

## New Age or Old Sage? A review of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy

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## Abstract

Equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP) is fast gaining recognition internationally as an effective treatment strategy for a number of different client groups. Its capacity to deliver positive outcomes for adolescents and mental health clients has brought the practice to Australasia. This paper provides a review of the literature on EAP and considers the development, status and future among contemporary counselling approaches. After examining the history of the horse-human relationship and the possible value of the horse as a therapeutic assistant, we discuss the background and development of EAP through to its emerging professional status. The process of an EAP session is briefly described and is illustrated with client responses to EAP. We conclude by discussing the outlook for EAP in Australia and New Zealand, with some suggestions for future potential and development.

For centuries humankind has been in relationship with the horse and not only as beast of burden, mode of transportation or workmate. Jung suggested that horses embody one of humanity's deepest mythological archetypes. With flaring nostrils, long flowing mane and tail, flying hooves drumming across the ground, horses represent strength and nobility, heroes and warriors, intense feelings and unbridled passions. With soft nuzzling muzzle, velvet smooth coat and a tender eye, containment and liberation paradoxically present simultaneously (Cole, 1992; Henderson 1964; McCormick & McCormick, 1997; Taylor, 2001). Humanity is irresistibly drawn to this enigmatic creature of magnetic beauty and tremendous power.

Referred to in the ancient myths of Celts, Greeks, Indo-Europeans, Iberians, Berbers, and Asians, as companions to the Gods and messengers between ourselves and the divine, horses embody a healing metaphor that is reflected in a rich mythology (McCormick & McCormick, 1997). As a symbolic icon the horse is embedded in our psyche. Exemplified in such literary classics as *Black Beauty*, *The Red Pony*, *The Black Stallion*, *My Friend Flicka* the horse figures prominently in our culturally cherished stories. Remember, *Mr Ed*, the wise seer and humorous companion? *Fury*, the 'black' untameable spirit won over through kindness and consistency? *Silver*, the representation of all that is good as the Lone Ranger's trusty 'white' steed? *The Pie*, in National Velvet, the focus of a young girl's convictions and aspirations triumphing despite adversity? *Phar Lap*, the proverbial Ugly Duckling story personifying faith and persistence? *Seabiscuit*, the misunderstood and maligned subordinate as a champion in disguise? *Shadowfax*, the glorious silver/white horse that in concert with Gandalf the White Rider in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, overcomes all that is evil?

## Humans and Horses

The horse evokes some form of emotion in all of us. In Western cultures the almost tangible yearning of prepubescent girls for a horse or pony companion is undeniable. The thundering of hooves as galloping horses race for a finish line can bring whole nations to a standstill. The gentle enquiring tickle of a nostril can produce the hint of a smile in the most disabled child. Jones (1983) suggests that the horse is a symbol of “human spirit and freedom” (p.91).

Kohanov (2001) argued that the natural nomadic spirit of the horse instigated a merging of species - human and horse - “into a single herd of mutual influence and cooperation” (p.54). People who have some familiarity with horses, and who have had opportunities to engage with horses will sometimes talk of the beneficial effects of positive interactions, of the power of horses to influence people, of the simple pleasures of being around horses, and of the bonding that can occur between horse and human.

## Horses and Therapy

Although many clients have powerful responses to the energies of the horse, for example, “the magical white pony”; “the fiery chestnut”; “the mystical Arabian”, there are certain characteristics of the horse that appear to be important in the success of EAP. These are the horse’s distinctive combination of fearfulness and power allied with their natural ability to mirror our behaviours. Horse-human encounters provide opportunities for learning about relationship. It is through mutual trust and respect that a horse and a human engage in a productive relationship. The ascription of stubborn or defiant horse behaviour can often be understood as a lack of engagement and thoughtfulness on the part of the human participant (Kersten and Thomas, 2003).

Horses are not judgemental; they don't have expectations or prejudices. They don't care what you look like; are not influenced by your station in life; are blissfully unaware of whether you have friends or not. High qualifications do not impact upon the response of the horse to your presence (O'Connor, n.d.; Vidrine, Owen Smith & Faulkner, 2002). The horse responds to the immediacy of your intent and your behaviour, and does so without assumption or criticism. Engagement on such a level can be extraordinarily powerful for many people. For example, McCormick and McCormick (1997) have found that the hostile and defiant street smarts of adolescent gang youth erode quickly in the presence of an assumed adversary (the horse) that the youth is unequipped to control or overthrow. Such adolescents are invariably shocked as they begin to understand that openness and vulnerability are more likely to elicit positive behaviour from the horse than displays of defiance and aggression.

Horses are generally much bigger and stronger than people. Their size demands respect, and can be intimidating for some people. Safety around these large animals requires some level of attentiveness. In other words, clients become immediately more watchful around horses, even if feigning indifference. This size differential creates a social opportunity to overcome fear. Confidence and self-esteem are greatly increased through the accomplishment of a competently handled horse-oriented task (Kersten and Thomas, 2003; Kohanov, 2001; Levinson, 2004; McCormick & McCormick, 1997; O'Connor, n.d.).

As a target for hunters the horse has a well documented biological programming that includes instinctual hyper-vigilance and the tendency to flee from fear. In contrast to other animals used in animal-assisted therapy (cats and dogs) horses are not predators. Horses are vegetarians; they are not interested in eating people (Vidrine et. al., 2002). "The horse's ability to intuit fear in a distant herd

member and act on this feeling without hesitation is a life saving skill; their innate aptitude for resonating with another being's trust, joy or confidence is a life enhancing skill" (Kohanov, 2001, p.105). This is a species-wide talent easily transferred to interactions with people and over the past 5,000 years or so, horses' interaction with humanity has produced even more sophistication in their non-verbal communication (Kohanov, 2001; McCormick and McCormick, 1997).

As Kohanov (2001, p.106) notes: "Even the most secure horse knows that any two-legged creature conveying the gestures of one emotion in order to hide another is either up to no good or delusional enough to be a danger to self and others". In interaction with people, horses offer immediate, non-verbal feedback. Horses "mirror" emotion, feeling and non-verbal communication back to a client (Vidrine et al, 2002). When experiencing this characteristic the client is encouraged to use interpretation and insight, so that they can start developing new ways of being around the horse. The immediacy of non-judgemental feedback from a large live body is coupled with a developing relationship with the equine partner.

As messages from the human become clearer, the horse begins to comply with their intent. Previously difficult tasks and exercises are more easily accomplished and it seems that people soon begin to generalise their new ways of being to their human relationships.

### **History and Development of EAP**

EAP identifies itself as a psychotherapeutic program or session that includes the use of a horse as part of the therapeutic team. As a human-animal interaction, the practice falls broadly into the category of animal-assisted therapies. Fine (2000) describes a number of empirical studies that positively assess the impact of animal companionship on human quality of life. Burch (1995) cites centuries of beneficial

reports relating to the use of animals in therapy settings, and discusses the growth of animal-assisted therapy in the 1970s and 1980s. Much of the literature supporting the burgeoning increase in animal-assisted therapeutic programs is based on case studies, survey responses, or theoretical literature, and is often in languages other than English (Vidrine, et al, 2002), although recent work has appeared on the topic in the US (Greenwald 2001; Hayden, 2005; Iannone, 2003; Root, 2000; Taylor, 2001; Tramutt, 2003).

The seeds of EAP were sown more than two centuries ago. German physicians advised horseback riding to reduce attacks of hypochondria and hysteria related to mental illness (Riede, 1988). Europeans promoted and standardised therapeutic riding which was cultivated for the reduction of physical ailments, promotion of psychological wellness, and the rehabilitation of people with decreased motor control (Spink, 1993, Tyler, 1994). These forerunners of EAP focused upon the benefits of either riding or vaulting and served some remedial function.

Today, these remedial uses of horse riding, in the form of horsepersonship programs, (sometimes known as Hippotherapy) are generally delivered to patients with special needs, as physical, occupational or speech therapy. Riding for the Disabled teaches various equestrian skills under the premise that these skills are transferable into aspects of daily living (NZRDA, 2004). Participants have shown clinical improvement in physical, psychomotor, and psychological parameters, as well as improvements in communication, social skills, self-esteem and self-discipline (FRDI, 2004). Therapeutic vaulting programs have been utilised for children with socialisation and behavioural issues (Heipertz, 1977). Therapeutic vaulting is based on children performing gymnastics atop a horse moving through various paces whilst on a *longe* line, and supervised by a therapist. With the *longeur* controlling the

horse's direction from the centre of the ring, the vaulter is freed to focus on the body-to-body experience of shared energy, impulsion, rhythm and balance (Vidrine et. al., 2002). Programs borrow from professional vaulting disciplines, but emphasise the developmental sequence of compulsory moves, teamwork, communication and self-expression. Therapeutic vaulting is a very structured experience centred on spatial relations, organisational skills and body awareness. Vaulting exercises are tailored to the needs of the individual client which helps guarantee success at some level (Vidrine et al., 2002).

Recently EAP has been directed at different groups, such as violent offenders, youth who are at risk, or people seeking personal growth experiences. In-patient psychiatric and substance abuse programs that have integrated an equine experience have been successful in teaching clients effective use of both verbal and non-verbal communication (Rector, 1992). The horse has been fruitfully utilised in behavioural and motivational psychotherapeutic programs for children and adolescents (Tedeschi, 1991). Mann (2001) reports that the recidivism rates of male juvenile offenders improved after the introduction of horses into treatment sessions. Mann and Williams (2002) found clinically significant improvement in 82% of youth taking part in Equine-Assisted Family Therapy. An average of five sessions produced improvement in areas of conduct, mood and psychotic disorders, after years of conventional methods of therapy had failed to have an impact on these clients. Reduced recidivism rates have been reported by the Geauga County Juvenile Court in Ohio after the incorporation of equine-assisted therapy in programs for juvenile offenders (Myers, 2002). Levinson (2004) described the positive impact of equine assisted work on children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder and reported children focused for long periods of time when either grooming or leading the horses. The children's self



esteem also increased once they understood how to ask for and receive cooperation from the horse. Myers (2004) used horses to teach problem-solving skills to adolescent recovery groups. With the aim of strengthening sobriety, adolescents learnt to think creatively, take risks, break tasks down into manageable steps and to work as a team. Myers claims that when adolescents are teaching a 500kg animal to kick a ball, the immediate responsiveness of the horse accelerates learning and concretises skills more effectively than traditional group therapy programs.

### Professional Development in EAP

In 1996, the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) formalised a specialised section of its organisation as the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA). NARHA, a professional body founded in 1969, attends to safety standards, instructor training and certification, and the accreditation of therapeutic riding operations. Initially, therapeutic riding instructors worked primarily with clients with physical impairment and observed the mental and emotional benefit produced through horse work. EFMHA focuses on developing professional and ethical standards for those working in the field (Kohanov, 2001). In 1999, another professional body, the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) was founded. EAGALA, while not associated with NARHA, is a non-profit organisation also devoted to the development of high standards and professionalism in the field of EAP (Kersten and Thomas, 2003). Professional activities include conferences, ongoing education, support groups and newsletters. Both organisations (EFMHA and EAGALA) appear to enjoy a flourishing membership and both offer training programs. Information about these associations is available at the websites (<http://www.narha.org>; <http://www.eagala.org>). As yet no training programs from either of these

organisations have been conducted in Australasia, although in November 2004, a demonstration of the work was given by visiting EAGALA trained practitioners in Whangarei, New Zealand. It was attended by over 40 practitioners. The present lack of well established training programs in Australasia means that potential practitioners currently travel to the USA to complete training. Trainees are expected to have already completed formal training qualifications, for example, in counselling, psychology, social work, that are recognised by the country in which they intend to practice.

New Zealand has its own indigenous development of EAP. Leg-Up Trust, a group connected with Hawke's Bay Recovery Centres, offer an equine therapy program for disadvantaged youth and mental health clients that is supported by the district health board. They also receive client referrals from local police and the courts.

### The EAP Session

Structurally, EAP sessions are facilitated by a licensed or registered therapist partnered with a certified horse professional. EFMHA sometimes supports facilitation by a mental health professional dually credentialed as an equine professional. Sessions are experiential. Clients learn about themselves and about others through participating in the horse activities, primarily groundwork, and discussing behaviours and emotions elicited through the process. Clients may work individually, or with others in a team approach, depending upon presenting issues. In the USA a licensed mental health professional must facilitate the process for it to be considered psychotherapy (Kersten and Thomas, 2003).

Sessions involving horses are designed around setting up activities that require clients to apply particular skills such as "non-verbal communication, assertiveness,

creative thinking and problem solving, leadership, work, taking responsibility, teamwork and relationships, confidence, attitude” (Kersten and Thomas, 2003, p.9). EAP can address a variety of mental health and human development needs including “behavioural issues, attention deficit disorder, substance abuse, eating disorders, abuse issues, depression, anxiety, relationship problems and communication needs” (ibid). As well as very specific exercises, activities can include mutually respectful equine activities such as handling, grooming, or *longeing*. Exercises can be as simple as putting a halter on a horse, or entering a round pen containing more than one untethered horse.

### **The Future for EAP**

It appears that EAP may well have a great deal to offer those with mental health issues and those with complex social problems. The work is attracting support and gaining popularity with mental health communities in the USA primarily because success with clients has been impressive (Woodbury Reports, 2002). Local funding grant applications have been successful in New Mexico, Ohio, and Texas (Eagala News, 2005; Esquibel, 2003; Woodbury Reports, 2002).

Plans are underway for the first Stage 1 EAGALA training program to take place in New Zealand in Whangarei in early 2006. The Hawke’s Bay group are considering funding proposals and joint research projects for continuing development of their program, and presentations on EAP have been made to the New Zealand Psychological Society and the Central Regional Mental Health and Addiction Network. In Western Australia; a network for people with an interest in EAP was established in Perth in 2003. This has now developed into an equine assisted counselling and education program (see [www.eponacounselling.com](http://www.eponacounselling.com)).

Full acceptance of EAP will be assisted through the development of further research. We know that the portion of variance due to the therapeutic alliance or relationship between therapist and client contributes three to four times as much to the outcome effect size as the specific treatment adopted (Wampold, 2001). Orlinski, Grawe and Parks (1994) conclude that the quality of clients' participation in therapy is the prime determinant of outcome and that the therapists' contribution to a quality outcome is made mainly through "empathic, affirmative, collaborative and self-congruent engagement..." (p.361). Perhaps EAP works well because it gives prominence to the establishment of relationships both with therapist and horse, with the one mirroring the other.

With its claims of positive results for hard to reach client groups EAP merits further investigation and consideration in Australia and New Zealand..

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