

Therapeutic Trail Riding for Children and Adults with ADHD and Anxiety Disorders

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For several years the many benefits of Equine Assisted Therapy with both children and adults have been demonstrated. In my practice as a Certified Equine Interactive Professional-Mental Health (CEIP-MH) and a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist of 23 years, I have built on the more traditional equine interventions and expanded my EFP (Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy) program to utilize a unique, highly beneficial exercise: trail riding.

Years ago, when I interned as a wrangler at Eaton's Ranch in Wyoming, one of my favorite duties was taking people of all ages out on various challenging trails and witnessing first hand their increase in confidence, focus and self-esteem in a "non therapeutic" environment. I clearly saw how trail riding helped people push through the immediate experience of fear towards increased competence. At this point I began strategizing, testing out assumptions and organizing a trail riding program to incorporate into my therapeutic practice.

I began this process with a thorough review of the diagnostic criteria for Generalized Anxiety Disorder (and related anxiety disorders) and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and compared these criteria with the presenting

issues in many of my EFP clients, especially children. Some of the symptoms which most frequently appear in my practice include restlessness, difficulty concentrating, symptoms of inattention, difficulty with task completion, distraction by extraneous stimuli, lack of focus, poor impulse control and need for immediate gratification. I then considered what I knew to be true about the results of my work with horses and anxious, unfocused humans. Out of this review I designed a program for treatment of anxiety and ADHD with an emphasis on trail riding.

The psychological, emotional and somatic benefits of my trail riding program are numerous. Guiding one's horse requires one to be present in nature's bounty. The magical motion of the physical experience (clip-clop) along with the thorough engagement of the senses causes relaxation, awareness and presence. Body follows thought and feelings. The mind becomes still and thus the body quietens. The delicate relationship between the rider's physical being and the horse's momentum creates balance and focus on the physi-



cal sensations. In my experience, this all translates to rapid growth in awareness and improvements in concentration in both home and school environments.

My first profound confirmation of the healing nature of trail riding occurred when nine year-old Grant overcame excessive anxiety and shyness, feeling sufficiently confident to take the lead part in a school play. I knew without a doubt that my horse facilitator, Caesar, was meant for this work and felt validated in my belief in the extraordinary healing benefits of EFP.

In my trail riding program, I work with individual children and adults as well as with groups. Both individual and group work, of course, begin with a thorough demonstration and discussion of horse and trail riding safety. Individual

sessions include grooming and tacking the horse. The choice of one's horse is based on matching for safety and temperament. It is essential that the horse have the appropriate temperament as well as a history of reliability and experience with novices on the trail. The appropriate human-horse match is an essential part of creating a safe therapeutic environment.

The ride begins on a familiar yet appropriately challenging trail. Each trail experience is unique, just as each "in the room" therapy session is unique, because I don't know what will be triggered in my client during the ride. As we proceed on the loop trail, both my horse and my client's horse are focused and therapy is happening in a variety of ways.

Therapeutic trail riding group sessions are similar to individual ones in that they consist of horse selection, grooming, tacking, mounting and riding. I also have a therapeutic intern who assists in all aspects of the group process.

The two hour children's group (of up to six participants) is usually more intense than an individual session because it involves social interactions and the particular social challenges of ADHD and various anxiety disorders, such as not listening to others, self-centeredness and difficulty setting and maintaining appropriate boundaries. The trail ride not only triggers individual issues, but relational issues as well by exposing a participant's weakness, fears or vulnerabilities in a group situation.

Whether individual or group, the trail riding program may be divided into four different components, each one building upon the benefits of the previous. After horse selection (explained above), grooming is the first component of the program.

Grooming teaches and fosters preparation and organization, sequential learning, impulse control and delayed gratification. The repetitive and grounding nature of the grooming exercise helps regulate affect by physically slowing down and calming an anxious or hyperactive human. For an ADHD child in particular, grooming captures the attention, creates focus and requires, under my guidance, task completion before moving on to the next step. Grooming is always considered a prerequisite to trail riding. Nurturing an animal through touch and the magic inherent in the horse-human interaction also creates focus on the tactile experience of repetition and completion of task. Grooming actually sets the tone of the ride because the horse-human connection is already building a sense of empowerment in the client.

Tacking, though more technical than grooming, also supports a sense of empowerment in both children and adult clients. Following a sequential order--blanket, saddle, bridle-- is required when tacking. The task must be done correctly and thoroughly for safety reasons. Ten year-old Carl, for instance, just wanted to rush through the tacking due to the impulsive nature of ADHD. How he's learn-

ing that everything we do to prepare for the trail ride has a reason and an order to it. My intervention with Carl has been to ask, "Why does the blanket go on before the saddle?" (for the horse's comfort) or "Why do we always tighten the cinch around his middle?" (for both horse and human safety). Thus, Carl is learning the purpose and consequences of following directions.

After tacking, comes mounting and dismounting of the horse. This is another sequential exercise which requires skill, patience, listening and paying attention. Impulse control is needed to learn to mount correctly.

Because group riding involves social interactions and boundary issues, I begin each group trail ride with a group check in, which fosters bonding and connection. My assistant helps provide more individual attention and everyone is encouraged to help each other along the way. Understanding horse herd behavior and safe trail behavior (i.e. keeping the correct distance between the horses) also helps with boundary issues.

Application on the trail ride. The ride itself offers unlimited opportunities for therapeutic insight and growth. For example, it is important to pay attention to the leader. It is essential to remain focused on your horse as well as keeping the appropriate boundary between self and others, remaining present with the task of staying on the trail. Attention to one's body positioning also requires focus. I set the order of the horses in a manner that is

most likely to foster an experience of individual competence and control. For example, the horses are arranged according to how they get along. The anxious horses do better in the middle, while the braver ones are out in front. The riders are responsible for the cooperation of their horses and must always be aware of the boundary between horses. I find it useful to pay attention to the trail “chatter” because riders often project what they may be feeling onto their horse.

Because horses have to be on the lookout for predators, sometimes even the most trustworthy horse may be freaked by a surprise in their line of sight. I will announce when my horse has a startle response by saying something like, “Look how Caesar’s looking at the log... What do you think he’s thinking?” This type of intervention encourages an anxious child to relax (self soothe) and to soothe his horse. Then I encourage him to push past his fears if the situation doesn’t warrant a fear response. I use the situation to teach about the nature of appropriate and unnecessary fear.

When Carl’s horse trotted up a small incline to catch up with me, Carl asked me why the horse responded that way. I replied, “What do you think?” This naturally became a teachable moment in which Carl learned about anticipation. Carl was learning both to anticipate a horse’s change in momentum as well as the importance of trusting his horse.

Often we will discover a tree branch intruding on the trail. First, I anticipate its coming. Then I demonstrate how I use my leg to steer the horse around it. This teaches appropriate anticipation of obstacles and using proven methods to avoid them, creating a balance between alertness and relaxation and teaching that the locus of control is within oneself, not external to self.

Horses have impulses just like humans. A horse may stop along the trail and begin eating grass. I tell the rider that there is a time and a place for everything but that this is not the time for grazing. Thus, another teachable moment in delayed gratification, self-control and self-monitoring.

Both the anticipated incidents and the surprises on the trail are, in my opinion, metaphors for life and opportunities to negotiate life’s challenges. It is all about developing a balance between letting yourself be carried (trusting) and finding your inner place of attention and authority. We work on paying attention and being highly present in a state of relaxation. We work on acknowledging your tasks and following through in appropriate sequence. As one can see, trail riding is therapeutically rich with opportunities to address in the moment the many issues arising from ADHD and anxiety disorders.