

Letters

The healing power of horses

Thank you for another excellent issue of *Private Practice*, especially the features 'Mental health: time for a rethink' (I have long thought along the lines Jonathan Sunley describes) and 'Sex addiction: the search for a secure base'.

I would like to comment on the third feature, 'The healing power of horses', by Christine Fairweather. Although I found it interesting and informative, there are three aspects that need challenging, in my view. First, the article conveys more than a flavour of trying to claim academic credentials, which not everyone will find convincing. While I certainly do not dismiss EAP and have always been interested in the connections between nature and the human mind, EAP is not considered evidence based and Christine herself twice alludes to the variability in qualifications, some purveyors not being qualified in therapy. I am aware of some colleagues resigning their membership because the 'broad church' membership criteria allow those working in such areas to join, diluting what some practitioners feel is authentic therapy.

Second, the author seems to suggest that setting up an EAP governing body would 'pre-empt' getting caught up in potential government regulation of counselling and therapy, when that surely would not be the case. I doubt whether the existence of a specific organisation would place it somehow above the reach of a statutory regulatory body.

Third, the author twice sets up psychoanalytic and relational working as opposites, when they are not mutually exclusive. Perhaps some traditional analysts still work in a top-down way, but many of us whose training is psychodynamic will definitely be working relationally, just with the added invaluable dimension of psychoanalytic theory, which we use to help understand the client's internal world.

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Response

First, thank you for your kind words about finding my article interesting and informative. With regards to your first point, I agree that equine-assisted practice (EAP) has not had NICE approval as an evidence-based practice. However, approved modalities are being undertaken by some EAP practitioners, so evidence-based work in EAP does already exist. Further, an ever-increasing body of evidence that shows positive outcomes supports EAP. No modality arrives with

an evidence-based label on it; it requires research and analysis, and for the results to be interrogated and reliably reproduced. My contribution forms part of this interrogation. There remains a wider debate about the value of a therapy being evidence based, and whether it is the only, or even a worthy, benchmark for therapeutic intervention.

With regards to the 'broad church' of BACP, I did not advocate that all EAP practitioners be granted entry into BACP. Since much of EAP relates not to therapy but to learning and corporate training, it would not aspire to a pew. However, there are training providers, such as LEAP, that have brought their training in line with BACP standards and offer outstanding, high-level, externally accredited qualifications and CPD for qualified practitioners, which is of immense value in adding to an integrative model. Like you, I value exploration of the connections between nature and the human mind, and I would like to see EAP more widely regarded as a valuable element of an integrated model.

Your second point touches on the rather charged question of mental health provision being allowed to self-regulate through professional bodies. The provision of equine-assisted work is slightly different as it also sits among other legislative constraints relating to animals, and among other bodies that are not therapy based. For the sake of our clients, I would prefer to see the vacuum that has been created at the top of the provision of EAP filled by a membership organisation focusing on ethical practice, rather than by either a single training provider, or some combination of other professional bodies.

On your third point, I have absolutely no argument with the assertion that psychoanalytic and relational theories are not mutually exclusive. Within one-to-one therapy, it's difficult for me to see how a therapist could work with a complete absence of relationship. EAP differs, as it's possible either to foster a relationship with the horse, or to present the horse as a tool. In the article, I set a transpersonal 'I-Thou' relationship with the horse at one end of a spectrum, and at the other end of the spectrum, I put practice in which the horse acts purely as a metaphor and ceases to be appreciated as a horse. It was not set against psychoanalytic theory.

Thank you again for reading the article and taking the time to respond.

Christine Fairweather MBACP, accredited member of the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) and the European Association of Horse Assisted Learning (EAHAL)

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