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Healed By Horses

By Wendy Kagan

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Annie Internicola

Illustration

One June morning at HorsePlay in Kerhonkson, 10 of us stood in line in an outdoor arena, connected to one another with one long piece of string. Along the edge of the covered space, a sandy-colored horse munched peacefully on some red clover. Our facilitators—HorsePlay owner and equine specialist Cori Nichols and mental-health counselor Rosey Rouhana—had given us a mission: Coax the horse into the middle of the arena, and have it step or jump over a low obstacle. Yet what sounded like a simple exercise turned out to be more complicated than we thought. Each of us had to keep one hand on the string, and we could not touch the horse at all. Our group experimented with snaking our line in front of the horse and corralling her into the center, yet she neatly avoided the obstacle every time. Once she lifted a hoof as if to step over it—yet at the last moment she spooked, backed off, and ran away. After several failed attempts, we finally succeeded in getting "Hope" (the name we gave her) to jump over the obstacle. The group erupted in cheers, and Hope responded with a victory lap around the arena, bucking her hind legs and throwing her head back in what seemed like mutual celebration.

When Nichols and Rouhana invited us afterwards to tell about what happened, we spoke of our frustrations, the complications of group problem-solving, and the ultimate exhilaration of reaching a shared goal. One woman equated the experience to parenting, with the horse as a stand-in for a child: "Sometimes we push our agenda on our kids and want them to do certain things. When we stepped back and didn't push it but just made space for it, the horse flew over the obstacle." Others gleaned a different lesson, and it was easy to see how this simple exercise with this powerful animal could represent almost anything. Said one participant, "How you do this kind of thing is how you do your life."

That is exactly the philosophy behind equine-assisted learning (EAL) and equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP), twin therapeutic practices that connect people with horses for experiential growth and healing. It's an approach that makes sense to Nichols, who has spent much of her life around horses and has often witnessed people problem-solving with the help of the fairy-tale animals. "It's an invitation to try to relate to another living being who is a lot bigger than you, and who for some reason you're drawn to," says Nichols, who became an EAGALA (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association) certified specialist and opened HorsePlay in 2015. Interacting with horses unmounted and on the ground (these therapies do not involve horseback riding), people discover things about themselves they did not know before, opening a door to new solutions.

"We're not asking [our clients], 'How do you feel?' We're saying, 'Tell us what happened out there? What are the horses doing?' That's when we get the most information, because people are describing themselves through the horses. There's a lot of projection going on," says Nichols. Through exercises that involve observation and engagement as well as metaphor and projection, equine therapy can be an effective alternative to traditional talk therapy, giving people insight into their own behaviors, patterns, and habits.

"We all agree in the field that talk therapy doesn't always get the results we want," says Rouhana, who collaborates with Nichols and also works outside the arena at Astor Services for Children and Families in Kingston and Ellenville. "Sometimes we need a bit of assistance to see something that might not be coming out verbally. It's an experiential therapy, which can be really useful when you're feeling stuck." The sheer size of a horse can be intimidating, but that in itself is part of equine therapy's unique power and usefulness, says Rouhana. "Being able to connect with that and learn from that—and being able to ask a horse to do something and have it do it—all of this can be very effective in overcoming feelings of intimidation and fear around big things in our lives."

Help for Boots on the Ground

It takes sizable strength to stand up to something as life-changing as post-traumatic stress disorder—and that's what Jimmy Downes facilitates every week at the Therapeutic Equestrian Center (TEC) in Cold Spring. On Fridays, Downes offers EAGALA-model services to postdeployment military veterans from the VA Hudson Valley Health Care System in Montrose. An equine specialist who works as a consultant through his own business, Relatively Stable LLC, Downes is also a certified substance abuse counselor who uses equine therapy to help people heal from addiction; in the past he used EAGALA-model services with survivors of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in December 2012, helping families, teachers, and first responders deal with the emotional aftermath of the tragedy. "This is a solution-focused short-term therapy," says Downes. "We do activities that help the clients find their solutions. Our philosophy is that we believe all of our clients have their answers inside."

When combat veterans enter the arena at TEC, it can transform into a place of startling self-discovery. Downes recalls one instance in which several veterans were invited to use props in the arena to re-create a scene from their deployment. "We asked them to build a safe place [with the props], and then to lead one of the horses to that place." One of the veterans, a woman, seemed to know just what to do: While the other participants struggled to lead a horse to their safe place, she simply squatted down at the entrance to the space she built, and one of the horses came over and put its head on hers. Yet just as she started to connect a rope to the horse to lead it inside, another horse came over and stood directly behind her horse. Blocked on both sides, the horse had no place to go and panicked. It let out a high-pitched squeal and kicked out its back leg at the other horse. "[The veteran] had a strong reaction;

she said, 'Get me the f--- out of here!' Later her caseworker found out she had been raped as an adolescent by a relative, and she had never told anyone about it. When the horse squealed, she had a flashback. We thought it was a flashback to the roadside bombing she had experienced, but it turns out it was an early childhood trauma, and she was able to talk about it and open up for the first time with a professional and deal with that."

Giving Confidence Full Rein

Equally effective with men and women, in groups or one-on-one, the EAGALA model is particularly rich ground for the flowering of personal empowerment and self-esteem. That's why Anne Gordon, an art teacher, thought it would be the perfect therapy for her 10-year-old daughter, Ruby (not their real names). Adopted at one year old from an orphanage in Kazakhstan, Ruby has been struggling with various fears and safety issues for the past year or so. "She's an incredible kid—she's amazing," says Gordon. "She doesn't know why she's afraid and nervous all the time, but it's definitely related to that first year of her life. We don't know what really happened [in the orphanage], but her anxiety is a visceral thing—it's in her body. She's constantly aware of it and hypervigilant about where she is and who she's with. Everybody's got their thing, and that's her thing."

Ruby has always loved horses and had taken horseback riding lessons in the past, but her newly developed fears extended to the sport; now she'd rather remain on the ground, observing horses instead of making direct contact with them. With its unmounted approach, EAGALA seems to be just what Ruby needs. In a recent exercise, Ruby was invited to instruct Nichols verbally on how to perform various equine tasks such as grooming a horse and putting on its harness. Nichols was not allowed to talk, and Ruby could not touch the horse; she could use only her voice. At the end of the session, the girl was beaming. "She loved giving the directions and getting [Nichols] to do what she wanted her to do," says Gordon. "The horse can be a metaphor for things she's uncomfortable around, and help her start to feel like she can take control of things and work with them. That will hopefully start affecting other parts of her life as she works on that sense of safety and confidence."

Meanwhile, Nichols and Rouhana are developing a girls' empowerment group this summer for girls aged around 8 to 14. "It will focus on helping girls build their communication skills, assertiveness skills, and healthy relationship skills," says Rouhana. "We're coming from the lens of how much girls struggle with self-confidence, especially with the challenges of peer pressure and bullying." Through various interactions and activities with horses, they'll learn that with good communication and hard work you can succeed at something. Adds Nichols, "We're offering it to help kids discover their strengths and also learn to ask for help when they need it. It's about creating healthy boundaries and having the self-esteem to create their lives. What are your goals? What do you want to do? They're less of a victim and more of a creator." With the goal of offering the program to families who wouldn't otherwise be able to afford it, Nichols and Rouhana have created a GoFundMe campaign called Girls' Power with Horses and have started to raise scholarship money.

Even though horses are herd animals, they have a lot to teach us about assertiveness and leadership skills, says Nichols. "I recently got a phone call from the mom of a girl who said, 'You know, something's going on here. Something's happening. Things are changing for her at school. She's standing up to the bullies; she's holding her own.'"

A Trail to Self-Realization

There's something about girls and horses that's everlasting—a sense of connection between a young person and an animal that is very real yet seems enchanted. But equine-assisted therapies can extend to all sorts of populations with seemingly endless applications. Nichols uses the EAGALA model for couples' therapy and family therapy, finding it particularly useful for blended families to facilitate bonding. It can be an adjunct therapy consisting of six to nine sessions—or it can have impact as a single, stand-alone session. "Because it's so powerful, people have the ability to find their solutions quickly," says Downes, who leads EAGALA trainings at TEC that attract students from across the United States and Canada. (Downes recently held a Part I EAGALA training in late June.)

Just why this happens is not such a mystery to people like Nichols. "There's something about being outside with an animal that's very liberating," she says.

"I've seen very withdrawn people shed their bags at the door. There's a letting go of ego, of restraint. People drop their shell; they don't bother being shy around horses. It promotes a really authentic sense of being."

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