natural opportunity to examine the power dynamics that exist within our relationships. Horses are naturally curious, social creatures who do not worry about ego, looks or qualifications and have no ulterior motives. They stay in the present moment and provide unconditional acceptance, a major factor in the healing process.

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Overcoming Blocks to Recovery

"Equine-assisted therapy is especially beneficial for clients who tend to intellectualize," says Nichols. "It assists patients in 'getting out of their heads and into their hearts and bodies.' Intellectualizing is a major block to recovery for many individuals. Being able to break through this is huge for many patients."

Equine therapy helps patients get in touch with their emotions and feelings. "Many patients have avoided feeling emotions for so long that they don't know how to anymore. Through working with horses, feelings of fear, anger, resentment, sadness, loneliness, joy and peace are brought to surface."

EAP Activities

One example of an EAP activity used in equine assisted psychotherapy; a halter is handed to a participant and the individual is then instructed go into an arena and catch a horse. Depending on the approach, the horse may back away, run, or allow the individual to place the halter over its head. It can be an easy task, or a very daunting task, it is all in how the horse interprets the participant's body language. They may give up and walk away, because it appears to be impossible, or they try a variety of methods until they are able to approach the horse and place the halter over its head. It makes the participant stand back and assess the situation. Many times it requires more than one session to accomplish this activity. Each time the individual feels like giving up, the question can be asked; how could this simple activity be compared to how people approach each other, and what are the signals your body language sends?

In another example, the participant is asked to go out into an arena without a halter, and asked to get the horse to move through a series of obstacles. This activity usually takes several sessions. If the participant is disrespectful to the horse, such as inappropriate touching or loud noises, this makes the horse fearful. When the participant makes a conscious effort, and considers what affect they are having on the horse, rather than just making demands, the horse begins to cooperate. The horse is beginning to trust and respect you. Trust and respect are earned with horses, much the same way as gaining trust and respect from people.

Communication and Feedback

Equine Therapy helps with communication skills. In working with the horses, clients get a new perspective on communication and honesty. Unlike other aspects of the addiction treatment program and treating chemical dependency, the feedback is supplied not by a counselor or fellow resident, but through the actions of the horse. It isn't like interacting with another person, our spouse or parent. Horses are highly acute of their

surroundings and our intentions. We cannot gain the trust of the animal without being honest in our intentions, which doesn't always require words.

Another valuable lesson learned in this process is through asking for help. When in the throes of addiction, this can be a difficult thing. Before trust is established with the horse this can be necessary. Participants can experience some frustration as the horse is uncooperative. It is in these moments when one learns not to look at the horse as the problem, but look inwardly to themselves at their limitations.

Connections through Equine Therapy

An honest connection is a powerful thing, because it is something earned. When this happens between client and horse, the horse becomes willing to do what the alcoholic/addict commands it to. In some cases they even follow the client around without a lead rope or restraint. We can use this feedback in for recovery! The experience can help to communicate more appropriately not just to those in the rehabilitation counseling room or within a group, but with partners, family and coworkers.

Equine therapy is used to help a wide variety of different people across many psychological and physical spectrums. In terms of addiction treatment, equine therapy can help those who suffer from:

- Heroin addiction
- Cocaine addiction
- Crystal meth addiction
- Prescription drug addiction
- Alcohol addiction
- Anxiety disorders

