

THE POWER OF HORSES by Shannon Boggess

Horses offer solace for veterans and first responders suffering from PTSD



Anne Porteous has loved horses since she was a child. She rode anywhere and anytime she could. Growing up she found another passion – Nursing. Her caring and compassionate nature coupled with her desire to teach others evolved into a Professorship in Nursing.

At home on her farm with her horses, she knew there must be a way to utilize her teaching skills and her beautiful horses to help people. This led her to her finding EAGALA© - Equine Assisted Growth & Learning Association. EAGALA© is an international, non-profit organization setting the standards for Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and Learning. She became certified with them in 2007 and since then, her Sierra Acres Equine Assisted Healing Centre has evolved in offering many unique programs such as H.E.L.P. (Heroes Equine Learning Program), Horses Helping People with Dementia and their Caregivers, Leadership for Women, Project Pathfinder – Aboriginal Services, and much more.

The powerful program H.E.L.P. evolved after the announcement that the Ontario Government unanimously passed legislation recognizing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a work related illness for First Responders such as Police, Firefighters, and

Paramedics. Sierra Acres is a designated facilitator for Southwestern Ontario and a proud advocate for the H.E.L.P. program offered to Veterans and First Responders suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and/or Operational Stress Injury (OSI).

Anne and her horses, accompanied by mental health professionals, follow the EAGALA© model to assist clients to analyze personal obstacles and find their solutions. The philosophy that people learn best by doing is embraced in this program. The clients work hands-on with the horses. No riding is involved; all sessions with the horses are on the ground. Safety rules around horses are established first, then the clients take their time bonding with the horses. These large animals have a powerful grounding effect, which enables the client to feel safe enough to explore their personal situations.

For centuries, horses utilized the fight or flight response to strategize their survival in combat. They reflect people's true selves because their survival depends on reading the client correctly. This helps horses understand and connect with someone affected with PTSD/OSI. Horses provide a safe and non-judgmental environment to allow a person affected by PTSD to work through and overcome personal issues.



Equine Assisted Psychotherapy is proving effective in treating people who suffer from acute, cumulative or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder because the benefits are immediate and fully felt. According to Dr. Laurie Sullivan-Sakaeda, a Utah-based Clinical Psychologist and EAP Practitioner, “horses are prey animals that rely on their senses for survival, similar to those who have been to war. Horses reflect negative and positive emotions with no ulterior motives. They are just there, providing non-verbal feedback. The interaction speeds up the therapy process substantially, with one session of EAP in the barn equal to five sessions ‘on the couch’.”

Horse Assisted Learning Therapy is not just for PTSD/OSI as the list of benefits for this type of hands-on therapy is extensive. People who have low self-esteem, anxiety and depression, or nervousness can benefit from working one-on-one with horses. Horses are social animals like us, and want to be in a herd (society). When clients work on relationships with horses, they in turn learn how to improve relationships with others. These powerful creatures are highly sensitive, non-verbal communicators that can provide a non-judgmental and safe environment for anyone to be themselves and let go.



Sources:

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www.tranquilacresguesthouse.com

Tranquil Acres Inc., Therapeutic Equestrian Centre

www.eagala.org

www.ahelpinghoof.org A Helping Hoof Equine Therapy

Photos provided by Anne Porteous