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[CHOOSE A \/] [back to therapy today](#)

## Cover feature

### Horses for courses

As equine assisted therapy grows in popularity, it would seem that the old proverb 'there's nothing so good for the inside of a man as the outside of a horse' is true, with regard to their intuitive understanding of humans. Clare Pointon reports

**'RICK AND JOAN** had been having difficulties in their relationship and, despite a number of sessions of traditional therapy, felt they weren't moving forward.

Wanting to try something new, they came for Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP). By the third session, they had been able to define their problems quite specifically and we set up an activity for them to work with what they had learned.

They were instructed to lead a horse together – each holding a rope on either side of the horse – along a path marked out by logs on the ground, through a series of obstacles. They labelled the obstacles according to the problems they had identified: 'communication', 'secrets and lies', 'the other woman'. They then caught and haltered the horse, leading it towards the path. They were not allowed to touch it, to bribe it or to use words. And, if the horse stopped at any point, they were to go back and start again.

The first obstacle Rick and Joan set up represented 'the other woman', whilst they put a 'communication' obstacle at the end of the course and made 'secrets and lies' into a pile of cones on one corner.

What they found was that they had difficulty leading the horse together; one of them tended to lead while the other held the rope loosely. After a while, they also felt that perhaps they had started the course from the wrong end, that it would have made more sense to start from the 'communication' end. Meanwhile, they noticed that each time they tried, they had problems getting past the 'secrets and lies' corner. Joan then became very emotional. The horse moved away from Rick towards her



and Rick acknowledged that he was living his part of the relationship with a number of secrets and lies. While they were talking about this, the horse went and trampled on the 'secrets and lies' cones, picked one part of the pile up and tossed it into the air.

Both Rick and Joan were then able to identify that these secrets and lies were the major block to their communication, particularly around 'the other woman'. We gave them further activities with the horse to explore this.

Looking back, after several sessions, Rick and Joan felt that the most interesting and important aspect of the work was the way in which the horse had confronted them with the real difficulties in their relationship, simply by cutting through the defence mechanisms they usually employed when talking about their problems.'

### **Non-verbal skill**

For practitioner David Tidmarsh,<sup>2</sup> who offers his clients Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) at his centre in Scotland, therapeutic awareness in this way of working does not come from the pontification of the therapist. It comes from the intuition of the horse, taken up and interpreted by the client him/herself.

In this case, he believes, the horse working with Rick and Joan picked up on their non-verbal cues each time they approached the 'secrets and lies' obstacle on their course and, in his own unique way, showed them what they needed to do.

'Horses are animals that are preyed upon,' he says. 'And their non-verbal skills are crucial to their survival. In the wild, they become alert when a predator wanders along a ridge a few miles away. Sometimes they will watch; at other times they will charge off in the opposite direction. They know at some level whether that predator has a full or an empty belly. In the work that we do, a horse will respond to you differently if you look at his head than if you look at his back eg. He will pick up on what's really going on for you at a sentient level, even without overt signs.'

### **Roots and shoots**

David is one of around 100 EAP professionals in the UK and northern Europe – some counsellors, some from a horse practitioner background. The figure is only a fraction of the 3–4,000 in the US where he himself was trained. But it's a burgeoning field. Its roots lie in 18th-century Germany, where horseback riding was first recommended to reduce attacks of hypochondria and hysteria. A century and a half later, Austrian-

born Martin Buber is said to have conceived his ideas about the dialogic 'I-Thou' experience in the context of his relationship with a horse.<sup>1</sup>

However, whilst riding has in Europe and the US been recognised since the 1950s as a therapy of benefit to people with physical disabilities, the psychotherapeutic dimension of activities with horses has only begun to be fully explored and articulated in the past couple of decades. So what is Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and how does it work?

According to the training body in the field, the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA<sup>2</sup>), this form of therapy is designed to be short-term, intensive and experiential. Sessions – usually lasting an hour to an hour-and-a-half – are facilitated by a team comprising counsellor and horse practitioner – the first focused on the needs and actions of the client, the second on those of the horse. It's not about riding skills – or even necessarily about riding. In fact, almost all activities – including catching and grooming – take place on the ground with limited equipment.

Sessions with horses may be unstructured or may focus on specific goals related to the issues which the client brings. There will usually be time for reflection on the process. The work is designed to boost skills like non-verbal communication, assertiveness, creative thinking, problem solving, leadership and teamwork. EAGALA argues that it can be employed particularly powerfully with behavioural issues, substance abuse, eating disorders, depression and relationship problems.

## **Why a horse?**

But what is it about horses that makes them suitable for this kind of work? Practitioners across the field argue that the horse offers something which is uniquely healing to the human condition. The essence of this has been described in many ways – power, honesty, the capacity to pick up and mirror back unspoken feeling.

US-based EAP practitioners Adele and Deborah McCormick put it like this: 'The horse's peculiar constellation of characteristics introduces health into a relationship. It is a well-balanced animal. Among domesticated animals, horses have retained a strong component of their original wild nature. Because they're not so easy to please as domesticated dogs, they're less labile and more strong-willed. They're also fiercely independent. Their imposing size, tremendous strength and keen intuition require that one approach them with respect and vigilance and great deal of sensitivity. One must also become highly attuned to them physically, and it's important to stay conscious and very

much in the moment.'<sup>3</sup>

In Jungian thinking, of course, horses have mythical significance; the wild horse represents the uncontrollable instinctual urge of the unconscious, whilst the horse also stands for the magical side of a person, the intuitive mother within.

And for some, this work has a spiritual dimension in which the human-horse relationship offers the potential for a particular kind of transformation. Master horseman Dominique Barbier is quoted in McCormick and McCormick<sup>3</sup> as saying that there is a way of calming one's intellect and letting one's 'animal mind' come up in order to be 'one with the horse'.

## **The theory**

However, the ways in which this work is conceptualised vary according to the particular theoretical orientation of the therapist. Whilst in a psychodynamic approach, engaging with the horse may be seen as a bridge to less easily accessible parts of a client's unconscious, EAGALA relates EAP to Gestalt therapy where the focus is on the here-and-now, where body language is the prime mode of communication, where the approach is holistic and where the focus is not to explain things to the client, but to give them the opportunity to experiment with, discover and understand themselves for themselves.

For his part, David Tidmarsh also sees aspects of person-centred thinking in his work with clients and horses, particularly the opportunity to explore the relationship between the self which we know and the self which we sense, but of which we are not completely aware. For him, the client's relationship with the horse is central; it may be within this, he argues, that the person has for the first time in his/her life the opportunity to be met and mirrored with total congruence, to reflect on this experience and through it to move towards greater self-acceptance.

'What I'm struck by is that we have all sorts of different approaches and theoretical understanding in this work,' he says. 'But the thing that is common to what is described as good therapy is the relational aspect – that through the relationship with the horse the client develops insight and understanding of themselves, awareness of their difficulties and is challenged to change.'

And, it seems that working in this way to connect to the part of ourselves that is less verbal, more intuitive and at one with nature does bring about change. According to a recent research project, 82 per cent of the youth taking part in Equine Assisted Family Therapy, showed significant clinical improvement after five sessions (Mann and Williams<sup>4</sup>). Greatest improvements

were in the areas of conduct disorders, mood disorders and psychiatric disorders where clients showed more progress in a shorter time and at less cost than with other approaches.

The experiential nature of EAP is also in line with recent research into neuroscience. John Ratey,<sup>5</sup> associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, argues that when working with troubled children and adolescents traditional therapeutic approaches can yield poor results. He says that drug therapy is usually unrewarding because young bodies are sensitive to the chemicals, and that when involved in talking therapy youngsters often find it hard to cognitively articulate their emotions. He argues for a shift from linear thinking to greater reliance on symbolism and metaphor, suggesting that physical movement – as in experiential therapies – may enhance a client's capacity for movement of thought.

### **Cautions and challenges**

But while – for those who love horses, at least – the idea of practising EAP may sound like a dream, this work brings robust professional challenges. As in other work, David Tidmarsh points out that a therapist or horse specialist will at times need to be mindful of and unravel in supervision what happens in the transference/counter-transference. And, in this work, this is as relevant in the practitioner's relationship with the horse as in the relationship with the client. Perhaps he or she brought personal expectations of the animal's behaviour into the session, wanting, hoping, even encouraging the horse to be 'nice' to the client, rather than staying with the horse's own real response which may have offered a far more helpful experience to the client.

What is most important in this process, he argues, is that the therapist is able to let go of his/her own importance in the therapeutic frame, giving up the usual medium of words and handing over to the horse to do its work. This may be extremely challenging, he points out, for someone who is familiar with the power dynamics of counselling or psychotherapy inside a closed room.

And, when the therapist does hand over to the horse, the speed and congruence with which the horse feeds back to the client may also be a challenge for the therapist to match. For, having had immediate and honest feedback from the horse, the client is likely to expect the same from the practitioner.

Meanwhile, on top of the psychodynamic processes, there is the challenge of making sure that neither the client nor the horse gets hurt. Tidmarsh sees this as an area where practitioners need to examine themselves to find the balance between 'reasonable safety precautions' and ones that are more

emotionally based. Often, he argues, safety is equated with power – perhaps tying the horse up with the aim of making sure it is under control. In reality, however, he says this may not be the safest procedure – for the horse or the client – in an event where the horse becomes agitated and tries to pull itself free.

For counsellors or therapists considering working in this way, it seems that the willingness to question oneself is crucial. In David Tidmarsh's view, EAP is not the exclusive province of experienced equestrians or horse people. It is a field in which practitioners who are committed to working on themselves can find a new or extra dimension to their work. He believes that the capacity to work effectively in EAP is largely about attitude – being willing to be open and to question and challenge one's practice – particularly with regard to one's level of congruence with clients.

### **Horse as metaphor**

So, notwithstanding its results to date, what may be some of the reasons for the emergence of EAP in the European therapy field at this time? Is it that we as professionals and consumers are now psychologically ready for it? In a society where the pull of nature is growing – be it to live rurally, to grow or eat organically, to recycle our waste, watch the stars or swim with dolphins – it would seem that equine assisted psychotherapy is going with the flow. For David Tidmarsh it reflects the current shift in the western world towards a different way of relating to the world – less defined by social mores and expectations and more by our quest to reconnect in different ways with the natural world.

It could perhaps even be said that EAP lies within the range of adventure therapy/ecopsychotherapy. It certainly has the feel of a return to something that we've lost along the way, as David Tidmarsh suggests when he writes: 'In a highly technology-dependent culture, that increasingly undermines the original ecological bond that connects us all to nature, these magnificent animals can help us to help ourselves in many creative ways to reconnect with our original resourcefulness that springs from that original bond.' For Adele and Marlena McCormick,<sup>3</sup> the healing lies in the fact that horses can provide something beyond the physical (often routine, tiring and painful) reality of our lives. They help us create a metaphor which can enable us to make the leaps of faith we need in order to cope in life: 'The horse metaphor serves as a focal point to keep us centered and on track,' they write. 'By entering the world of nature, we learn to judge for ourselves when we are straying too far. It offers us a yardstick to measure when our values are unnatural or too intellectual.'

And more than everything else, this metaphor helps us to move

beyond the specific interests that exist within our own skins, our own families, our own tribe, towards a sense of something large, more universal and ultimately more healthy: 'Simply focusing our attention on ourselves and our problems to the exclusion of everything else,' they say, 'reinforces our modern plague, narcissism.' ■

## References

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**[Back to archive home](#)   [Back to issue index](#)   [Back to top](#)**

**[CHOOSE A MONTH: \/]   [Home BACP home](#)**