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Equine Insight

Horses facilitate a uniquely effective form of therapy.

Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy is still a relatively new field, but Certified Equine Interactive Professional Judy Weston-Thompson, MFT, reports that its popularity has grown considerably since she began providing the therapy in 2006.

In her own practice in the Bay Area's San Rafael, Weston has been thrilled with its results in her adult and child clients. Clinical evidence has found EFP to be helpful in treating several conditions, including depression and anxiety, ADD/ADHA, addictions and assisting recovery from traumatic life changes or events. It promotes self-esteem and self-confidence, honesty and trust, communication and social skills, empathy and many other traits that contribute to happiness and success in everyday life.

Weston believes the connection with the horse and its direct, honest nature, is the root of the therapy's benefits. Whether clients are doing grooming exercises or riding in the arena or on trail, their interactive relationship with their horse provides myriad learning opportunities.

One of Weston's favorite examples is a delightful child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. "He chats excessively and when he chats his body gets excited and does all the things you don't want to do if you are riding a horse," Weston explains. For safety purposes, she instructed the boy that he needed to be quiet and to focus carefully on his body, paying special attention to what his hands



were doing. He was told he could talk, but it needed to be "in the moment" talk that was relevant to what was going on right then. "It got him to see how his body follows his thoughts and feelings," Weston says. After just a few sessions working on this, the boy showed noticeable improvement in his home and school environment.

Weston's clientele is split fairly evenly between children and adults. The process begins with an assessment in her office, which includes an evaluation of whether EFP will be a good path for them. Often, even clients who are fearful of horses may benefit from the therapy. "If there is a fear of horses there is often anxiety about a lot of other things," she explains. If the desire to interact with or ride horses is there, the patient is likely to



overcome fear and other obstacles to fulfill it, a great model for many life situations.

Many Applications

The therapist is excited about a new exercise in which clients ride her Percheron, Star, a veteran vaulting horse, on the lunge line and with a surcingle and bareback pad. "It gives them the bareback experience with the safety of the surcingle." The client works on physical riding skills, like balance and position, while also chipping away at psychological issues. The format was particularly effective for an adult client who had strong riding skills but was afraid to let herself go with Star's

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EquineInsight.net

"Heal Your Spirit Through
The Soul Of A Horse"



Equine Facilitated
Psychotherapy

- Individual EFP sessions for Adults, Teens and Children
- EFP Groups for Children (7-12) with ADD / ADHD or Related Symptoms *fee negotiable ~ most insurance accepted*
- EFP Groups for Psychotherapists *6 week sessions ~ limited space*
- Therapeutic Trail Riding for Adults and Children



Star, Judy & Caesar

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flow. In her life, she was unable to let others help her and, on Star, the trait manifested as resisting the horse's natural motion, even going against it. Experiencing how much better it felt to go with the horse's flow had lasting carryover effects in the client's beyond-the-barn life.

EFP can address heavy emotional issues, but Weston also offers the therapy in lighter dosages: namely trail riding. She conducts all her EFP at Willow Tree Stables in Novato and uses some of their bomb-proof mounts for these outings. "Trail rides are good for someone who doesn't want to bring a lot of issues to the fore or do an in-depth group therapy session," she observes.

The popularity of her sessions for fellow psychotherapists is a great indicator of the EFP's growing acceptance. She created them with three goals in mind: "to enhance personal growth, provide professional development and provide an overview of the EFP process." She uses the same grooming, horse handling and riding exercises as in her work with clients and asks participants to address their own challenges in the process.



"They wind up getting a little therapy themselves," says Weston, who is not surprised. After a few years of providing EFP, Weston one day stepped back and noticed that her own already high intuition had risen to a new level. "My horse work has increased my own level of intuition and empathy," she observes. "I rely on my feeling so much more than my analytical skills and I have horses to thank for that."

As in any growing field, it is important to check providers' credentials. In equine facilitated psychotherapy, in particular, it is critical that practitioners have proper training and a license in clinical therapy, plus training and appropriate credentials in horsemanship. In addition to her lifelong affinity for horses and many years as a licensed clinical therapist, Weston earned several credentials in the general horsemanship and EFP world. Her status as a Certified Equine Interactive Professional Mental Health therapist reflects completion of a rigorous, multi-year program that entails many hours of horsemanship training and psychotherapy work with and without the horse. This is complemented by many years studying, in theory and practice, equine behavior, plus training with the North American Riding For the Handicap Instructor Training School.



For more information on EFP and Judy Weston-Thompson's Equine Insight program, visit www.equineinsight.net or call 415-457-3800.

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