

## **Horses and Families: Bringing Equine Assisted Approaches to Family Therapy**

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One of the more unique clinical practices to emerge in the last decade has been the inclusion of horses as a tool in working with couples, families, groups, and individuals. Typically referred to as Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP), the practice has gained recognition and acceptance both nationally and internationally as an increasing number of clinicians (and horse lovers) have harnessed the natural traits of the horse to complement and enrich their clinical practices. A wide range of diverse approaches has been developed, and it's important to distinguish between therapeutic riding programs (often used to enhance physical stamina and coordination of individuals with physical challenges) and the practice of EAP, which most commonly does not include riding, horsemanship instruction, or mounted activities.

EAP is an experiential clinical modality that incorporates the horse as an integral part of the therapy session. As described by the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), EAP is a solution-oriented approach that assumes clients have the ability to find their own solutions to their problems ([www.eagala.org](http://www.eagala.org)). EAP has been used to treat many clinical concerns, including behavioral issues, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders, and domestic violence. Outcome literature has not kept pace with the proliferation of programs and models in the equine assisted community; however, anecdotal and

clinical case study reports indicate significant changes in clients who have experienced this unique approach.

While Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) has been a growing field for many years, utilizing dogs, cats, pigs, rabbits, and other animal assistants, EAP practitioners are passionate about the unique qualities of the horse as a resource within the therapy session. Because horses are prey animals, they are immediately sensitive and attuned to any changes in their environment. They also respond immediately and directly—through sometimes quite powerful body language—providing clear messages in response to human communication. They are large, potentially intimidating animals, but they can also be calm and responsive, allowing clients to experiment with different types of behavior and gain immediate feedback. When clients are dealing with intense emotions and attempting to make significant changes in their lives, interactions with horses can pave the way to trying out new behaviors and creating solutions to long-standing difficulties.

In a typical EAP session, a licensed mental health provider works alongside an equine specialist and one or more horses. The therapist asks the client(s) to complete an experiential activity with the horses; activities are designed to allow the clients to experience metaphorically something they may be struggling with outside the arena. For example, a family struggling with conflict between parents and children may be asked to create an obstacle in the ring, and find a way—together—to encourage the horses to go over or through the obstacle. The clinician observes family processes and interactions, noting when the family may become stuck, struggle to determine who is in charge, and find ways to work together.

Simultaneously, the equine specialist carefully observes the horses' behavior, attending to herd dynamics as well as equine responses to human behaviors. These clinical and equine observations then inform the processing of the session, as the team learns from the family what seemed to work for them, what they tried when they were stuck, and what may have been familiar for them when compared with their daily challenges.

Because the sessions take place in a relaxed, natural environment, away from the office setting that can at times seem intimidating or emotionally stressful, clients may be able to make connections between what happens in the ring and what happens at home with less content-based discussion of the presenting problem. The "take-away" from the session is not defined by the therapist; rather, the clients leave the session with experiential learning that may translate into immediate changes in their relationships.

The Family Therapy Program at Nova Southeastern University has partnered with Stable Place, a non-profit, equine-assisted psychotherapy program, to deliver clinical services, supervision, training, and continuing education offerings in Equine Assisted Family Therapy practices. Through our work, we have found that horses can and often do help clients make significant changes in their lives through interacting with the horses and finding what works. This fits well within a systemic framework that privileges the clients' understandings, resources, and strengths. Through observing clients' struggles to complete their tasks with the horses, therapists may notice persistence, determination, resilience and creativity that may not have been apparent in more traditional clinical sessions.

Additionally, we have found the horses to be an invaluable tool in training and supervising therapists. Through a series of carefully designed exercises, we encourage therapists to explore who they are as therapists and what they bring into the room with them each time they meet a new client. Unlike in a conventional supervision session, we are not focused on content, therapeutic model, or technique. Rather, using the horses as their clients, therapists explore their typical ways of assessing and developing connections, their ways of managing “stuckness,” as well as their approach to change. We have found that therapists learn a great deal about who they are as therapists, and who they would like to become.

There are numerous resources for clinicians seeking to learn about equine assisted approaches to clinical work. As this field continues to develop, it can provide a rich and fertile field for applying brief, systemic methods to a wide range of presenting problems. Family therapists have the skills, training, and theoretical framework to blend beautifully with the herd.

### **Recommended reading and available resources:**

Bowers, M. and MacDonald, P. (2001) The Effectiveness of Equine-Facilitated

Psychotherapy with At-Risk Adolescents. *Journal of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences*, 15: 62-76

Brooks, S. (2006) Animal-Assisted Psychotherapy and Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy.

In N. Webb (Ed.) *Working with Traumatized Youth in Child Welfare*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Chandler, C. (2012). *Animal assisted therapy in counseling*. London: Routledge.

- Donaghy, G. (2006) Equine Assisted Therapy. *Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, 26 (4).
- EAGALA (2009). *Fundamentals of EAGALA model practice*. Equine assisted growth and learning association (6), 2-140
- Ewing, C., MacDonald, P., Taylor, M. and Bowers, J. (2007) Equine-Facilitated Learning for Youths with Severe Emotional Disorders: A Quantitative and Qualitative Study. *Child Youth Care Forum*, 36: 59-72
- Frewin, K. & Gardiner, B. (2005). New sage or old? A review of equine assisted psychotherapy. *The Australian Journal of Counseling Psychology*, (6), 13-17.
- Karol, J. (2007) Applying a Traditional Individual Psychotherapy Model to Equine-facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP): Theory and Method. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 12: 77-90
- Lentini, J. and Knox, M. (2009) A Qualitative and Quantitative Review of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) with Children and Adolescents. *The Open Complementary Medicine Journal*, 1: 51-57
- Meinersmann, K., Bradberry, J. and Bright Roberts, F. (2008) Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy with Adult Female Survivors of Abuse. *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing*, 46 (12): 36-42
- Pichot, T. & Coulter, M. (2006) *Animal-assisted brief therapy: A solution-focused approach*. New York: Routledge.
- Solomon, M. (2010). Equine therapy: NSU's Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences uses horse sense in family therapy. *Horizons Magazine*, Fall.

Trotter, K., Chandler, C., Goodwin, D. and Casey, J. (2008) A Comparative Study of the Efficacy of Group Equine Assisted Counselling With At-Risk Children and Adolescents. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 3 (3): 254-284

**Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) [www.eagala.org](http://www.eagala.org)**

**Horses and Humans Research Foundation [www.horsesandhumans.org](http://www.horsesandhumans.org)**

**Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.). [www.pathintl.org/](http://www.pathintl.org/)**

**Stable Place Equine Assisted Family Therapy [www.stableplace.org](http://www.stableplace.org)**