



NATIONAL EATING DISORDERS ASSOCIATION
MAKING CONNECTIONS

Are There Tools For Recovery?

FEATURING

Evidence-Based Treatment

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Horses Lend a Helping Hoof

By Devon Combs, Certified Equine Gestalt Coach, Colorado

During her second hour at the ranch, Katie enters the arena where Archer, the horse, is roaming without a halter or lead rope. She cautiously walks towards the center, and she stands with her arms crossed. Archer is standing in the farthest corner of the arena, and he casually glances at Katie.

From the other side of the arena, Archer lowers his head and starts moving his lips and jaw in a chewing motion as Katie's authentic feelings begin to emerge in her tears. Katie wipes her eyes.

Archer promptly turns his 1,200 pound body and walks right up to Katie's frame. Archer lowers his head inches away from Katie's chest, and he takes a deep sigh.

"What do you notice about Archer?" I inquire. "That he wants to be with me even when I'm crying." Katie says in disbelief. She raises her arms around Archer's neck and buries her face into his mane.

Katie's emotions that have been locked away for years begin to emerge and be released. Archer stands as still as a statue, and his eyes are soft. Moments later, Katie unwraps her arms from around his neck. With her shoulders back and eyes forward, she steps toward Archer's head and whispers, "Thank you."

After she strokes his neck for a moment, I ask Katie to walk toward me, so we can debrief her experience. Archer immediately follows her as she heads toward the gate where I'm standing. "What will you take beyond the arena, Katie?" I ask. Her soft expression opens into a smile and she says, "That it's ok to cry and show my emotions. I feel better." As she plays with Archer's forelock, I ask, "What do you notice in your body?" She takes a moment and puts her hand to her heart, "My heart feels full."

Equine Coaching is an effective experiential process where the horse is an active partner in assisting the client in self-acceptance, emotional growth and developing positive life skills. This hands-on modality can be used as an adjunct to evidence-based treatment for eating disorders. As a lifelong horsewoman

and Certified Equine Gestalt Coach specializing in eating disorders, I facilitate the interaction between a client and a horse. The Equine Gestalt Coaching Method™ is a specific Equine Coaching Certification program developed by Melisa Pearce, a core founder since 1989 of the horse-human healing movement. The experiential nature of the method involves the horse as an active partner with the coach in the client's exploratory process. The integrative approach of the equine's interaction combined with positive coaching, somatic awareness guidance and Gestalt methodology assists the client in examining their life with a focus on designing a positive future.

In an Equine Coaching session, the horse partners with the human facilitator to address the client's struggles and stifled emotions that are blocking them from moving forward. Often, an eating disordered client will say they are fine when inside they feel depressed. A horse picks up on this incongruity and offers honest feedback through his reaction and body language.

The sheer size, power and grace of being with a horse commands that the client be in the present moment and allows clients to gain trust with the animal which in turn builds trust and confidence in themselves.¹ This experiential process is effective in assisting a client to get out of living in his/her head and to connect with his/her body. Through the horse's non-judgmental feedback and interaction with a client, he/she develops awareness about his/her body and what sensations and emotions are emerging as the process unfolds.

Instead of using eating disorder behaviors to get rid of the emotions, the client's emotions are recognized, validated and then released. The client can then take this experience with the horse as a meta-

phor for dealing with difficult situations in their life.² The integrated learning carries beyond the arena. Connecting with horses through Equine Coaching can be an effective adjunct activity to evidence-based treatment and an integral part of a person's recovery from an eating disorder. For many struggling, horses can lend a helping hoof. ■

References:

- 1., 2. Equine Psychotherapy, <http://www.equine-psychotherapy.com/>, Copyright 2008

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...it has been suggested that Equine Therapy – a common form of animal-assisted therapy – may yield a variety of psychotherapeutic benefits... If one interprets the existing research broadly to apply to a variety of animals, mental illnesses, illness severities, and treatment settings, and if one listened to the positive reports from those who practice Equine Therapy with eating disorder patients as well as the patients' own reports; then, it would appear that Equine Therapy is effective with eating disorders...

Cumella, Edward J.. "Question: Is Equine Therapy Useful in the Treatment of Eating Disorders?" *Eating Disorders The Journal of Treatment & Prevention*, v. 11, no. 2, Summer 2003, 143, 146.