

Horses have a way of healing

By Gretel Hakanson

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Even though horses are large mammals, they are prey animals. They do not hunt or attack other animals, rather they have been preyed upon for 70 million years. This means their innate responses and motivations are completely different from humans and other predators such as dogs and cats.

Prey animals usually have a highly vigilant awareness, a keen sense of smell and hearing, and they focus on the present. As a prey animal these qualities are necessary for survival. Horses also experience a range of emotions and strongly relate to fear. They respond to fear with flight rather than fight.

When interacting with humans or other predators, horses tune in to assess their own

safety and our human intent.

“Horses can mirror our emotions even if we don’t know exactly what our emotional state is at the moment, and when we know it, and we want to deny it,” says Laurie Barnhart, clinical director at Desert Dove Farm in Tucson. “Horses will pick up what’s really going on with us and then respond accordingly.”

The horse-human relationship relies on trust, which can be an issue for many equine-assisted psychotherapy clients. “A lot of clients are not good at trusting people and they have extremely good reasons to not trust people,” says Barnhart. “So establishing that level of trust between a horse and a human takes a pretty significant amount of effort for both the human and horse.”



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Tucson-area behavioral health agencies are turning to horses for counseling and therapy. Equine-assisted psychotherapy pairs people with horses to overcome a variety of mental health and human development needs including behavioral issues, attention deficit disorder, PTSD, substance abuse, eating disorders, depression, anxiety, relationship issues, and communication problems.

Using horses for therapy may raise some eyebrows at first but evidence dates back to 600 BC when ancient Greeks acknowledged that riding was more than a means of transportation; it was also a way of improving the health and well-being of people with handicaps. In the late 1800s in North America horseback riding was used as a treatment for a variety of physical challenges.

Equine assisted psychotherapy, equine facilitated mental health and other forms of therapy involving horses are forms of behavioral and mental counseling. The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), one of the predominant membership organizations in the field, describes equine-assisted psychotherapy as “a tool for emotional growth and learning.”

While traditional therapy consists mostly of talk, equine-assisted psychotherapy is experiential: clients learn by doing, rather than by talking.

Equine-assisted psychotherapy is different

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Desert Dove Farm has been offering equine-assisted psychotherapy as outpatient services in the Tucson area for 10 years. For information, visit online: www.desertdovefarm.net or call (520) 444-DOVE.

from talk therapy because it relies on metaphorical learning and experiential learning.

In the EAGALA model, the therapy occurs via various ground exercises, not on horseback. Both a horse professional and a licensed therapist are present at each session. The clients perform various tasks and exercises with the horses that are designed to reveal pattern behaviors and underlying emotions. For example, clients may be asked to lead a horse around the area and then back him up five steps or have the horse go over a jump without the use of a halter or lead. Equine therapy does not require any prior horse experience or skills. In fact, clients don’t even need to like horses to benefit from it.

“We ask clients to describe what’s happening with the horses and then apply that metaphorically to what’s happening in their

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Horses are heroes

By Karen R. Smith

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He's 18 years old and weighs 1,000 pounds, but he's as gentle as a lamb when he's supporting a child with cerebral palsy. His name is 55 and he's one of the therapy horses at Therapeutic Riding Of Tucson, better known as TROT.

It takes a special horse to provide what challenged individuals need. The animals must be particularly responsive, since in many instances the horse's movements are key to a particular individual's treatment. That technique is called hippotherapy (hippos is Greek for horse); it's practiced by occupational, physical and speech therapists who use the rhythmic movements of horses to help people with a variety of neurological disorders as well as those with spinal cord injuries.

TROT is accredited by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) as a therapeutic riding program, and many of TROT's instructors are individually certified by NARHA as well. It began in 1974 when two friends, Nancy McGivvon (physical therapist and lifelong horsewoman) and Barbara Rector (lifelong horsewoman) came to the conclusion, drawn from their own experiences and knowledge, that healing can take place – physically, emotionally and behaviorally – with horses. The pair put together a program designed around that concept.

PHOTO AT LEFT: Courtesy of TROT

Young Erin balances on her crutches to give Thunder, a TROT horse, a kiss of gratitude.



Horses and Healing

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life," Barnhart says. Usually, whatever a client interprets in the arena with the horses is familiar to them in other areas of their life.

With equine-assisted psychotherapy, clients are performing specific tasks rather than speaking theoretically about how life might be different if they tried something else. A lot of information can be gleaned from doing rather than talking, Barnhart says. "They actually get to try different approaches in a safe environment and get the real life experience of learning how to do something differently. If they get a better result, they can take that outside of the arena and try the news at home, at school, at work or wherever else they are struggling."

Equine-assisted psychotherapy practitioners say the horse will mirror back to the client whatever the client presents, such as an emotional state or a problematic dynamic going on in the client's life.

In the early 1990s, Sierra Tucson became the first treatment facility to incorporate equine-assisted psychotherapy as an adjunct to primary treatment. Since that time, other treatment centers have followed suit by incorporating equine therapy into their programs to assist in the treatment of a variety of addictions and disorders.

Kimberly Pele, intake coordinator at Pantano Behavioral Health Services, has referred many of her clients to equine-assisted psychotherapy. "It is a wonderful way for

kids to go through a therapeutic process without feeling like they're in a therapy setting. A lot of our kids are well versed in our system. They know what to say. They know what adults want them to say. They know how to scoot through our system," she says.

But when the kids are paired up with a horse, it's a different story.

Pele has seen equine-assisted psychotherapy help with anger issues, attention deficient disorders, autism, opposition defiance disorders, drug addictions, substance abuse, bullying, boundary issues and sexuality. "We have decreased aggression with families, decreased in-school and out-of-school suspensions, decreased out of home placements, increase in kids coming back to the homes, improvement in grades, improvement in family communication," she says.

Equine-assisted psychotherapy is about having an experience to gain information that can be applied to real-life situations. "Every time they come out [to Desert Farms] they have an experience with the horse that means something to them. It might mean something good, it might mean that they're really sick and tired of their lives, feeling frustrated or feeling helpless," says Barnhart.

Barnhart says a connection with a healing horse stirs up human emotions and gives people the opportunity to work on things that facilitate their learning. "You can't come out here and work with horses and not learn something."

Author: Gretel Hakanson is a local freelance writer.

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They discussed the idea with Bazy Tankersley, an internationally known breeder of Arabian horses, and owner of Al-Marah Tucson. Tankersley embraced the twosome's idea. "She literally said, 'Begin it here,' and then generously made space for it on her property," says Leslie Esselburn, TROT's executive director. "And since then, things have just evolved in the best sense of the word!"

TROT's first group of students came from the Arizona School for the Deaf and Blind. "They are still part of our program," Esselburn says, adding that special education classes from both public and private schools, along with individual riders, comprises 90 percent of TROT's clients – children 18 and under. Ten percent are adults of all ages.

Riders come in all shapes and sizes, and their challenges are just as varied. TROT's programs include Therapeutic Riding for individuals with special needs and Hippotherapy for those with neuromotor dysfunction. The newest is "Heroes on

Horses," designed to help veterans through weekly therapeutic riding sessions, the first program of its kind in the U.S.

Esselburn explains that like many things at TROT, Heroes on Horses evolved almost magically, as connections materialized in unanticipated ways. Mary Vardi, TROT's director of instructors, ran her own certified program in Israel treating wounded Israeli soldiers. When she came to TROT, Vardi ran the idea by volunteers, who were eager to expand. "That's when we received a telephone call from a VA therapist here in town, asking about the possibilities of developing a therapeutic riding program for veterans," she says. "Talk about synchronicity!"

From there, Heroes on Horses became a collaborative effort. Vardi had been trained by one of Israel's top experts, Anita Shkedi. As the program was forming, she learned that Shkedi and her son were visiting in Boulder, Colo. "One phone call later, Shkedi and her son were on their way to Tucson to hold a workshop for TROT's instructors and volunteers."

Shkedi's workshop helped everyone at TROT truly understand the differences they would face working with an injured adult veteran, as opposed to their predominant experience with juvenile riders, Esselburn recalls.

"Then a generous donor stepped forward and said if you're going to help veterans, we want to help you do it," she continues. With that contribution, TROT purchased

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RESOURCE

TROT (Therapeutic Riding Of Tucson) is entering their 36th year of providing equine therapy for children and adults in Tucson. For information, visit online: www.trottucson.org or call (520) 749-2360.

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