

mentalhealth

February 2008

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'At a stroke she had punished not only me but the whole of that vulnerable little community'



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SUBSCRIPTIONS Customer Services 0870 890 1080

SUBSCRIPTION RATES Inland UK: individuals £32.00/corporate £95.00. Europe: individuals £50.00/ corporate £105.00. Rest of the world: individuals £67.50/corporate £115.00.

Cheques payable to Pavilion Publishing (Brighton) Ltd. Subscriptions from: Customer Services, Pavilion, Richmond House, Richmond Road, Brighton, BN2 3RL

DESIGN Phipps Design. www.phippsdesign.co.uk PRINT Newnorth, Bedford

© Pavilion Publishing (Brighton) Ltd. ISSN 1474-5186

Pet therapies that use dogs or cats to calm people with high blood pressure, or simply to cheer up and stimulate elderly people in residential care, are now widely accepted as a valid form of health treatment. But what about horse therapy? An increasing body of evidence is showing that people with mental health problems – especially those who struggle with more orthodox talking treatments – can be helped by non-verbal interaction with horses.

Equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP) is an emerging specialism offered by a small but growing number of specialist practitioners. It involves a trained and licensed EAP therapist and a horse professional working together with the patient and horse to help the patient tackle issues such as lack of confidence, poor body image, addictive behaviours, and poor communication skills. The belief is that people can learn about themselves by carrying out set tasks and role-plays with the horses and then processing and discussing with the therapist their feelings and behaviours, and any repeated patterns. The role of the therapist is to act as a guide; the horses are the teachers.

EAP is used to treat a number of mental health problems, including depression, eating disorders,

substance abuse, anxiety, communication needs, and abuse issues, and EAP providers are increasingly keen to encourage the NHS to recognise the benefits for patients on their paths to recovery.

Ruth McMahon took early retirement from her job as senior occupational therapist with the Norfolk and Waveney Mental Health Care Partnership, an NHS foundation trust, and in 2006, with riding instructor Nicky Welton, developed her Equine Assisted Therapy programme at Croft Farm Riding Centre in Filby, near Great Yarmouth. Their clients include referrals from mental health trusts, charities, local private mental health organisations and organisations like Independent Living Norfolk, which channels government funding to individuals for activities that they feel will be of therapeutic value to them.

McMahon first worked with patients and horses back in 1990. 'To begin with, people with mental health problems were encouraged to attend a local riding school to try "therapy on horseback". The focus at the time was on understanding horse welfare, learning to ride and confidence building,' says McMahon. 'Patients consistently reported a sense of "feeling better" after the sessions, so we decided to explore more work on understanding and communicating with horses, and developing the human-horse bond without riding.' (Traditionally the focus of EAP is not on riding skills; for 90% of the time the client is not mounted.)

These days a typical session with clients involves setting up activities and creating cause-and-effect situations with the horses that will require participants to find coping strategies. The trust, self-confidence, self-esteem and problem-solving skills that this develops are all transferable to other aspects of day-to-day life. 'For example,' explains McMahon, 'some people need to develop a sense of caring, so the process of feeding, watering and grooming the horse can be very therapeutic for them, as these things can be transferred and help them to think about how they need to care for themselves to stay healthy and well.'

photo: John Powell

Working with horses 'raises genuine emotions that you are unlikely to get in normal therapeutic settings,' says Wendy Powell

Tina Bexson discovers the benefits of equine assisted psychotherapy

Talking horses



The task of leading a horse can throw light on a client's social skills and sense of self. 'Do they just pull the rope or do they try and engage the horse in eye contact and try to get it to willingly walk with them? This can be quite difficult for some of our patients, because they don't feel they have the right to ask the horse to do this or they don't think the horse will come with them, so often the first step is for the patients to believe the horse will follow them by changing their pattern of thinking. Then their contact with the horse can be a motivating factor to get them to address their problems, which may be those involving communication with other people,' McMahon says.

Horses have a unique ability to mirror what human body language is telling them, which makes them more suitable than other domestic animals for this kind of work. 'They like clear, open communication, and can see through to falseness, and so work well with patients who they sense are congruent within themselves,' she says. An angry, frustrated patient will not find the horse co-operative. 'The horse mirrors back to the client how they themselves are behaving, and so their interaction can also act as a metaphor for the difficulties the client may have with people.'

The very size of the horse is also significant for some patients, she believes. 'The therapy provides an opportunity for them to overcome any fear and develop confidence. And accomplishing a task despite these fears provides useful metaphors when dealing with challenging situations in life.'

Most of McMahon's clients have enduring mental health issues and, after an initial six weekly sessions, come back again and again for a further six sessions each time. 'We tend not to use it as a short-term treatment, although used on a short-term basis, because of its intensity, it can be very powerful in helping people to start the process of recovery by having their various issues highlighted so they can go on to explore them deeper.'

A number of eating disorder and addiction treatment centres use EAP. They include the Priors' North London Clinic and STEPPS, a residential rehabilitation clinic in Gloucester whose subsidiary, LEAP, has a sole focus on EAP. These EAP programmes are based on the belief that people who are susceptible to addictions often have a history of unresolved trauma. This creates an intolerable level of anxiety, which in turn leads to self-medication with alcohol, drugs, food, sex, or other behaviours. These clients are also often distanced from themselves and EAP helps them to re-engage with their self.

Wendy Powell worked at LEAP and now runs her own private EAP practice in Surrey, offering outpatient and day programmes as well as training BACP recognised therapists. 'It has been very difficult to get the NHS to recognise EAP as an incredibly useful and valid form of therapy with all types of mental health problems but particularly with addictions and eating disorders,' she says.

Powell argues that EAP is very effective for people with eating disorders because having to engage non-verbally with a horse 'tends to bring real emotion to the fore much faster'.

'We have found that the use of a horse allows these clients to express themselves and to feel comfortable and safe enough to physically embrace such a powerful

animal. This may be one of the rare occasions that they get to experience non-threatening touch with a sentient being, and this raises genuine feelings and emotions that you are unlikely to get in the normal therapeutic settings.'

She says clients with eating disorders can be very particular about which horse they work with. 'One client I had was a man weighing 26 stone who did not want to work with a small but very rotund pony because he said the horse was fat and therefore lazy. He would not even approach the pony and said that just being around this pony made him feel uncomfortable. We were able to get him, over a period of several sessions, to recognise that he was projecting onto the horse how he felt about himself. He did a lot of work around stereotypes and what they meant to him.'

Powell has also found that anorexic patients often only want to work with horses that look perfect and have no scars or obvious physical defects. 'When challenged with having to work with a horse that may have what these patients perceive as a defect, the initial instinct appears to be to avoid that horse, even if it is desperate for attention. This opens paths to physical appearance issues and body image perceptions and allows the therapists and clients a very real opportunity to challenge these beliefs and perceptions and to use these observations as a mirror of how they see themselves.'

There is already a substantial body of evidence for the benefits of physical activity for mental health, and qualitative research specifically on EAP is producing promising results. But quantitative research findings are less promising. Says Helen Spence, teaching fellow in animal behaviour at the School of Psychology, Queens University Belfast, and an equine behaviour and training consultant: 'Many of the quantitative studies have so far failed to find a significant improvement in scores for self-esteem scales, depression, frustration tolerance, strength and difficulties. However, a study last year of equine assisted psychotherapy for children who have experienced family violence did find a significant improvement in scores on the Children's Global Assessment of Functioning Scale, and that there was a statistically significant correlation between the improvement in the scores and the number of EAP sessions.' Enthusiasts for EAP should not be discouraged by this lack of quantitative findings: 'It is widely accepted that animals are beneficial to human physical and mental health. The qualitative research is, on the whole, very positive about the benefits of the use of horses in a therapeutic setting. More quantitative evidence will start to emerge as ways of measuring the benefits and controlling for other contributory factors are refined.' ■

EAGALA (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association) is a non-profit international organisation set up to promote equine assisted psychotherapy. Most equine assisted psychotherapy sessions are run according to the EAGALA model and they publish a directory of providers in various countries www.eagala.org.uk

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