

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy Replaces Conventional Therapy

Therapists and counselors now have a way to do counseling that looks nothing like the old therapy couch of bygone days. Equine Assisted Psychotherapy or Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy is real therapy, but with a couple of important and very noticeable differences. First of all, equine assisted therapists usually work in a team consisting of therapist and horse professional. The next most noticeable thing is that the therapeutic team is completed by horses. And, of course, they can't come to the office, so the therapy session is moved to the farm, usually taking place in an arena or other area large enough and safe enough for horse activity.

In this horse-human team, horses take on a role in activities, or simply offer comfort and companionship as human clients explore coping skills, decision-making skills, creative problem-solving skills, and meanings of body language and nonverbal communication. For the bereaved, their peaceful presence and warm, fuzzy bodies also provide a tactile stimulus that calms while releasing good feelings. Horses serve as silent partners to the therapeutic process, providing clients a safe place to face and work through their emotions.

In Horses Healing Grief, children and caregivers spend a half-day in the quiet comfort of a working horse farm with other families who have had a loved one die. Through stimulating activities with horses and other humans, horses comfort and help children and adults understand life after a loss.

The rationale behind the work is that the experiential process – learning by doing - allows the client to explore his or her inner world while the horse makes it easier and more comfortable to manage feelings or thoughts that might otherwise seem too hard to bear. In this way, learners can challenge themselves about needed change applying new skills, but they don't have to take the risk of judgment or criticism that sometimes inhibits positive change. The horse becomes a bridge that connects the client to their problem in the here and now, and prepares them for how to face it in the future. As a result, change takes place more quickly, and often the impact of counseling is greater than with traditional talk therapy, because their experience becomes the teacher.

Losses early in life often shape the balance of a child's life. The primary goal of our equine assisted work with foster kids, attachment disordered, traumatized, and/or grieving kids is to heal early life trauma, giving them a better chance for emotional health later on.