

## *Chapter 23*

# *Horse Sense: Equine Assisted Single Session Consultations*

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A relatively new and often-misunderstood clinical approach, equine assisted therapy invites clinicians to temporarily leave their “talk therapy” techniques at the office and emerge into the realm of nature, engaging with large, powerful, yet typically gentle animals who, for a short time, become co-therapists in a clinically rich and unpredictable therapeutic dance. There are multiple and varied approaches to incorporating horses into clinical work; the range of those approaches will be reviewed briefly here.

The particular work described in this chapter is fundamentally grounded in the relational, systemic assumptions that have informed the brief therapy field (Cade & O’Hanlon, 1993; Flemons & Green, 2007; Flemons, 2002; Green, 2013; Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974).

- Our work is intentionally strength-based, non-normative, and non-pathologizing.
- We seek out our clients’ solutions rather than imposing our own, and we attend carefully to how our clients’ behaviors make sense in context, assuming there is systemic wisdom in their current actions that we need to understand and respect.
- Our effort is always to understand and utilize this wisdom rather than to simply offer conventional ideas about relationship health and satisfaction.
- We strive to honor and punctuate our clients’ strengths, to avoid pathologizing interpretations of their behavior, and to create—through our observations of their encounters with the horses—new meanings and understandings that can enhance their relationships.

These clinical assumptions provide a solid theoretical foundation that offers clinical clarity within an experiential model that relies largely on non-verbal communication, spontaneity, careful observation, and creativity in learning to observe and utilize the immediate and powerful interactions between humans and horses to facilitate therapeutic change.

Our equine assisted approach lends itself particularly well to single session consultations, as the clinical work often fast-forwards client understandings of their current situation. A single session with the horses offers clients an embodied experience of awareness and transformation that they may return to in future therapy sessions and also in their day-to-day interactions with each other. This chapter introduces the broad field of equine assisted therapies, describes in detail the model we developed, and

offers a case study that illustrates the potential of a single equine assisted clinical session to transform couple dynamics.

## *History of Horses and Humans*

Humans partnering with horses is not new—for thousands of years we have shared a bond with these beautiful and fascinating creatures, using them to carry warriors into battle, to haul burdens, plow fields, drive cattle across the range, and, in more modern days, to earn millions for their owners on the race track and in the show ring. Within the past 30 years, occupational and physical therapists have embraced the physical benefits of horseback riding to create successful therapeutic riding programs for individuals with physical limitations, as well as for children dealing with the effects of autism and developmental delays (Frewin & Gardner, 2005; Masini, 2010). The sheer range of life-enhancing services provided by horses over the centuries is staggering, particularly given that they are prey animals, and thus, naturally inclined to flee all potential predators. Humans have acted as both predators and partners, and have over the centuries perpetrated much harm as we have bent these beautiful creatures to our will and determined the course of their lives. As Hamilton (2012, p. 7) notes, “Because horses function from the premise of a herd identity, they see relationships as partnerships. They struggle to include us in their concept of a herd—a huge leap considering they are the ultimate prey species and we the uber predators.” However, oddly enough, horses still find it within themselves to connect with humans, often becoming willing and trusting partners in a wide range of endeavors.

## *Development of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy*

Within the past 20 years, increasing attention has been devoted to exploring the potential of horses to enhance lives not only through physical activity and riding experiences, but also through their unique way of relating to humans. While the range of animal assisted therapies includes clinical work that partners humans with a wide variety of animals (dogs, dolphins, cats, pigs, rabbits, and even elephants) (Chandler, 2012), the basic assumptions of utilizing horses therapeutically are unique, as the animals themselves offer a singularly different relationship with humans. As prey animals, horses do not automatically assume they are safe in the company of humans. Because their survival for thousands of years has depended entirely on their ability to attune to their immediate surroundings and detect danger in time to flee, they are exquisitely sensitive to context. They attend carefully to minute changes in body language—of humans, other horses, or other predators—and they respond with immediacy and honesty.

It has been said that “horses can’t lie.” Without anthropomorphizing, it remains clear through observing horse-human interaction that horses have a unique capacity to attune themselves quickly to the non-verbal communication of humans, to determine whether the intentions conveyed by that communication allow for a safe environment for the horse, and to respond accordingly and immediately. They read human behavior quickly, and are intuitive and responsive to that behavior. Horses have no ability, as humans do, to edit, misrepresent, or manipulate through communication; this alone alters the context of therapy considerably.

## *Assumptions of Equine Assisted Models*

Many equine assisted programs have been developed for at-risk adolescents, allowing them the opportunity to groom, care for, interact with, and perhaps ride the horses, with the guiding assumption that all of these activities will, in general, be beneficial in building self-esteem, developing responsibility and accountability, and offering much-needed companionship (Chandler, 2012; Frewin & Gardner, 2005). Other programs have more specific clinical aims, utilizing horses in therapeutic settings run by licensed mental health professionals to treat specific issues such as substance abuse, eating disorders, domestic violence, trauma, PTSD, and physical or sexual abuse (Masini, 2010). A number of organizations have emerged, each informed by a slightly different approach or set of assumptions, to train and in some cases certify equine and mental health professionals to conduct this work. These include the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), and the Professional Association for Therapeutic Horsemanship, International (PATH, Intl), among others. Most of these programs offer an atheoretical approach that assumes each licensed mental health professional will bring his or her own clinical expertise and model to the work, while integrating the therapeutic potential of including horses as partners in the sessions.

## *Theoretical Framework*

A brief, relational approach to therapy provides the foundation for our equine assisted model (Green, 2013). Clients are assumed to be the experts on their own lives, and a non-normative, non-pathologizing stance is maintained; thus, we don't assume that clients' "hidden agendas" or pathologies will reveal themselves through their work with the horses. Rather, we believe the session will provide an opportunity for clients to try something new and to experience success in the moment; this experiential process can then offer new meanings for the behaviors that have been troubling to them. Informed by the work of the Mental Research Institute (MRI), we assume that our clients are often stuck in their own well-meaning attempts to resolve problems, and that those attempts may be exacerbating their difficulties (Watzlawick, et al., 1974). Clients often experience, in one session, a transformation of the premises, meanings, and assumptions that have defined their relationship—transformations we understand as second-order change (Fraser & Solovey, 2007; Watzlawick, et al., 1974).

The goal of our work, then, is to alter the clients' relationship to their problem, rather than to explore underlying causes. Our focus is consistently on relationships, rather than on individual motivations or characteristics; we seek to enhance relational freedom, so that our clients may change or remain stable in coordination, rather than competition, with each other (Flemons, 2002; Flemons & Green, 2007). We assume that clients are doing the best they can, given their circumstances, and that their solution attempts have made sense in some significant way. Understanding "patterns as habits" (Cade & O'Hanlon, 1993), we hope to offer our clients, through a unique and unpredictable interaction with the horses, a way out of those habits into a less constrained and less troubling relationship. Paramount in all of our sessions is our acknowledgment that clients are taking risks just to be present and engaged with the horses and each other, as well as our deep respect for and desire to understand our clients' expertise and strength. We trust that through our observation of their interactions with each other and the horses, we will be able, within the single session, to observe and highlight those risks and strengths in ways that lead to transformed relationships.

## *Structure of Session*

Each session is organized around simple tasks that can easily be revised or even omitted as the session evolves; the point is never the completion of the task—rather, tasks are simply jumping off points for observing client behaviors and interactions. A team, including a mental-health professional and a trained equine specialist, conduct all sessions. The therapist's job is to avoid becoming invested in the clients actually completing the task, and to focus on the experiential process, honing observation skills about “how” the clients attempt the task, noticing clients' investment in finishing, or perhaps their desire to connect, or to try, or to give up, or to ask for help. Clients may be asked to observe and describe horses, catch and lead them, name them, paint them with finger paints, walk them through obstacle courses, or gather them in a herd. The possibilities for tasks are endless, and are guided by the collaboration between the clinician and the equine specialist, balancing safety with risk, and offering opportunities for clients to be challenged personally and relationally.

There is often very little talk throughout the completion of a task; the therapy team observes closely, and considers ways the clients' behaviors are making sense given their context and constraints (i.e., their in-the-moment context with the horses, as well as the larger context of their relationship). Observation of the horses' behavior is paramount, as the horses' response to human behaviors often becomes a pivotal component in the clients' experience. We do not interpret equine behavior for our clients; rather, we ask them what sense the behavior makes to them, and they often share compelling stories that are relevant and close to their own experiences. In this way, the experiential potential of equine assisted work is maximized.

As mentioned earlier, all work is un-mounted; there is no attention to horsemanship or to “teaching” clients how best to work with or engage with the horses (EAGALA, 2009). We seek instead to learn from clients how they typically interact with each other, and with themselves when faced with uncertainty, ambiguity, fear, tension, and unusual expectations. All of these are common factors in any equine session; our ability to observe and comment therapeutically on how our clients manage these concerns provides the heart of our clinical work, as it offers the potential for creating relational freedom rather than constraint. We attempt to both make sense of their challenges and frustrations, and to notice and comment on strengths they may not have observed in terms of their unique efforts to resolve these challenges.

Equine assisted work thus offers an alternative context, apart from a content-based discussion of problem behaviors, which may allow clients to experience change and then apply that change back to their current life situations. The following case study will offer an illustration of this model in practice.

## *Clinical Illustration*

As I have specialized in couples therapy and sexuality concerns for the past 20 years, I have been particularly interested in bridging couples work with an equine assisted approach. Given that couples are often entrenched in long-standing, consistent, and often particularly painful interactional patterns that can be difficult to interrupt or transform, altering the therapeutic context can be a welcome change. Moving outside the therapy room and engaging with horses offers an innovative way for couples to experience, process, and understand their relationship dynamics, typically without a focus on the ongoing, familiar discussion of old hurts and resentments.

The case example presented here reflects the work that I developed and refined in collaboration with Valerie Judd, who serves as the equine specialist in all our couples' sessions. In this role, Valerie not only attends to the safety of the horses and people, but also observes the equine behavior closely, adding a different perspective to the clinical observations. An experienced horsewoman and trained equine specialist, she is able to notice subtle but relevant aspects of the horses' behavior that can become an integral part of our clinical interactions. We collaborate continuously throughout each session, comparing our observations and allowing the flow and direction to evolve in ways that maximize the clinical potential of the interactions between horses and humans.

I originally trained with EAGALA, and Valerie is certified as an equine specialist through PATH International. Our work together, however, has emphasized the specific incorporation of the brief, systemic therapy assumptions described above. We have witnessed first-hand the power of grounding an equine assisted approach in a solid theoretical framework that privileges a non-normative, non-pathologizing stance, punctuates clients' existing strengths, and shines a light on the unique ways they may already have found to connect as a couple.

Our work has been enriched by partnering with an innovative clinical practice here in South Florida, Couples on the Brink ([couplesonthebrink.com](http://couplesonthebrink.com)) that specializes in intensive therapy for couples in crisis. Valerie and I developed a consultation model that maximizes the power of our equine assisted approach and tailors it to working with distressed couples. The therapy team at Couples on the Brink (COTB) contracts with couples for 12 hours of intensive, in-office talk therapy, typically allocated in three 4-hour sessions. They also offer follow-up telephone sessions after the intensive work is completed. As a means of adding an experiential component to their intensive therapy, the clinicians at COTB refer these couples to us for an equine session lasting approximately 90 minutes. Most of the couples are unfamiliar with equine assisted therapy, but they have been intrigued and receptive to trying a new approach. The primary therapists are always welcome to join us to observe the session if their time permits. As illustrated below, we send a follow-up therapeutic letter to the couple (White & Epston, 1990), in care of the therapists, to be shared at their next appointment.

The referring therapists do not share specific information with us about the couple's situation prior to our consultation. Upon meeting the couple, I spend 10-15 minutes going over paper work, getting a signed release of information to communicate with the referring therapists, and hearing from them a very brief overview about their current situation and their work in intensive therapy. Our focus in this brief interview is to find out about any changes that have occurred since they began their intensive sessions, and to understand what hopes they currently have for their relationship. We discuss only minimal content or background about their situation, and then we "take it to the horses."

### *Case Study: Aaron and Laura*

Aaron and Laura were referred to us by COTB. They had been married for 8 years and had no children; both were in their mid-thirties. They were both independently employed in demanding and creative fields, and had devoted the years of their marriage to collaborating on their professional pursuits, traveling, and embracing life. Both were highly educated, articulate, reflective, and passionate. In addition to a powerful emotional and sexual connection, the couple shared intense synergy and creative collaboration, and supported each other as they built their careers. They had also endured hardship; Laura had suffered both severe injury and chronic, debilitating health issues within the previous 3 years, resulting in her needing a great deal of physical care and attention from Aaron.

Only in the past few months had she experienced significant health improvements that allowed her to attempt embracing life again with her characteristic enthusiasm and abandon; even so, her health was an ongoing concern for both of them.

They came to COTB as they were currently experiencing ongoing conflict and were in great distress. They couldn't imagine how they could love each other so deeply and be so committed to their relationship, and simultaneously find themselves in such emotional pain. They described Laura as a steamroller, moving over Aaron and demanding that he comply with her wishes, which he generally did but with much resentment. Laura believed he needed to commit more time and energy to her, so she demanded it. He wanted to be with her, but feared that her demands would overwhelm him. They both hoped that through intensive couple therapy, they could reclaim the passion and move beyond the conflict that currently threatened their relationship. We spoke very little regarding the content of their conflict, but went out and introduced them to the horses. While they had each ridden horses recreationally a few times, they had little other experience with horses, and neither of them had experienced equine-assisted therapy before; both were intrigued by the prospect.

Immediately as we approached the arena, Aaron and Laura were engaged, curious, and receptive to exploring what these horses might have to offer. We allowed them to simply observe, finding whatever way worked for them to get to know the horses and see what they could learn about them. We did not direct them in terms of how to approach the two mares they would be working with, whether they could or should touch them, or how the horses might respond, as we wanted to learn from the couple about the different ways they would each attempt to get to know our equine partners. We also did not share any information with them about the horses, such as names, histories, or typical behaviors/personality characteristics.

Aaron initially approached a grey mare (who he later decided to call "Sanchez") and noted that the other horse, an Appaloosa mare, seemed to hold back at first and make sure she wanted to engage (she later was christened "Dolittle" by both Aaron and Laura). Laura described being amazed by the horses' "gentle quiet presence," noting that while they are so big they emanate such presence and sense of calm. As we entered the ring, Laura observed the horses but did not approach them; the horses both went immediately to Aaron and stood quite near him, seeming to desire his presence. Dolittle began to nuzzle Aaron and nudge him repeatedly, moving her large head up and down his body, rubbing particularly forcefully against his crotch. Sanchez was more calm and passive in her demands, but nevertheless, stood patiently near Aaron, maintaining a constant gaze upon him and making clear she wanted to be in his presence. Neither horse approached Laura nor indicated that they noticed her.

We made no comment about the horse's intentions or behaviors, but asked Laura simply what she noticed about what was occurring. She said immediately that Dolittle asked for Aaron's attention the way she herself usually does (and which she said that Aaron hates); she said that Sanchez was asking for attention in the way that would work for Aaron—calmly and quietly. She stated that when she requests attention and caring from Aaron in the way that Dolittle was attempting, he gets angry and doesn't want to be with her. However, Aaron quickly corrected her and noted that while is at times angry at her attempts, he still wants very much to connect with her. This desire for connection came as a surprise to Laura.

We then asked them to catch a horse, take it for a walk, and bring it to a place they wanted it to be. We did not provide any specifics about how they were to do this—we didn't suggest that they do it together or individually, nor did we indicate what they were to use to catch the horse(s), nor what tools

or approach might work best. Our goal was to leave as much ambiguity as possible and then attend to how each of them attempted to accomplish the task. As they began, we paid careful attention to their actions, their interactions with each other and the horses, and the horses' behavior throughout.

Laura and Aaron initiated this task independently, in very different ways, with Laura offering Sanchez a beach ball and playfully inviting her to interact; as she repeatedly said, "come on, this will be fun—you will love it!" This invitation to play continued even as Aaron laughingly commented that horses don't play with balls. As her efforts to engage Sanchez continued to be ineffective, she rather abruptly pushed Sanchez, and then apologized, saying, rather emphatically, "I don't want to hurt you but we have a task to accomplish!" Sanchez turned her head and walked away.

During this interaction with Laura and Sanchez, Aaron was calmly retrieving halters from the center of the ring and trying to put them on the horses, while acknowledging repeatedly that he had no idea how to do so. This didn't stop him, and he commented that he was always eager to try new things and figure them out. After 5-10 minutes of trying unsuccessfully to gain cooperation from the horses, he asked Laura several times to come and help him figure out the halter. While she initially resisted, she ultimately complied and they spent much time attempting to put on the halters, always making sure the horses were safe and comfortable and that the halters weren't going to harm them in any way. The horses were calm and compliant throughout this process, never wandering away or disengaging. Following this patient and careful process, they then each separately took a horse for a walk, commenting throughout to each other on how they were able to do so and what that was like for them.

After we observed them walking for a few moments, we stopped them and commented very briefly on a couple things we had noticed; Valerie mentioned Laura's comment to Sanchez about "having a task to accomplish." Laura immediately noted that this is what she does to Aaron—inviting/demanding that the tasks she needs his help with will be fun. We then mentioned her unsuccessful attempts to entice Sanchez with the ball, and she elaborated further, noting that with Aaron, she pushes and cajoles, demanding that he will have fun "working on our household budget." Aaron quietly observed this discussion.

We then commented on their careful attention to keeping the horses safe and comfortable, and their sensitivity to the horses' experience. We also mentioned Aaron's desire to figure things out and his repeated invitations to Laura to help him do so. Laura noted how painful it is for her that his invitations only come when he wants/needs her intellect—not when he wants to "share his heart" with her. He heard this, and he agreed that they can connect intellectually and professionally, but they are missing the heart connection that they both value deeply.

At this point in a typical session, we would most likely have asked the couple to do a bit more elaborate task with the horses; however, this couple had already made significant connections between their interactions with the horses and their typical behaviors with each other. We seemed to have quite a good sense of their frustration, their pain, and their desire for connection. So instead, we then asked them to remove the halters from the horses and to arrange themselves and the horses in a way that would represent where they would like to be as a couple right now. Within 15-20 seconds, Aaron and Laura were standing between the two horses, with their hands outstretched, fingertips lightly touching each horse. Initially, Laura's back was to Aaron, although she was very close to him—almost spooning. However, she almost immediately turned around and faced him, with their noses almost touching and their eyes meeting, while remaining in contact with both horses, which stood quietly, nose to tail. The horses' cooperative response to their efforts to array them was immediate and compelling.

The couple shared a very powerful moment while standing in the midst of the two horses, tears streaming down their faces. After some time of allowing them to experience this connection, we asked them simply what was happening. They said that in that brief moment, they were able to connect in a way that “filled them up” rather than drained them in any way. Aaron described his fear that if he were responsive to Laura’s demands to connect with her, that it would take too much time and limit his ability to accomplish his work. What surprised him was how much he in fact felt filled up—not just that he was filling her up—and that the moment was powerful and brief, and would allow him to connect with her and with his life in a significant and positive way. We asked them if they could give a name to the configuration they created, and they said that it represented the “cradle” that they hoped they would be able to return to.

They were both deeply touched by the power of this moment; I took a picture of them in their “cradle” with the horses, and texted it to them while still in the session. They said they would frame it and have it displayed in their home, to bring them back to what they learned about how to embrace their heart connection. They shared that with all they have experienced in life, this had been one of the most meaningful and powerful experiences of all, and that it would stay with them forever.

As mentioned earlier, because we only have a brief time with these couples prior to their return to their intensive therapy sessions, we follow up our equine assisted therapy session with a letter that is sent to the primary therapy team at COTB and read together in the couple’s next session. In each of these letters, we describe what we believe to be the pivotal moments from the session, and we offer our observations regarding how their interactions with the horses may be relevant within their relationship. The intent of each letter is to offer a strengths-based, non-pathologizing and, ideally, generative description of the couples’ encounter with the horses. The single session, along with the therapeutic letter, often punctuates themes that may have already been developing within the couples’ intensive therapy sessions. The single session with the horses allows the couple to move away from talking about their struggles and to experience them in a powerful, embodied way. One of the liberations for me, as an experienced “talk-therapy” professional, is that I can watch our clients “see” and experience, in one session, changes that I might otherwise have discussed with clients for weeks, with little result. Below are excerpts from the therapeutic letter that we sent to Laura and Aaron:

Dear Laura and Aaron,

It was our honor and pleasure to meet with you last week, and to witness the powerful work that you were able to do with the horses. Both of you demonstrated a commitment to consider your actions and your responses to each other within the context of your history, your love, and your challenges, and to find your path to a new way of being together.

We were captivated as the session began and you both began to notice the horses’ ways of being and to make sense of their behaviors. Laura, you quickly began to notice parallels between how the horses were inviting Aaron’s presence and the ways that you find to ask Aaron to be with you. Your ability to examine your own behavior, and to watch Aaron’s reactions to Sanchez and Dolittle’s different sorts of invitations, seemed to provide a foundation for the rest of the session. With no defensiveness or emotional protection, you both immersed yourselves in the possibilities for learning and growing in this moment. Laura, we also were struck at that moment by your impression that when you invite Aaron’s presence in the way that Dolittle was asking, he tends to become angry and not want to connect. What we heard from him, clearly, was that even in anger or frustration, he still wants very

much to connect with you—anger and connection can coexist. We wonder how this understanding will inform you as you find new ways to connect with each other.

As we asked you to catch a horse and take her for a walk, we noticed your unique ways of reaching out. Laura, you offered an invitation to play and a promise of enjoyment and fun, and seemed to become frustrated when that invitation was not accepted. As Valerie observed, you then moved Sanchez while apologizing to her, and reminding her of your shared task. It sounds as though the tasks that you invite Aaron to “love” are not always the activities he wants to “love” with you. Aaron, you enthusiastically embraced the challenge of trying something you had no idea how to do, and then invited Laura to help you several times. We noticed that it was very important to you to know the “right way” to put the halter on; we wonder how your desire to respond to Laura in the “right way” has at times kept you from responding at all. As you and Laura worked together to find a way to halter the horses, we were so touched by your careful attention to the horses’ safety and comfort. You wanted to make sure, above all, that you were attuned to their needs. Your tenderness and sensitivity were so apparent to us even as you were in the midst of struggling with invitations that were not received as you had hoped.

Aaron, when you invited Laura to help you figure out this new challenge, we saw that this invitation to her intellect, but not to her heart, has perhaps been standing in the way of the heart-filled connection that you both have been missing. The poetry with which you both turned away from these frustrated invitations and towards each other, turning the horses into a cradle that connected your hearts, astounded us in its brevity and its elegance. Without a doubt, the two of you know exactly how to find a heart-to-heart connection, to grasp it fully and immediately, and to fill each other up in the moment. We trust that you will find many ways to claim that connection and to be filled by it. Thank you both for sharing a piece of your story with us. We would always love to hear from you.

We were fortunate to be able to follow up with the couple’s intensive therapy team, and to learn that a year after treatment, they were doing well. While they had had some ongoing and significant challenges with Laura’s health concerns—challenges that threatened the peace and connection they had developed—they were able to find ways again to connect and support each other, and to renew the intimacy they had created. A month after a follow-up session with their intensive therapy team, they reported that they were stronger than ever.

## *Conclusions and Implications*

This case represents our commitment to embracing and amplifying the strengths and wisdom our clients bring, and to finding experiential ways to interrupt the “habits” that have prevented them from enjoying the relational freedom they desire. Our clinical assumptions help us focus on the creation of new meaning and interactions, without attention to pathology, causes, or negative intent. Always, we maintain a non-expert stance; we don’t impose our views, and we choose to frame, rather than interpret, client interactions. Similarly, we have no desire to educate our clients on how to have a “healthy” relationship—we believe they have their own ideas about this that simply need to be accessed and privileged. This fits well within an equine-assisted model that is not informed by a need to educate clients about how best to interact with horses; in the clients’ efforts to find their own way with the horses, they demonstrate for us their relational strengths.

We have found this to be a transformative experiential process, with little discussion of “how things are” but a significant focus on observation and meaning. Interestingly, while the referring therapists do

not provide us with specific details about the couples' relationship prior to our session, our impressions of the clients' struggles are always strikingly similar to those of the intensive therapy team, as we learn upon conferring with them after the session. We hope to enhance the overall therapeutic process—but we don't take the place of it; our therapeutic letters offer a way to connect the equine work back with the ongoing intensive therapy, and provide a new perspective. We offer consultations as a way of dealing with stuck cases as well, for other therapists in the community.

Not all of our equine-assisted sessions are single session; we also do ongoing clinical work that includes horses, and we work with a wide range of clients (children and adolescents, couples, families, and groups), struggling with issues such as eating disorders, substance abuse, domestic violence, anxiety, school problems, conflict, and crisis. In all cases, we hold on to our foundational clinical assumptions, while letting go of our desire to "talk about" the context of the struggle and instead, watch it unfold. Sometimes, a single session is all that's needed, and in those cases, we celebrate the ability of our equine co-therapists to invite clients into new ways of interacting and making sense of their struggles.

Making the decision to partner with horses in my clinical work has been exhilarating, challenging, frustrating, and inspiring. I have questioned my sanity many times as I have dealt with the complexities of adding a herd of large, hungry, curious, opinionated, and feisty co-therapists to my practice. Valerie and I have learned to manage safety concerns, calm our own anxieties, pay attention to the horses' behavior, watch, learn, and trust the process. I have learned to let go of my need to "talk" in session and simply observe; Valerie has learned that our human clients don't have to put a halter on the "right" way, and that the horses won't mind, as long as they are treated with respect and kindness. We have both learned how much the horses can show us about how our clients engage, develop relationship, push too hard (and thus encounter a fleeing horse), create trust, initiate cooperation, face and overcome fears, and find new ways to connect with each other in loving and yet complex relationships. Each session is unique, unpredictable, and demanding in its requirement that we observe and utilize what's happening in the moment, rather than hold onto any commitment about what "should" be happening. The horses are often our greatest clinical asset, as they communicate very clearly with the clients about how their behavior is being received. When clients change their attempts in the moment, their equine partners respond with immediacy and grace.

While certainly not every therapist may have access to the unique setting necessary—or the desire—to include horses in their work, we encourage readers to seek out opportunities to collaborate with professionals who do conduct relational, strength-based equine assisted models. In one session, it will add horse sense to your practice, and innovation to your ongoing clinical work.

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