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Partnering with Horses to Train Mental Health Professionals

Shelley Green, Ph.D.¹

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Students enrolled in university-based mental health training programs typically spend 2-3 years immersed in didactic coursework focused on developing their understanding of a range of clinical theories and models, building competence in applying techniques specific to those models, and insuring that they understand the legal and ethical codes that guide the profession. While clearly this is the foundation for training informed, thoughtful, and ethical practitioners, a missing link in many training programs is attention to the self-of-the-therapist. A therapist's awareness of self—socially, emotionally, interpersonally—and of what he or she brings to each therapeutic encounter is critical to the process of sound ethical practice. As Timm and Blow (1999) observe, each of us is informed, often outside our own awareness, by significant events and life experiences that have contributed to our development as individuals. These experiences may inform our responses—in more and less positive ways—when our clients describe similar moments in their lives. Timm and Blow (1999) advocate for doing self-of-the-therapist work that explores both the restraints and resources that arise out of a therapists' life experiences. Additionally, Simon (2006) has proposed that family therapy training, specifically, be guided by a four-stage process that begins with an exploration of the trainees' personal worldview and ends

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with the therapists' developing nuanced skill in a model that most closely aligns with their personal understanding of the human condition. Within the first stage, trainees would be asked to explore their own life decisions, with the goal of understanding the worldview that informed those decisions and life structures (including political, social, spiritual, and personal beliefs).

Given that clinical training programs are typically rigorous and based on highly structured curricula developed to cover as many models, theories, and practices as possible, self-of-the-therapist work has at times become marginalized and is non-existent in many training programs. Discussing where (or whether) to include this work, including relevant literature and assignments designed to promote self-reflection and awareness, does not always lead to consensus among faculty and administrators. Additionally, developing the means to invite students into such reflective discussion can be challenging when students themselves may be more focused on gaining clinical competence and remembering details of models to pass comprehensive and licensure exams.

Theoretical Foundations of our Equine Assisted Training Approach

An innovative response to this training dilemma has been developed in the Family Therapy program at Nova Southeastern University (NSU), by incorporating an equine assisted training model into the self-of-the-therapist explorations of the students. All family therapy coursework at NSU is informed by a brief, systemic, relational approach to therapy (Cade & O'Hanlon, 1993; Flemons, 2002, Flemons & Green, 2007, in press; Green, 2012, 2014; Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974) that privileges the clients' worldview and honors their solutions (deShazer, 1985). Therapy models are informed by a strength-based, non-pathologizing stance that seeks to make sense of all behaviors in context, rather than to diagnose or pinpoint dysfunction. Students in the NSU programs have the opportunity to take two

electives in Equine Assisted Family Therapy. In these courses, students learn about both the fundamentals of equine assisted therapies and the components of their own personal experiences that may inform their relationships with clients. Informed by our commitment to a non-normative, non-pathologizing approach, we invite the students to explore connections between their interactions with the horses and the ways they have experienced, and responded to, similar situations in their personal and professional lives. As past struggles and challenges become relevant, our focus is on the resources students have acquired through meeting those challenges, and on how they may experience something new with the horses that has relevance for responding to challenges in the therapy room.

The courses are taught through our NSU Family Therapy collaboration with Stable Place, a local non-profit equine assisted therapy program. Stable Place provides the setting, horses, and PATH, Intl. certified equine specialists and is an integral component of the course delivery. All staff (therapists and equine specialists) at Stable Place are trained directly through the NSU courses, and the method for facilitating and processing activities is consistently informed by the relational, strength-based model described above.

The first course (Introduction to Equine Assisted Family Therapy) addresses the world of animal and equine assisted therapies, and includes attention to therapeutic riding, hippotherapy, and equine assisted learning models. Students become acquainted with the literature in the field, including research on the effectiveness of equine assisted models, and they are introduced to various national organizations that train and certify equine professionals, such as EAGALA and PATH, Intl. The course is taught in a hybrid approach, with half of the class sessions taking place at the Stable Place facility, offering students hands-on experience with the horses and allowing them to learn first-hand about equine assisted sessions. A central component of this

introductory course involves exploring how the students' experiences with and reactions to the horses mirror their responses in the clinical setting. Activities are intentionally designed and processed in a way that metaphorically attends to the students' understanding of their strengths and growth areas as therapists, whether in terms of building trust and rapport, establishing connections, promoting change, or dealing with fear and anxiety in the room. The horses provide a rich and potentially transformative partnership for exploring and understanding how to bring their "best selves" into the room with clients. As one student observed,

"Since the horses are attuned and connected to each participant in EAT, they also pick up on what therapists bring into session. This course really highlighted that, by allowing training therapists to be participants, and by allowing them to experience the powerful sessions for themselves. The activities allowed for each clinician to be self-reflective, mindful, and intentional each time they worked with the horses during class. Each course activity made a way for the clinicians to explore their therapeutic orientation, their style of working and their personal values in an experiential way."

The advanced course—also a hybrid, with alternate weeks taking place at the barn—invites students further into a process of self-reflection regarding the particular strengths, areas of growth, values, beliefs, and worldviews that accompany them each time they enter the therapy room. The course is grounded in a mindfulness approach, and students are encouraged each week (in the classroom and at the barn) to attend to engaging in the experience in a mindful, fully present manner. This contributes to building a context of self-reflection, awareness, and introspection, which then translates well to our work with the horses. Course readings encompass the triad of equine assisted therapy approaches, mindfulness and meditation, and self-of-the therapist literature. These readings guide class discussions and inform equine based activities as

well. Barn days are structured specifically to maximize students' awareness of their ways of approaching clients, building trust, developing rapport, dealing with fear and anxiety, and embracing challenge and change.

Activities are often simple (e.g., finding the horse's heartbeat and listening to gut sounds, hoof cleaning, taking the horse for a walk) and always require a significant level of self-awareness. For example, in one activity, students are blindfolded (if they are comfortable—or willing to be uncomfortable), and asked to simply touch and connect with one of the horses for several moments. Then as they are able, they are asked to find a way to partner with the horse that allows them to move the horse and to move along with it in a direction that is mutually desired. An equine specialist maintains connection with the lead rope and manages the proximity and pacing of the horse at all times, but the student is in charge of direction and movement. Students often report experiencing a trance-like phenomenon, in which they become aware only of themselves and the horse, moving in sync. Processing of this activity is powerful, focusing on the student's self-awareness, as well as his or her ability to connect and join with the horse, to manage the anxiety of the unknown, and to understand what creates change and movement. The relevance to therapeutic encounters is clear, and metaphors abound in our conversations. As one student described her response to this activity,

“During our very first day at the barn (Advanced Class), I had a trance-like connection with the horse I was working with. I was blindfolded and completely attuned to the way the horse moved, and the direction the horse took me on, trusting my Equine Specialist with my life. That experience taught me about the joining that occurs with clients in a way that does not necessarily require spoken language, but a humanness that begs for collaboration.”

Weekly journal assignments and on-line postings offer students the opportunity to process their reactions to barn day experiences; these descriptions often become the basis for extended conversations in the classroom. Following is a student's journal description of her response to hearing the horse's heartbeat:

“The heartbeat exercise was so profoundly beautiful for me. I decided to use a firm but soft approach with my left hand on Paris [one of our horses], while joining with her. I had the intention of sending her loving kindness. I mapped my hand path in short firm strokes before making my way down to her chest area. She allowed me to find her heartbeat with ease. After listening to the soft and slow ‘ba-beat’ a few times, I realized that my eyes were closed and I was smiling from ear to ear. It felt like such a gift that she was trusting me enough to hear this very private part of her body. Later, I realized that clients are trusting us to listen to their very private stories and this is also a gift, as well as a responsibility.”

Description of Technique—Moving the Hips

The activity I have chosen to address in more depth here involves an equine training exercise that our Stable Place team learned in a clinic led by horse trainer Richie Wingfield (www.richiewingfield.com). This exercise, although originally developed to assist riders with gaining trust and leadership with their horses on the ground, also has strong resonance for our students in terms of exploring how they have previously responded to fear, anxiety, and challenge. Students have the opportunity to try something new and to experience a transformative moment in terms of their relationship with that fear or anxiety through participation in this simple exercise.

This activity typically takes place late in the semester, after students have had many opportunities to interact with the horses and develop greater confidence and comfort with them. Students are asked to first consider a fear or challenge they have faced or are facing in their development as a therapist and/or as a person. They then write this challenge/fear on a small index card and we tape it to the hindquarters of the horse of their choosing. The student then holds the lead rope and walks toward the horse's hindquarters, utilizing their intentionality, energy, and focus to ask the horse to step under with the inside hind foot, thus disengaging the hindquarters. The equine specialist is, as always, in close proximity, monitoring the horse's movements and response to the student therapist's efforts to produce the desired movement.

Fundamentally, our equine assisted training of students is not based on developing their horsemanship skills, and it is also not a venue in which the facilitators become therapists to the students. Both of these ethical and professional considerations are discussed at length with the students at the beginning of the term. This activity, as well, is not intended to help the students learn ground work or become adept at showing leadership to the horse. Rather, it is designed and intended to allow the students to alter their relationship with fear or anxiety (Flemons, 2002; Flemons & Green, 2007, in press) through an experiential moment that requires them to *move toward*, rather than away from, their fear. The horse's hindquarters, as the engine (and kicking end) of the horse, represent metaphorically the power and source of the fear, and by entering into relationship with that fear rather than seeking to avoid it, students have a completely non-verbal, often emotional, and consistently powerful experience.

Case Study

Elena is a 53-year-old family therapy doctoral student with a rich professional background that preceded her interest in becoming a therapist. She is a confident, outgoing

person and therapist, but she also struggles with the lasting effects of an injury from an accident that occurred two years prior. Her fears around pain and re-injury at times prevent her from fully participating in experiences that matter to her. Throughout the semester, she had been cautious and aware of avoiding any equine assisted activities that might have been risky for her physically, and she had experienced some frustration at those limitations (as she had in her personal and professional life). Following is an excerpt from her session with Casper, another of our horses, along with my brief descriptions and explanations:

Transcript	Analysis
Facilitator: “Elena, you are welcome to share the fear you have identified with your classmates, or you may certainly keep it private if you choose.”	As this is a class, rather than a therapy group, it is critical to attend to privacy and self-disclosure choices, and to insure that the facilitator does not act as a therapist to the student.
Elena: “OK, I’m just going to think about it myself as I go through this activity with Casper.”	Elena seemed to be experiencing some anxiety and chose to keep the content of her fear private at the beginning. This was honored.
Facilitator: “So I’ll help you tape the fear onto Casper’s hindquarters. [Does so.] And now I’m going to ask you to focus completely on that card as you walk towards Casper’s back end and ask him to move his hips over. Does that make sense?”	The facilitator explains the activity briefly, with little extraneous detail, and with an emphasis on the focus (the card representing the fear).
<p>After an initial struggle with inertia and Casper simply following her in a circle, Elena observes as our ES does a brief (silent) demonstration that allows Elena to consider what she needs to change in terms of her intentionality. She then begins to dance with Casper as he gracefully moves and circles.</p> <p>Facilitator: “Beautiful, Elena; watch that fear, notice how it’s changing.”</p>	<p>As mentioned previously, our goal is not to teach horsemanship skills. However, an ES may offer to demonstrate a skill that simply seems impossible until viewed. No verbal instructions are given, and there is no emphasis on doing it the “right way.” Students are asked simply to observe what works and to find their own path. Consistently, those paths vary widely. In this instance, following the demonstration, Elena was able to find her own method of creating a beautiful dance with Casper.</p>
Elena: [Continues to dance with Casper, down a hill, in perfect rhythm; she is visibly crying, and yet seems simultaneously joyous.] “I’m doing it! I’m letting it go! I’m letting it go!”	There is very little verbal discussion during the student’s experience; we prefer to allow each student to “have their moment,” and any processing that is desired can come later, in the form of simple observations, connections

	to strengths, relevance to clinical work, and positive transformation.
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Reflections

Elena later described this session in her journal, continuing to process and make sense of her experience with Casper in relation to her life experiences and what she brings to each session as a therapist. Following is an excerpt:

“Today I focused on my injury as I placed my obstacle card on his hip. At first, I was channeling my intention but I did not realize that it was up to me to *initiate* the movement. How freaking obvious! I can’t believe I was just ‘willing’ Casper to move with me, as if he could read my mind, without the follow through of my body. It was a profound experience for me in that I truly felt myself letting go for the first time with any of the horses. I know my injury was previously blocking me in a tentative stance with them, despite the fact that I love them all and want to be close with them. I have just been holding back for fear of re-injury. Since my obstacle was my injury, some part of me was able to just release the ‘hold back’ and truly let go. I felt tears just gushing out of me and true joy filling my body as we spun around and around. I felt like I was in a flow state, or trance. I remember realizing that we were starting to go down a hill, but we both just kept going. It was the strangest most beautiful thing. We both seemed to trust the other one that everything would be okay.

The icing on the cake was when Casper stomped on my injury card as it flung off his hip. How appropriate! It was as if we both knew exactly what to do, once I made my mind up and invited him to join me, through my intention and my follow through. As I

reflect back on my dance with Casper, I realize how visceral and immediate the impacts of equine work can be. I struggled with my injury for two years and, in one session with Casper, I was able to recognize the unintentional role I was playing in remaining stuck in my fear. Casper helped me see that and, in the process, he expanded my insight as a human being, and my vision as a therapist. In this sense, the experience was truly transformative and, ultimately, healing.”

The type of learning that Elena experienced is the norm, rather than the exception, in the equine classes. We strive to offer each student many opportunities to engage with the horses in ways that allow for personal and professional transformations. The horses offer something that is simply not available or possible in classroom-based, didactic contexts. Elena’s final words reflect our strong belief in the power of this partnership with horses to create change and to enhance the training of our therapy students:

“The learnings are visceral, as opposed to intellectual. For someone like me, who is always ‘in my head,’ this is a great way to engage my whole body/mind/spirit in the learning process. It is hard to forget this kind of learning.”

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