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Horses: Partners in Psychotherapy and in Learning

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Horses: Partners in Psychotherapy and in Learning

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An individual's sense of identity and belonging is crucial to mental wellness and happiness in life. Yet, often, with animals, some feel that we need to train them to be something that they are not naturally inclined to be in order to be useful to humans. This is not the case with Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) taught in the Harding University Professional Counseling program, or with Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) practiced by Dr. Amy Adair (an author of this feature) in several aspects of her career in education. While EAP is useful in psychotherapy, and EAL is effective in illustrating a wide range of educational and social concepts, the horses can be just that: horses. This modality is effective in a number of therapies and learning.

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is an experiential psychotherapy tool growing in popularity that uses horses as a partner in the therapeutic process. The largest certifying organization of EAP, the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), requires that the session is led by a certified Equine Specialist in addition to a licensed Mental Health Professional. The Harding University graduate-level class in the professional counseling program, Introduction to Equine Assisted Therapy, utilizes a licensed mental health professional and a certified equine specialist to teach the course. The treatment team, a triad created by the two specialists and the horse, enter the session with a client with the goal of creating experiences that bring about deep connection and reflection (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, 2018a). Horses are large, powerful prey animals with distinct personalities, and this combination makes them a priceless tool for creating metaphors from which to draw emotional growth (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, 2018b). EAP can be used for almost any type of psychotherapy client, but specific populations that have seen promising results are chronic psychiatric inpatients at risk of violence (Nurenberg, et al., 2014) and children and adolescents who have been traumatized (Kemp, Signal, Botros, Taylor, & Prentice, 2013).

The practice of EAP is closely related to another practice using horses as a partner to human professionals called Equine Assisted Learning (EAL). Horses can be used to teach specific concepts to a wide variety of individuals, including elementary students to college-aged adults, and groups of faculty members or other types of employees. EAL creates metaphors for learning, both social-emotional and academic. In a widespread program created by Dr. Michele Pickel, called Horse Powered Reading (HPR), social-emotional skills are integrated into reading instruction (Pickel, 2019). Pickel writes that students who perceive deficiencies in Maslow's essential needs of safety, belonging, and self-esteem are not ready to pursue

knowledge (2019). In HPR, similar to EAP, self-concept and social-emotional skills are primarily focused on to create self-confidence first, and then reading-related skills are pursued (Pickel, 2019).

Local to Harding University, Dr. Adair has helped to create equine-assisted examples for groups of grade-school students, and also uses EAL with her college students anytime an opportunity arises. Harding University offers Principles of Learning and Teaching, taught by Dr. Adair, in the College of Education and teaching this class provides some opportunities for her to use EAL. Horses can create powerful, experiential metaphors for future educators. The horse looks to a leader for direction, just as students in the classroom look toward their teachers. One education student, Mary Katherine Childers, after watching an equine specialist influence the horse's actions with only body language said this: "I loved being able to make the connections and see a real-life metaphor for how it might be in the future classroom" (personal communication, September 25, 2019).

Both Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and Equine Assisted Learning are empirically documented as useful techniques in their respective fields. Many children and adults alike have been provided the opportunity to build metaphorical experiences representing life's choices and feelings with these large, emotional prey animals. There are other tools in this field that may be just as effective in building healing for these populations, but the beauty of EAP is that horses can embrace their natural passions and curiosities, just as we would like humans to do. What could be a better therapeutic model than that?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kaci Miller is a graduate student in the Professional Clinical Mental Health Counseling program at Harding University. Her research interests include first-generation college students, parent-child communication, sense of belonging, self-awareness, and whole-hearted living. She plans to pursue her Ph.D. after graduating from her current M.S./Ed.S. program.

Amy Adair is an Associate Professor of education at the Cannon-Clary College of Education at Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas, and she has been involved with Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy and Learning since 2009. Her main field of study is teacher preparation for undergraduate education students.