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*Abundant Living...Discover the Possibilities!*

This essay is written about PATH Intl.'s Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy, not to be confused with the EAGALA model of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. The core difference between the two is that with the EAGALA model, clients are treated from the ground, not from the back of the horse.

## **An Excerpt from Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy: Generation Me's Self-Esteem**

*Megan Schwartz*

According to Equine Facilitated Mental Health Services, "Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) is experiential psychotherapy that includes equine(s). It may include, but is not limited to, a number of mutually respectful equine activities such as handling, grooming, longeing, riding, driving, and vaulting" (Hallberg 276). EFP integrates cognitive-behavioral therapy, psychodynamic psychotherapy, Gestalt therapy, experiential therapy, somatic psychotherapy, as well as addiction and recovery therapy. Although this therapy is new to the world of psychology, the studies that have been done show significant trends in it improving the well-being of those suffering from mental illness. Due to the large amount of case studies that swear by its healing capabilities, more and more research is being done to provide statistical proof (and can be found on the EAGALA website at [www.eagala.org/Research](http://www.eagala.org/Research)).

What makes equine-facilitated psychotherapy original and effective is its incorporation of physical movement that is natural to humans, as well as the personal connection between equine and client. In clinic practice, Angela Masini of "Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy in Clinic Practice" found that EFP reduces psychological distress and enhances psychological well-being (34). It "promotes personal exploration of feelings and behaviors and allows for their clinical interpretation" (Bachi, Terkel, Teichman 2009). Leif Hallberg of Walking the Way of the Horse, states that:

The most prevailing goal of EFT is to help the client make unconscious feelings, thoughts, behaviors and actions conscious. The secondary goal is for the client to realize their own power of choice, and thus begin changing maladaptive patterns that negatively impact their lives. EFP is designed to help reduce psychological dysfunction and to promote deeper psychological healing (282).

The horse provides the perfect tool for psychotherapy for multiple reasons. One of the reasons is due to the movement of its gait. Hallberg explains that their gaits are rhythmical and three dimensional, which relaxes the client's tense muscles and thus releases memories held within parts of the human body (281), memories that have been buried due to the suppression of emotion. Another aspect of the horse that assists in psychotherapy is the fact that they are, by nature, herd animals. It allows humans to observe relational skills, allowing them to improve their social skills which in turn improves their personal relationships. Overall, "being in a relationship with horses provides opportunities for



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humans to reflect on their relational impact, stretch into different styles of contact, build self and relational awareness, and feeling into their body, energy and feelings as information for strengthening self-regulation, choice, and responsibility" (Kirby 62).

Also, with horses being a part of the herd, they must have a leader—and the client, if they are to work with horses, must become this leader. In the first quantitative study on the advantages of EFP that took place in Israel with at-risk adolescents, researchers Keren Bachi, Joseph Terkel, and Meir Teichman found that EFP allows for these adolescents to learn leadership, self-control, and to address someone other than themselves (300). The act of the client becoming the leading of the partnership between themselves and the horse naturally forces the client to shift from their external locus of control to an internal locus of control. In a study that worked with adult female survivors of abuse and how EFP benefitted them, one woman stated: "the biggest thing I learned [in the EFP program] was to have confidence that I could control this beast. And if I could control this horse, I should be able to control my life" (Meinersmann, Bradberry, Roberts 39). Hallberg elaborates that once the client recognizes their own power of choice, the maladaptive patterns that they had obtained begin to change (282). Self-confidence and a newly positive self-image are results of learning how to control the horse and how to move with him (qtd in Bachi, Terkel, Teichman 301).

On the aspect of clients dealing with anger management and aggressions issues, due to the size and power of horses, respect is something that comes naturally and does not need to be taught: "work with horses enables aggression to be redirected in a sublimated, creative and positive manner" (Bachi, Terkel, Teichman 301). In fact, the teenagers learned quickly that the horses "project love and acceptance to whoever treats them positively" (301).

This unconditional love and non-judgemental attitude of the horse is what transitions them from being a mere tool to becoming something of a co-therapist:

The horse also helps open the doors of the psyche by providing unconditional love and affection, which a licensed mental health professional may be ethically uncomfortable doing within a psychotherapeutic relationship. Humans are more inclined to share honestly and openly with a being they feel loved and cared for by" (Hallberg 284).

The use of EFP in clinical practice allows clients to feel comfortable and safe, as staff in residential treatment centers have witnessed (Masini 32). The horse provides a safe space for the adolescent to discover and recognize his/her emotions, emotions that may have been turned off or suppressed due to mental illness—and thus how to respond to these emotions. The horse will provide immediate feedback to the client if they are sending signals or providing cues that are incongruent with their emotions and thoughts. Through this interaction, the clients become aware of how their behavior affects the horse (Brandt 29), which in turn makes them aware of how their behavior affects individuals around them. Horses are ultra-sensitive, and provide immediate feedback for both failures and successes—but again, they don't judge the client on these outcomes. This allows the clients to expand and grow, to achieve success on which they can base a positive well-being.



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The use of equines in psychotherapy has been found to reverse the effects of a low self-esteem, lack of respect, responsibility, and self-worth, as well as suffering relationships and an external locus of control. The client learns responsibility when it cares for and invests time in the horse; in putting time and effort into the horse, Bachi, Terkel, and Teichman describe that it acts as a metaphor, representing care and investment in themselves (301). With the horse being so physically large and powerful, respect occurs naturally and makes sense to the client. The relationship that forms between the horse and client "helps ward off the loneliness of depression, isolation and 'virtual reality' of today's world (McDaniel 2). As the clients improve their horsemanship skills, as well as their social and relational skills, their feelings of self-worth improve. With today's population increasingly becoming more immersed in technology, the use of authentic equine therapy will become only more advantageous, teaching adolescents to effectively work side by side with another individual and experience the psychological rewards that result from it.

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