



A vital connection

The development of equine-assisted psychotherapy can be traced from its roots tackling gang culture in America to being established in Britain as treatment for a range of mental health issues. *Flora Neville* investigates

Equine-assisted psychotherapy was conceived in the USA in the 1970s – there are now more than 90 practitioners in England and Wales

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Pictures by Peter Nixon

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FLICKER, a muddy palomino part-Shetland, trots across the field, shaking her knotted mane. She stops, nuzzles my pockets, and rubs her nose against my back. Tina and Cumbria, two retired high-goal polo ponies, stand against the green hill and blue sky, watching.

"Which horse would you like to work with?" asks equine psychologist Jo-Anne Karlsson.

Tina reminds me of Bonnie, my own black pony with a dark brown muzzle whom I would ride bareback as the summer sun rose over the mornings of my adolescence. Riding across stubble fields and through dark woods, I told her my secrets.

"Tina is highly sensitive," says Jo-Anne later.

I lead Tina into the manège, Flicker and Cumbria follow. Jo-Anne instructs me to imagine four different areas of my life within the manège, and I am to walk through these areas with Tina at my side. Cumbria and Flicker play the role of interruptions or obstacles. I brand Cumbria "self-doubt" and Flicker "perseverance". Flicker leads me through each stage. Winding through the traffic cones of my job; behind the bollards of marriage, through the flimsy family poles; and over the cavaletti of a particular writing commission. Cumbria hangs back, tailing me, always stopping with me.

"Now imagine what this exercise is like for a young person who has addictions, probably related to sexual abuse," says Jo-Anne at the end.

Tina is constant, peaceful, strong. And later when I stand with her and observe her quietly watching the world with her big, brown eyes and her head held high, I too feel strong.

EQUINE-ASSISTED psychotherapy was conceived and developed in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. At around this time, troubled teens who were getting into gangs, drugs and guns were sent to desert boot camps, run by cowboys. The work was hard and tough and involved a lot of time with horses. The cowboys noticed that without any kind of specific therapeutic interventions, the teens started to change their behaviour. They were less aggressive, better able to communicate and to form positive relationships with the horses and each other.

At around the same time, American eventer Barbara Rector had a horrific accident while jumping at a show. She was crushed by the horse and pronounced dead for several minutes before she was revived. She did not "get back on the horse" literally, but through her recovery she learnt to work with horses in a different way — a rehabilitative, tactile, experiential way, which she developed into a therapy. Barbara co-founded the Sierra Tucson clinic in Arizona in 1981, working with

'The desire for connection is where humans and horses overlap': Flicker is one of the ponies at Jo-Anne Karlsson's Berkshire practice



adolescents on self-esteem issues through horses, and continues to work with groups and individuals in Arizona.

The treatment has spread around the world and there are now around 90 practitioners in England and Wales working under the moniker LEAP, a leading equine-assisted therapy programme.

Jo-Anne is a senior practitioner of LEAP and runs her own practice, BEAT-UK, from her centre in Berkshire, where she keeps her herd of retired polo and rescue horses, as well as her five dogs and several children. One bouncy, blonde Labrador clambers all over me as I lie, or sit, on the proverbial couch of the therapy room and talk to Jo-Anne.

'It's not about mindfulness or meditation — it's a full-body X-ray in the moment with immediate feedback from the horse'

JO-ANNE KARLSSON

LEAP provides a gentle model of equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) and equine-assisted learning (EAL), with the horse at the centre.

None of Jo-Anne's herd is shod, and their coats, manes and tails are long and shaggy. She does not rug them unless the temperature really drops. They live as close as possible to how a herd would live in the wild.

LEAP practitioners believe that horses and humans share significant similarities.

"The desire for connection is where humans and horses overlap," says Jo-Anne. "But while horses live in the moment, humans are always wondering what's next."

EAP and EAL both encourage the human to ground themselves in the present and to be aware of their environment and how they are behaving and responding in real time.

"It's not about mindfulness or meditation," she says. "It's a full-body X-ray in the moment with immediate feedback from the horse."

Mike Delaney is another senior practitioner at LEAP who helped devise the programme. He has 35 years of experience and is a former addict.

"We don't see the horse as a tool, we see the horse as a therapist," he tells me. "The horses get an equal footing."

IN equine therapy, the horse chooses the client. Though Mike and Jo-Anne are keen to avoid reading too much into



The obstacles in the arena reflect different areas of life that clients might be facing difficulties with; the horses help them overcome these



anything, both talk about the times when a horse has chosen a client out of some mutual identification. Mike had a horse on his books who had been struck by lightning. It wasn't visible, but it had hit her head. She often came through the herd to choose clients who were recovering from strokes.

"She was once a show pony," says Mike. "She came to us so depressed because she no longer got any attention. Through this work she got her confidence back."

As the horse regained her confidence through the clients, so the clients regained their confidence through the horse.

Jo-Anne has a horse, Chispita, whom she thinks of as a co-facilitator because she will encourage a particular horse towards a particular client. Chispita will often encourage CJ, a member of the herd who is blind in one eye, small and sometimes bullied, to work with clients who have also been abused by their peers.

"He doesn't bully back," says Jo-Anne, "but he reflects behaviour. And if the client tries to appease him, as victims of bullying often do, he won't let them."

Unlike conventional therapy, says Mike, equine therapy is experiential and bottom-up. Your interaction with the horse makes you feel a certain way or realise something about yourself, your behaviour, your environment. It's not about thinking or analysing the why and the how, rather it's about seeing and experiencing the why and how.

MIKE and Jo-Anne work with individuals who may be young primary care-givers, children coming out of care, child sex-offenders, addicts of all kinds, and veterans suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as those with all kinds of physical and emotional trauma.

The problems usually manifest in certain behaviour patterns around the horse, says Jo-Anne. Trying to please the horse is a sign of sexual abuse, while addicts will always try to rescue the situation or to control the horse. Mike, too, has found this to be true. Addicts especially will choose the small horses, like Flicker, thinking they can control them. It makes me laugh to think of that strong, stocky, cocky animal playing to anyone else's tune.

"Addicts often smuggle things in," says Mike. "Apples or carrots because they want the horse to love them. It causes havoc — pulling and nipping and kicking. They think that if you give a horse a treat he will love you. But a horse isn't like that, he wants more. Just like an addict."

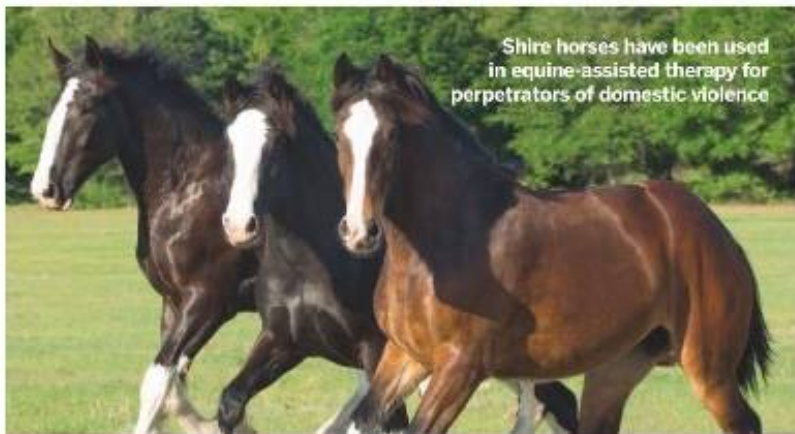
'We must cry. It's a wonderful release of many emotions'

AMONG the clients of Mike Delaney, a leading equine-assisted therapy programme (LEAP) senior practitioner, are perpetrators of domestic violence. With an audience of probation officers and the police, Mike put a group of four violent men in a manège with Harry, the biggest shire horse in Europe, and Harry's brother. Both horses went wild and the men ended up against the fence confronted with the full force of 20hh of hair, muscle and muzzle. They were petrified.

"How did it feel to be that frightened?" asked Mike after.

The men were vulnerable. It made them cry.

"We absolutely must cry," says Mike. "It's a wonderful release of many emotions. Of anger, so much anger."



Shire horses have been used in equine-assisted therapy for perpetrators of domestic violence



Equine-assisted therapy is experiential rather than analytical, giving instant feedback

The treatment works by metaphor and by experience, and there is also neuroscientific evidence to support the efficacy of the method. In her book, *The Listening Heart*, Leigh Shambo, a qualified therapist and horse trainer based in California, writes that the desire for connection and herd mentality that humans and horses share is a biological predisposition that comes from the brain's limbic system. This is the part of the brain that deals with feelings, sociability and behaviour. It is a powerful thing to harness that "limbic resonance", and can lead to healing that more conventional or office-based therapy could not uncover in the same way.

"There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man," said Winston Churchill.

A horse is a different beast. An animal apart from his owner that can teach, tune and touch the deepest reaches of the human heart. **H&H**



Jo-Anne's herd of therapy horses live as close as possible to a wild herd. They are barefoot, unclipped and unrugged, unless it's really freezing