

THIS IS PSYCHOTHERAPY?

By Eva von Schrittz, NCC, LPC, CACIII, ACS

One of the fastest growing trends in the field of psychotherapy involves the use of horses to assist a human in providing psychotherapy services to other humans. This therapeutic modality is effective, powerful, immediate and provides gains to humans that can be difficult to realize in a therapist's office. It is also very frequently misunderstood.

The practice of utilizing horses in therapy re-emerged in our country with North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) in the middle of the last century. Since that time, numerous persons with physical and developmental disabilities have been served by dedicated teams of therapists (physical, occupational, mental health), horses and volunteers. The utilization of horses in psychotherapy has emerged with NARHA as a section of the overall organization (Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association or EFMHA), as people have begun to recognize the enhanced sense of mental wellness that the riders experience during a therapeutic riding session.

At the same time, in a sort of parallel development, EAGALA (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association) has formalized and is promoting Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP). EAP differs from therapeutic riding in that the goals of the session are focused tightly on mental/behavioral health issues with clients and—when appropriate—families. The emphasis is not on riding but rather on activities that are structured to allow the client to develop a relationship with the horse, receive feedback from the horse and the human team members, and work through their issues with the support of a powerful, non-judgmental equine ally.

A third discipline, working in the spirit of the best offerings of EFMHA and EAGALA, has been quietly emerging for some time and was catapulted into prominence with the publication of Linda Kohanov's *Tao of Equus* and Wyatt Webb's *It's Not About The Horse*. Ms. Kohanov's book describes her journey with horses and humans that led to the creation of Epona Equestrian Services. Mr. Webb's book, similarly, culminates in the description of the creation of The Equine Experience.

So, what's the big deal? People have been riding and grooming and training horses for hundreds of years. Many teenaged girls are still "horse crazy", and depending on where a person lives, all manner of horses and stables and horse-related activities are available. But *therapy*? You mean, the client asks, I go and hang out with a horse and brush it and do some stuff with it and talk about some stuff and that's therapy? (Look of disbelief). Well, the therapist answers, yes and no.

In any area of equine facilitated, assisted or co-facilitated psychotherapy, there are rules that apply. Number one rule, client confidentiality; as with any other psychotherapy process, anything said to a therapist during an equine session is legally confidential, chart notes are made, charts are maintained securely so that client information is protected.

Number two rule, a treatment plan is developed that guides the process so that the client's goals and needs are paramount to all other considerations. Number three rule, the treating therapist is appropriately trained, licensed, credentialed, experienced and insured to provide such services, and makes evidence of the above available to clients. Number four rule, the client's safety and welfare are paramount. Number five rule, the treatment of clients is guided by a theoretical model, and that information is clearly communicated to the client. Put simply, it takes more than having and liking/loving horses and a desire to help others to provide such services.

But, the client asks, *how* does it work? *Why* does it work? Horses are prey animals. In the wild, they live by keen sight, fleet foot and agreement with other members of the herd. They accept the leadership of the lead mare and the protection of the stallion. They have a finely tuned awareness of body language that allows them to instantly perceive the emotional state of other herd members and ascertain whether or not there is danger in their environment, and if so, how immediate. We can take the horse out of the wild, but we cannot completely take the wild out of the horse. All horses are keenly aware of the emotional state of their humans; therapy horses through learning and proximity, become even more sensitive. In a therapy session, the horse provides immediate non-verbal feedback to the client about his or her emotional state, and about his or her relationship building skills, mirroring the client's state of being with uncanny accuracy. This information, then, is observed by the human therapist and processed with the client so that the client has the opportunity to develop solutions for needed changes. There are an endless variety of equine activities that are planned by therapists to best facilitate the client's change process.

Sadly, therapy involving horses is still often relegated to the category of "Animal Assisted Therapy", and considered to be an adjunct to "regular" therapy. As such, and because of the risks inherent in working with a co-therapist that weighs as much as 1800 pounds, many insurance companies will not reimburse for this extremely effective treatment modality. And in this day and age of budget cuts, advancement of the equine involved psychotherapies to an officially recognized status by insurance companies is slow.

On a brighter note, it is in the American spirit that once we decide an idea is workable and that it is beneficial, we press forward until the idea is manifest. So we're out there, therapists and horses, available and ready to be of service to humans in search of alternative paths to emotional healing and wholeness. Yes, this *is* psychotherapy!

Eva von Schrittz, NCC, LPC, CACIII, ACS is a nationally certified counselor, a licensed professional counselor, a certified addictions counselor and a nationally approved clinical supervisor. She is Executive Director of Alpine Family Counseling Service, Inc., headquartered in Westcliffe, CO, and providing services to children, youth, families and adults in Custer, Fremont and Pueblo Counties, and Program Director of The Gentle Path Equine Co-Facilitated Psychotherapy Program (a program of Alpine Family Counseling Service). She is a co-founding member of The Alliance of Southern Colorado

Equine Assisted Therapies. She has been listed in Who's Who of American Women continuously since 1995. She is a mother of three children, and a partner with five horses, and has been providing equine co-facilitated psychotherapy services continuously for three years. For further information or to make a tax-deductible donation, please contact Ms. von Schrittz at 719/429-5285.