

In Charlés, L. & Nelson, T. (Eds.) (2019). *Family therapy supervision in extraordinary settings: Illustrations of systemic approaches in everyday clinical work*. London: Routledge.

## **Embodied Conversations—Partnering with Horses in Clinical Supervision**

**Shelley Green, Ph.D., LMFT**

### **Abstract**

Equine assisted approaches to psychotherapy are becoming increasingly recognized as powerful experiential opportunities in a wide range of clinical situations. This chapter describes an innovative partnership with horses which is used to expand the supervision conversation to the barn, allowing for embodied practices that enrich the clinical supervision context in meaningful and surprising ways. Through the use of intentionally structured but flexible activities which engage supervisees in hands-on interaction with horses, the author invites self-reflection, attention to the self-of-the-therapist, and the use of a generative context in which to attempt new behaviors leading to enhanced clinical awareness. The nature and role of horses—as prey animals—is explained, and transcripts from student learning experiences are included.

### **Introduction**

Nine years ago, I could wait no longer to have horses in my life in a full and significant way. Growing up in Texas, I was obsessed with these beautiful creatures since I first experienced thought and language. They drew me to them like a moth to a flame, as anyone who shares this obsession will understand. My good friend and colleague, Jim Hibel, describes it as a genetic flaw with no known cure and only highly expensive and frequent treatment. As a full-time faculty member in a COAMFTE-accredited program at Nova Southeastern University (NSU), I had very little free time or money to spend on horses. My wise and usually-right husband, Douglas Flemons, suggested that I find a way to combine my passion for horses with my love for

family therapy teaching and training. He would live to re-think those words, but his suggestion launched the work that has captivated me and, in some ways, taken over my life since 2009. I hold him completely responsible.

Once the idea was floated, it took over my consciousness in a similar way that horses had when I was a 10-year-old Texas girl. I read everything I could find, went to conferences, talked to people, found trainings and workshops, and within a couple of months, approached my department chair, Tommie Boyd, and said “I want to do this horse thing with our students and maybe some clients.” She had no idea what I was talking about but was immediately supportive. The work I will describe in this chapter reflects 9 years of exploration, experimentation, creation, frustration, collaboration, and innovation. I have had the great fortune to find talented and passionate colleagues in the equine world, enthusiastic and curious students and supervisees, and a welcoming administrative team at NSU that has supported the ups and downs of creating a complex community partnership with no road map nor precedent.

The historical and current shape of my work includes the development and co-founding of a non-profit equine assisted family therapy organization, Stable Place (with my equine professional colleague, Valerie Judd), internship and staff placements for 10 master’s and doctoral family therapy students, two funded research/clinical projects, and clinical service provision of over 1,000 client contacts per year. However, this chapter will focus exclusively on how I have brought horses into a collaborative supervision conversation with family therapy trainees. This focus is where the work began, and it has been a guiding force throughout the expansion of the program.

My earliest forays into this world involved finding a couple of horses, partnering with Valerie, and asking 5-6 family therapy doctoral students from NSU to come out to the barn and

see what they could learn about themselves as therapists and humans from their interactions with horses. From those early days, it was clear that the potential was immense, and the students were intrigued and asking for more. We began offering CEU workshops in the community, which generated more interest, and within a couple of years I had designed and offered the first section of *Introduction to Equine Assisted Family Therapy*—a 3-credit graduate level course in the Department of Family Therapy. That was in 2012; the course has been offered consistently each fall and winter term since, and since 2014, I have also been teaching a second, advanced course each year. The NSU Family Therapy program now offers a concentration in Equine Assisted Family Therapy.

In this chapter, I will describe the rationale for partnering with horses in supervision and training, and I will delineate the clinical and theoretical assumptions that guide my approach. I will offer examples of specific ways I have brought this unusual partnership into the realm of family therapy supervision and training, and I will include student/trainee voices to help illustrate the power of the experiential process and its potential for exploring the self-of-the-therapist.

### **Horses as Supervision and Training Partners**

For most clinical supervisors, the rationale for bringing horses into the supervision process will not be obvious. Indeed, the reasons for *not* incorporating horses into clinical supervision may be much more apparent and compelling. Horses are large, high-maintenance prey animals; they are expensive to feed and maintain, they can be unpredictable and possibly dangerous, and they require knowledgeable, trained professionals to manage them effectively. They don't fit into an air-conditioned therapy office, and they don't travel easily. However, on the plus side . . . . . they are beautiful, intriguing, social, and herd-based. Being in their presence invites quiet contemplation and mindful awareness of what we bring to a situation (emotionally,

physically, and in terms of our intentionality). As prey animals, horses are exquisitely attuned to their immediate surroundings—centuries of survival and adaptation have developed their observational skills such that they respond instantaneously to any perceived threat. Horses will always take care of their own needs for safety and survival first; thus, in order to connect and build a collaborative relationship with them, humans must create and maintain a safe space so that the horse can choose to become a part of the process. This creates an interesting context for exploring the skills and personal qualities that developing clinicians bring to the therapy room, given the rather obvious parallels with the therapeutic process.

### **Clinical and Theoretical Assumptions**

As the equine coursework that I have developed is housed within the Family Therapy graduate program at NSU, the clinical approach is consistently grounded in the systemic, brief therapy traditions that are the hallmark of our education and training at NSU (Cade & O’Hanlon, 1993; Green, 2014, 2011; Green & Flemons, 2018; Flemons & Green, 2014, 2017; Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974). Clinical conundrums are conceptualized from a strengths-based perspective that prioritizes the honoring of clients’ solutions and resources and emphasizes a non-normative and non-pathologizing stance (Green & Flemons, 2018). I am similarly informed by this relational approach when developing equine assisted training and supervision activities (Green, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2018, in press; Green, Rolleston, & Schroeder, 2018; Green, Schroeder, Rolleston, Penalva, & Judd, 2018). My goal is to create a context where students and supervisees can maintain an openness to learning about themselves, both personally and professionally, while interacting with horses in an experiential group setting. This requires a level of vulnerability and trust that is not unlike that which our clients experience in session. By maintaining a focus on strengths and resources and avoiding pathologizing conceptualizations, I

attempt to create a generative context in which students can explore their personal assumptions, examine their responses to the horses and to each other as well as the values that inform those responses, and experiment with new ways of relating through their interactions with the horses.

My own clinical stance and personal values inform the ideals that I believe are essential in developing thoughtful, self-reflective, and mindful therapists who offer their clients a safe place to address life challenges. In order to create this generative context for their clients, therapists must be able to:

- Develop rapport
- Build trust
- Create a collaborative and respectful relationship
- Consider their beliefs about therapist intentionality
- Examine their assumptions about movement, change, direction, leading/pacing
- Attend to ethical and legal responsibilities
- Maintain safety

Managing these complex demands requires a level of self-awareness and self-reflection that must be intentionally explored and developed. Attention to the self-of-the-therapist is foundational in our equine coursework, and it is always informed by a systemic, relational perspective. Rober (1999) notes that within the family therapy literature, the notion of "self" doesn't imply that the self is a separate entity, but, rather, refers to "the experiencing process of the therapist—in other words, to his [or her] feelings, intuitions, fears, images, ideas, and so on" (p. 4). This view of the self-of-the-therapist as an experiencing process resonates with a relational framework for training therapists and is particularly relevant given the experiential nature of our equine assisted approach. Timm and Blow (1999) define self-of-the-therapist work

as “the willingness of a therapist or supervisor to participate in a process that requires introspective work on issues in his or her own life, that has an impact [on] the process of therapy in both positive and negative ways” (p. 333). Such introspection is generated organically through the equine-based activities designed specifically for this purpose. In the following section, I will describe some of the activities that have had maximum impact on our student trainees and will include transcripts of student reflections on their experiences.

### **Equine Assisted Supervision/Training Activities and Goals**

The two courses that I have developed are both taught as hybrids—in a 15-week term, every other week’s class is held at the barn. During classroom days, students become familiar with the literature regarding equine and other animal assisted therapies and also process their barn-day experiences. In the Advanced Class, the curriculum includes an intentional focus on the self-of-the-therapist, and the course readings address this topic specifically. During barn days, our work is entirely experiential. For three hours, students are engaged in hands-on activities with the horses that are designed to address some aspect of their professional and personal development. Some examples of these activities and their related target issues/themes include:

- Catching a horse and leading it around a paddock: Themes include connecting with a client; developing trust and rapport; collaboration; considering pacing/leading. In this activity, students often find parallels between their way of approaching the horses and their typical ways of approaching new clients (i.e., being proactive versus giving the client space; level of intentionality and directiveness; and attention to pacing/leading with the client).
- Listening for the horse’s heartbeat: The heartbeat can be difficult to hear, and often the moment of hearing it is quite powerful for the students, leading to discussions

about how we have to position ourselves in session to hear difficult client experiences or stories that haven't previously been shared.

- **Cleaning a horse's hooves:** This activity requires that the student lift one hoof, thus asking the horse to be a bit off balance. Metaphors of support, balance, connection, and vulnerability are abundant in discussions of this activity. This exercise can also be quite intimidating for students who have never been around horses, as asking a horse to lift a heavy hoof requires responsiveness from the horse and a significant level of confidence from the human.

As we invite students into these activities, we bring awareness to a shared assumption (and repeated observation) that participants typically “show up at the barn like they show up in life.” This is a common theme in equine assisted work, and we find it to be a useful understanding as we continually experience students finding parallels in their clinical behavior and appreciating the richness of exploring new ways of connecting and relating. Below I will present in greater depth some of the activities that have been most compelling for our students, along with their reflections on the impact of these experiences.

**Blindfolded connecting**—In this exercise, typically conducted the first barn day of the Advanced Class, students are individually blindfolded and then led to a horse and given the following instructions: “Find a way to connect with and learn about your horse in any manner you choose. And when you feel comfortable, find a way to create movement with your horse.” The instructions are not elaborated on further; an Equine Specialist (ES) is at all times holding the horse on a lead rope and monitoring horse and human safety. The student is free to reach out to the ES for assistance or guidance at any time and may speak freely with the ES throughout the experience (although often the entire experience occurs in silence). My goal for this activity is to

invite students to learn to connect utilizing non-verbal communication and to let go of their typical assumptions about how to build trust, learn about another being, and find ways to connect and collaborate. My observation is that students find the silence and the absence of visual cues to offer an intensification of their other senses—they become fully present and mindfully aware of their proximity to the horse, attending to each movement and footstep. This heightened awareness serves them well as they explore how they can approach clients with fewer assumptions and greater attunement.

**Rana:** I went to the horse wearing my curiosity hat and nothing else. I was stunned (by) how empathy and curiosity together became a successful recipe to connection and change. Actually, being blindfolded really helped me to be more sensitive to my other senses and to be in the zone flowing with the horse, not thinking who will take the next step or where are we going. Instead curiosity took the wheel.

**Cristina:** I was relaxed, not too worried about the movement part but I was focused more on the connection between us. It makes me think of when working with clients—we are in the dark, we do not know much about them or their story. However, we have to co-create change and lead them in the right direction, and that is being made by joining, by creating that trust, where they can be vulnerable and be open for change.

**Mark:** In my mind, we go into the therapy room blindfolded and connect with the clients in a way that they will lead us in certain ways and trust us enough to follow us in other ways. Having the space to move (literally and figuratively) is something that was meaningful to me. For me, with more space comes more options for maneuverability. I also found myself being more mindful of the horse. I utilized the horse as a center for my mindfulness during the session.

**Labeling**—This activity is also conducted early in the semester of the Advanced Class. Students are provided with non-toxic, water-based paints and asked to depict on one side of the horse any labels that have been applied to them (or that they have applied to themselves) that they are not comfortable with. They can depict these labels in any way (images, words, etc.), and can include as many labels as they wish. After discussion of these initial labels, they are asked if they would like to remove the labels from the horse (they are provided with a bucket of water and a sponge) or alter them in any way, and then are asked to depict labels with which they resonate or embrace. This activity simultaneously allows therapists to understand this experience from a client’s perspective, and as well, to explore how their own and others’ ideas about themselves (personally and professionally) contribute to or detract from their ability to be fully present in the therapy room. The level of intensity and vulnerability inspired by this activity is frequently surprising to the participants, and they explore ways to fully embrace the strengths they hope to bring into the clinical setting.

**Amylie:** It was somewhat nerve racking to think about the implications of placing my thoughts and feelings onto the horse; it felt as if I was going to hurt one of the horses with my negative thoughts by attaching my label to them, and yet I never really think about how I hurt myself by applying the label to myself in my mind. It was also difficult knowing that I would be sharing these thoughts with my cohort but at the same time there was a freedom in that vulnerability. By accepting the help and, as Herb [one of the Equine Specialists] put it, “structure” of the halter, a really big change happened in myself and in Casper (her chosen equine partner). By asking for help and accepting help, the chaos of the day seemed to dissolve and suddenly everything seemed much more calm and orderly. I really learnt so much about humility in that moment and how as

therapist, a big part of what we do is just be there with our clients when aid and change is difficult to allow, ask for, and accept.

**Caitlin:** I found that I remain . . . my own worst critic and that I really should take the advice I have/would give any client. I will now work on reframing the following concepts in my mind: Asking for help and being more emotionally vulnerable/open (to appropriate people). This will not only help me grow, but it will provide others the opportunity to help me (which judging from our conversation, at least other therapists love to do) and improve/strengthen my relationships.

**Risky Crossings**—A large tarp is laid out on the ground and students are asked to find a way to lead a horse across the tarp. This presents several layers of difficulty, depending on the weather, wind, distractions, and the horse’s reaction to walking across an unstable, noisy surface.

Metaphors of fear, risk-taking, connecting, building trust and developing collaboration are all possible within this conversation. My intention for this activity is to explore how the participants conceptualize risk, how they might invite a client into walking through difficult conversations, how they would invite trust and maintain a strong, guiding presence throughout those conversations, and how they might respond to clients’ experiences of danger or risk. The horses provide a large and compelling example, as they may have a very strong, immediate, physical response to the noises and distractions that accompany their walk across the tarp.

**Rana:** Sometimes I purposefully choose to not to go to “a dark place” with the client because it’s scary to me too, so I play it safe by going around the problem instead of facing it with my safe curiosity. This can be not physically safe for the client, especially if the client is facing a serious problem. I guess it would be helpful if I utilized

the emotional safety part for the client to feel safe to talk and share and connect, but that doesn't mean that this kind of safety is enough.

**Triggers**—This activity was originally developed by our Stable Place team for the substance abuse groups that we work with (see Green, et al., 2018). The exercise involves the use of a range of dressage or lunge whips (short to long) that can be used as a tool of communication for the horses. An ES initially enters the arena and demonstrates the effect on the herd of introducing whips of varying lengths in different ways—they may point or gesture with them, swing them, raise or lower them, tap the ground or their own leg with them, or even simply place them on the ground (they do not touch the horses with them). Then each participant is allowed to enter the arena or paddock and discover ways to interact with the horses using on or more of these tools. Students experiment with creating varying levels of energy with the horses, based on their selection of a whip and on their method of using it. We use this activity with substance abuse clients to help create new conversations with them around the things that “trigger” a response to use or relapse; during our supervision sessions, the same activity is utilized to explore therapists’ comfort levels with introducing different levels of intensity and movement within a session, and how these choices impact their ability to connect with their clients and “move” the session.

**Mark:** In my therapeutic experience, I have the “trigger” (idea) that I cannot connect with people in a chaotic setting, but in my life, I have connected the most with people during some chaotic times. I reflected on these chaotic times and saw that during these times, people seemed more vulnerable. So why am I not comfortable and able to embrace the chaos in a therapy session? It could be a good rapport builder if used correctly. The clients are potentially stepping out of their comfort zone and that can be punctuated. I believe that I will have more

awareness in sessions and learning how to use chaos as a rapport builder rather than something negative that must be brought back to manageable levels all the time. Chaos can be good.

**Round Pen:** This is often one of the most powerful activities for the class, and it is offered at the final session of the Advanced Class. During this exercise, the students are invited to experience the Monty Roberts's *Join-Up* method (Epston, 2011; Roberts, 2002) in the round pen with one horse and one ES. The ES briefly demonstrates how to communicate with the horse to create forward motion within the round pen, and then how to invite the horse to turn inward and move in the opposite direction around the pen. After some time, the student is offered the opportunity to turn away and find the horse "joining up" in the center of the round pen. The beauty of this activity is in the freedom it affords; each student and their horse will find a unique way to connect and "dance" together. For some, the process is sticky, challenging, and at times, chaotic. For others, the dance is fluid and graceful, allowing both horse and human to enjoy the rhythm and pattern of a connected relationship. Each student takes away something different from this activity, and we utilize group observation and processing to help punctuate the strengths observed in each horse/human process.

**Mark:** Thinking back to my experience in the round pen, I see growth in myself in equine work and as a therapist. My thoughts going into the pen were to "have fun" and enjoy being in the pen. With that in mind, I was able to go in and have a conversation with the horse pretty easily. Where I moved, they moved and when I stopped, they stopped, and it felt pretty good to have that connection. Though I saw my own growth, I could see that there was more I could do and learn for future sessions. I saw this as how I see sessions and how I may need to work on sitting in a higher anxiety environment, potentially inciting a little anxiety within the client. I see this as being a way to bring a

change within the clients. I also value the times where the client and I "jam" together and have a conversation.

**Tyrone:** The horse stayed completely still, and I internally initially felt some sort of discouragement and a little worry of "what if I can't get the horse to react in ways the others did?" A little over 5 minutes into a heated stare off, I quickly remembered that there is no right or wrong and that each of our experiences would be completely different. Upon shifting my perception, I was able to see that I did create movement. Though it may not have been physical, the horse was mentally connected with me throughout my time in the round pen. His attention was completely fixated on me and the direction I decided to move for the entire time I was doing the round pen exercise. I immediately remembered intentionality. Walking in with a purpose would have made a difference. Though I had a personal purpose, I am sure the horse sensed that I was unsure and a little un-trusting of how he would react.

**Rana:** I have had sessions where the client just does like what the horse did and just is themselves and talks about their stories, and there are sessions where the spotlight is about shifting and changing. This was very useful for me to experience, to be always aware of my intentions and what I am bringing to the session. The image of the horse will always remind me to be kinder to myself and to be patient with my own process and timing!

## Conclusions

These examples provide only a brief glimpse into our work at the barn, but I hope they reflect the generative conversations that become possible when students leave their conventional settings of talk therapy and "talk supervision" and enter into an experiential process with our

horses and each other. These experiences allow the participants to try something different in the moment, in their interactions with a 1,000 lb. animal, and to experience *in their bodies* as well as their minds, the impact of that difference.

We utilize similar equine assisted activities in training a wide range of professionals, including anesthesiology assistant students, financial planning consultants, agency staff, university administrators, and high school teachers and administrators. In such trainings, our conversations are adapted to the particular context of those we are training, but we find the richness of the experience remains and the metaphors abound. Of course, our primary focus is conducting equine assisted clinical sessions with individuals, couples, families, and groups. We work with varied populations and presenting issues, including at-risk and incarcerated youth, foster care children, adults in residential substance abuse treatment, individuals and families experiencing the aftermath of trauma (including those affected by the Parkland shooting in the spring of 2018), veterans, those dealing with illness, grief, and loss, as well as couple and family communication and conflict resolution. In every case, we find that the horses bring a powerful and generative presence to the therapeutic and training context, and we are so grateful for their partnership. Through experiential processes with the horses, our supervisees and our clients have an embodied conversation that lingers long past the last day at the barn.

## References

- Cade, B., & O'Hanlon, W. (1993). *A brief guide to brief therapy*. New York: Norton.
- Epston, D. (2011). The corner: Innovative services. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 30(3), pp. 86-95.
- Green, S. (In press). Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy: Partnering with Horses to Provide Mental Health Services. Horse Industry Handbook. American Youth Horse Council.
- Green, S. (2018). Partnering with horses to train mental health professionals. In K.S.Trotter & J. Baggerly (Eds.) *Equine assisted mental health interventions: Harnessing solutions to common problems*. New York: Taylor and Francis. (pp. 251-256).
- Green, S. (2017). Equine assisted psychotherapy. In J. Carlson & S. Dermer (Eds.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of marriage, family, and couples counseling*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. (pp. 552-554).
- Green, S. (2014). Horse sense: Equine assisted single session consultations. In M. Hoyt and M. Talmon (Eds.) *Capture the moment: Single session therapy and walk-in service*. Williston, VT: Crown House Publishing.
- Green, S. (2013). Horses and families: Bringing equine assisted approaches to family therapy. In A. Rambo, T. Boyd, A. Schooley & C. West (Eds.). *Family therapy review: Contrasting contemporary models*. New York: Taylor and Francis.
- Green, S. (2011). Power or pattern? A brief, relational approach. *Family Therapy Magazine*, (10)6, pp. 9-11.
- Green, S. & Flemons, D. (Eds.) (2018). *Quickies: The handbook of brief sex therapy* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: Norton.
- Green, S., Rolleston, M., & Schroeder, M. (2018). Equine assisted therapy with couples and families in crisis. In K. S. Trotter & J. Baggerly (Eds.) *Equine assisted mental health interventions: Harnessing solutions to common problems*. New York: Taylor and Francis. (pp. 238-248).
- Green, S., Schroeder, M., Rolleston, M., Penalva, C., & Judd, V. (2018). Triggering transformations: An equine assisted approach to the treatment of substance Abuse. In K. S. Trotter & J. Baggerly (Eds.) *Equine assisted mental health interventions: Harnessing solutions to common problems*. New York: Taylor and Francis. (pp. 161-168).
- Flemons, D., & Green, S. (2017). Brief relational couple therapy. In J. L. Lebow, A. L. Chambers, & D. C. Breunlin (Eds.). *Encyclopedia of couple and family therapy*. New York, NY: Springer. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-15877-8>

- Flemons, D. (2002). *Of one mind: The logic of hypnosis, the practice of therapy*. New York: Norton.
- Flemons, D. & Green, S. (2014). Quickies: Single-session sex therapy. In M. Hoyt and M. Talmon (Eds.) *Capturing the moment: Single session therapy and walk-in services* (pp. 407-423) . Bethel, CT: Crown House Publishing.
- Fraser, S. & Solovey, A. (2018). The process of change in brief sex therapy. In S. Green & D. Flemons (Eds.). *Quickies: The handbook of brief sex therapy* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., pp. 70-98. New York: Norton.
- Rober, P. (1999). The therapist's inner conversation in family therapy practice: Some ideas about the self of the therapist, therapeutic impasse, and the process of reflection. *Family Process*, 38(2), 209–228.
- Roberts, M. (2002). *Horse sense for people*. New York: Penguin.
- Timm, T. M., & Blow, A. J. (1999). Self-of-the-therapist work: A balance between removing restraints and identifying resources. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 21(3), 331–351.
- Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J. & Fisch, R. (1974). *Change: Principles of problem formation and problem resolution*. New York: Norton.

