



LEARNING FROM HORSES

EQUINE ASSISTED EXPERIENTIAL THERAPY

Molly zones out to the sound of Zen Garden, music for relaxation. The Percheron mare watches as people gather at the end of the arena, making themselves comfortable in a circle of lawn chairs. She has no idea why her size is intimidating to some while providing great comfort to others. She doesn't seem to care. To her, all that matters is life at that moment in time, knowing that she feels safe and secure.

Horses don't see the world the same way we do. While we worry about the future and the past, they live in the moment. Their experience shapes their reactions, but they don't dwell on things. They react, they get over it, they move on.

It's that way of thinking that seems to help people deal with their own issues.

The therapeutic benefits of the horse have been recognized for centuries but it was as recent as the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games, when Liz Hartel of Denmark won the silver medal for dressage, that the modern medical and equine profession became intrigued. Hartel, who rode with some paralysis from polio, sparked an interest in the physical therapeutic benefits of riding, first in Germany and England and eventually North America. In 1969, the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) was formed. Now known as Professional

Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH), the professional organization represents more than 800 member centres worldwide and 6,500 individual members.

It's not just about physical therapy, though. Horses also help to heal the heart and the mind, making the connection with people through programs such as Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) or Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP).

At Sierra Acres in Rockwood, Ontario, Anne Porteous runs workshops and private sessions in both programs. She's a lifelong learner, with special interest in health, coaching, and horses, with the goal of combining her experience and talents with people and horses into a program she calls Unbridled Life Skills Coaching. Anne has a gentle and kind way with people, something that also serves her well as a Registered Nurse and teacher in the nursing degree program at Mohawk College, McMaster University and Conestoga College. Anne completed her diploma in Equine Science from the University of Guelph and is certified through the Leadership Equine Assisted Development (LEAD) Program and the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA).

"This is my office," she says as she looks around the bright, quiet arena. Her customers are typically adults, but occasionally children

and teenagers. Her business partners are seven horses: Molly, Sierra, Cheyanne, Xena, Charlie, Watson and Gunner.

There is a horse for every two guests. Anne simply combines the horses with the people under the same roof and allows them to interact. She doesn't judge; she doesn't tell anyone why he or she is there, what to say, or what he or she needs to do. She facilitates a way for the horses to interact with the people that will resonate, through maybe grooming the horse, defining personal space, or just becoming comfortable with their size and nature.

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy is showing great promise in treating veterans, first responders and their families who suffer from the debilitating effects of acute, cumulative or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to Dr. Laurie Sullivan-Sakeada, 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," says Sakeada, "providing non-verbal feedback." The interaction speeds up the therapy process substantially, as Sakeada estimates one session of EAP in the barn equal to five sessions "on the couch."

It's not just for PTSD though; the list of benefits of experiential therapy is extensive. Some people who have low self-esteem can be nervous around these large animals, as many have never been around a horse before. The horses are free to roam in the arena while guests become comfortable, first learning a few safety rules about being around horses, then allowing themselves to become grounded in the moment while they explore their own story. Simply trying to figure out how to put on a halter can provide lessons in confidence, self-awareness, communication and trust. It's a voyage of self-discovery, facilitated by the horses.

"The grey horse moved," said one guest. Why did that resonate, asked Anne? "People are always leaving me," the guest heard herself saying. But maybe the horse didn't move away because of anything personal, suggested Anne? Maybe it was just a fly? It's a way of figuring out that the actions of others aren't always 'about you'.

It's about making choices, awareness, non-verbal communication and experiential learning, and it's about making a connection. Guests may groom the horses: it doesn't matter which brush you use, only how the horse reacts to the brush that you chose.

"Very few haven't connected," said Anne, who has found that the biggest challenge is to have people relinquish themselves, turning off their cell phone and allowing that connection to



happen. "Horses are about the moment. We've lost that."

Two new horses – Charlie the Haflinger, and Watson, a Gypsy Vanner – have recently joined the herd. Guests have noticed how the horses react socially to a new member, relating to that feeling of being the new kid on the block. A herd is similar to a team. People watch, figuring out how they belong in the human herd, in the family or at work, by watching the interaction of the horses, allowing themselves to become part of the herd in the arena.

"Horses can be great teachers," said Anne, "if we let them in."

More information can be found at www.sierracres.ca

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