

the quarterly journal of wholistic equine care

Natural HORSE

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NATURAL HORSES MAKE EXCELLENT COLLEGE PROFESSORS

by Sandra Wise



These Florida Cracker horses, who live and work at liberty in this beautiful 5,000-acre natural setting in Central Florida, are now being used to teach psychotherapy skills to student therapists.

What does a natural horse in a natural setting have to do with teaching psychotherapy skills to psychology graduate students? Perhaps more than you think.

Consider this question first: *What is the nature of a "natural" horse?* His nature is to move at liberty, to be free. A natural horse reacts and responds to his environment and those around him in ways that increase his sense of safety and satisfy his need for comfort, curiosity and companionship. He is profoundly curious and, if given time and opportunity, is willing to explore situations and circumstances that initially seem frightening to him. A natural horse is supremely sensitive to humans with whom he interacts. He is highly aware of their emotional state and extremely adept at noting their non-verbal language. If left to his natural tendencies and if not overly-disciplined or forced into involuntary compliance, a horse's responses and reactions are pure, authentic, clear, immediate and direct. In other words, he gives fantastic feedback to humans regarding their communication, interaction, and relationship skills.

So could this "horse nature" be utilized to teach psychotherapy skills? That is the question I asked myself several years ago. To answer this question, I formulated experiential workshops in which graduate students interacted with horses at liberty and practiced a variety of non-verbal psychotherapy skills, as if the horse were a patient or client. And now, after hearing student therapists attest to the efficacy of this learning model, I know that the answer to my question is a resounding "Yes!"

Graduate students who have completed workshops with our horses report that the feedback they receive from these equine "professors" is invaluable in helping them hone their therapeutic skills. These skills include engagement (connecting with the client), appropriate assertiveness, eye contact, timing of interjections, pacing or speed of interactions, empathy, building trust, setting boundaries, regulating one's own emotions and energy, fostering curiosity,

problem-solving, and giving feedback. These are the tools that psychotherapists use in therapy and, moreover, they are the skills that a horse at liberty can detect and "evaluate" for a student.

In traditional university graduate school programs, these clinical skills are taught through classroom lectures and then role-played with fellow students, who pretend to be psychotherapy clients. A supervising professor then gives feedback to the student. This model is, of course, artificial, and all parties involved are aware that it is simply role-playing. Although relatively effective in imparting the basic skill set, the artificial nature of the role-play corrupts the authenticity of the therapeutic encounter. Also, the clinical supervisor is evaluating the encounter from the position of an observer, not the client. And the client, being a role-playing fellow student, is not in a position to give authentic feedback himself.

The new method of teaching that is described in this article is vastly different. Putting a student therapist with a horse at liberty allows the horse himself to give honest, immediate, clear, authentic feedback directly to the student. There are no hidden agendas or biases. A student therapist can experiment with personal style, body language, and emotional equilibrium without fear of harming a "real" client and without the anxiety-provoking task of "trying to say the right thing" in verbal dialogue, an aspect of therapy which is not always the most efficacious piece. In fact, it is the client-therapist relationship itself that has proven to be the operative component that makes psychotherapy "work."

While this new equine-assisted learning model is instructive and effective, the fact that the experiences occur in the great outdoors and contain an element of horsey "fun" adds even more to the experience. These aspects make the student workshops more attractive and conducive to learning than traditional lectures or role-plays held in a sterile classroom environment.



A psychology graduate student has fun receiving feedback from her equine 'professor'.



A student therapist's feedback from his equine 'client' is always immediate and direct ... and sometimes humorous.



A student psychotherapist meets a group of equine 'clients'.

Having been trained as a clinical psychologist, I am aware that I view these wonderfully expressive, complex beings that we call horses from a slightly different perspective. When I look at a horse, I see an exquisitely sensitive feedback system housed in a supremely beautiful and appealing body. As all contributors to this publication, I appreciate the fact that if allowed to live naturally, horses can bring pleasure, companionship and "fun" to many folks. But I take special note that horses can also assist in the education of human beings who are preparing to help others who struggle with emotional or mental health problems.

Who would have ever thought that the humble horse could serve as



A student therapist feels equally 'stuck' as she encounters a 'client' who can't seem to get past an obstacle in his life.



A psychology graduate student works on boundary issues in a family therapy session.

a more authentic and, therefore, superior teacher of psychotherapy skills, when compared to traditional classroom training? The fact that we can utilize the captivating characteristics of a natural horse in order to build competency in non-verbal psychotherapy skills is simply another reason to appreciate the special nature of the equine mind and body. ♡

About the author:

After working as a clinical psychologist and teaching graduate-level psychology courses, Dr. Sandra Wise has spent many hours studying the natural traits of equines, as she trains horses at liberty. The "nature of a natural horse" struck her as the perfect feedback system for teaching psychology students therapeutic non-verbal communication skills, since a natural horse will let a student therapist know immediately just how effective his or her skills are.

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