

# Using Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy with Psychotherapists in a Group Setting

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Working with horses and humans as a Certified Equine Interactive Professional-Mental Health (CEIP-MH) along with being a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist for more than 20 years has led to my creation of an equine program designed to foster the ongoing psychological health of those who do healing work. Knowing full well the intuitive and healing capacities of horses, I embarked on a pilot “consultation” group for psychotherapists with the intent of creating interest in the field and possible referrals. But by the second or third meeting of this pilot group, six therapist clients and I were deeply involved in the process. And, as with any process, one gets involved by experiencing it.

My intention was threefold: to promote professional development, to enhance personal growth and to provide my therapist clients with an overview of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy. I immediately knew that psychotherapists and horses would be a perfect fit, because horses naturally model and reflect the very qualities which we therapists, in our many years of training, work so hard to achieve: presence, empathy, intuitive skills, connectedness and increased somatic awareness. Horses are also ideal models for inner harmony, balance and insight—the goals towards which

we humans strive. Because my deep association with horses has so significantly increased my own inner knowing, I was completely confident that the therapists who were drawn to my group would be seeking much more than didactic consultation.

Both my personal and professional experiences have proven to me the healing and psychological benefits of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP). And my years of working with horses have taught me that there is a level of opening and honesty that occurs in their very presence. Horses are archetypal in that they evoke powerful emotional sensations in human beings. Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy involves a beneficial integration of the horse’s innate healing ability with psychotherapeutic work.

Upon deciding to facilitate EFP groups for psychotherapists, I had to give thorough consideration to the issues with which therapists are faced on a daily basis, both with our clients and within our own psyches. The ability to be present with one’s client and with one’s self may be considered a therapist’s guiding light. Horses innately know and instantly reflect one’s level of presence. The ability to be in relationship and one’s capacity for connectedness are essential for do-

ing healing work with clients. Horses pull you into relationship if you're willing and walk away from you if you are not. The ability to realize one's own true inner nature is at the foundation of therapeutic work. Horses have an astounding ability to cut through the outer layers and draw us into a deeper relationship with ourselves.

There are numerous ways in which I've experienced my equine co-facilitators teaching and modeling these qualities which are so essential to both personal growth and professional development. One member of my therapist group, Jean, had a strong connection with her horse, but felt she came up short in her willingness to "take charge" and be the leader. I noted their connection, but also remarked that she made eye contact with her horse more often (while leading him) than watching where she wanted him to go. In our second working session, Jean shared her awareness of feeling challenged to take charge in her life.

Psychotherapists also find EFP to be particularly helpful because our work requires us to keep constantly abreast of our countertransference issues (the therapist's emotional reactions to the patient based on the therapist's unconscious needs or feelings). The therapist, for example, may feel helpless with a client. These deep feelings of helplessness will be brought into the foreground in one's work with a horse. Or a therapist may feel disconnected in relationship to a client. This inability to connect will manifest in the presence of a horse. In our second pilot group meeting at my barn office, two women broke into tears, noting the vulnerability that came forth in relationship to their horse partners.

The group, composed of up to six members, meets with me for six consecutive weeks. The first group session includes the required paper work, logistics, group rules, my introduction to the class and introductions by individual members. All other group meetings begin with a check in and segue into horse work and debriefing.

During the very first check in, members disclose their reasons for attending as well as their personal and professional goals. In subsequent check ins (groups two through six), members describe how the previous group may have affected their personal and/or professional work. The purpose of the check in is to

ground the members in being present in the group, to increase group safety and cohesion and to reflect on any personal or professional process that has occurred since the last meeting.

The second part of each group is experiential and involves partnering each member with a horse and engaging in various EFP activities. I have designed these activities specifically for therapists to enhance the personal and professional qualities referenced in my introduction (presence, empathy, intuitive skills, connectedness and increased somatic awareness).

The third part of the group--debriefing--includes feedback as well as self-observation and facilitator observation of group members. As with any group therapy, participants are striving towards insight. The debriefings are focused on the here-and-now (presence), what is happening (process rather than content) and interpersonal/interspecies relationship (self and horse). The debriefing segment serves as an integration of what has taken place with each participant through personal process and experiential.

Being in relationship with a horse requires that one be fully present--without agenda--as agendas don't lend support to interspecies friendship. Thus, the all encompassing goal of my group exercises is to support my clients in being truly present without expectations. Horses respond to a human's competency, need for control and expectations. When one of my co-facilitators, Caesar (in this case), isn't compliant, the participants have a difficult time because they feel incompetent. In this way, Caesar has become the therapist.

Caesar has a way of letting me know when a client has an agenda with him, and I have learned to intuitively interpret his response to his human partner. My relationship with Caesar alone evokes transference in people who sense my protectiveness of him and worry about my feelings even after I've assured them that I would stop a session if human or horse safety was at stake.

Listed below are the exercises I utilize in my EFP groups for psychotherapists:

**Safe horse practices.** Besides being an ethical necessity, I'm continually tying safety issues--such as clear and appropriate boundaries with horses--back to safety issues with each therapist's own clients. Although

I interject safety practices throughout all the sessions, our first exercise is specifically devoted to demonstrating and utilizing safe horse practices around the barn and with horses. I explain what we are doing and why. I'll show the clients how to approach a horse, how to stand behind a horse and how to interpret a horse's ear and head signals, such as jerking the head or twitching the ears upon being inappropriately approached. The clients further integrate these practices as we move on to the grooming exercise.

**Grooming.** The grooming exercise may evoke a great deal of emotion for clients. Through grooming in pairs, members learn how horses regulate our emotions as we regulate theirs. They calm down as we calm down, and vice versa, in a synergistic manner. For example, in one grooming exercise when Jean and Adele were working on Caesar together, Caesar kept moving towards his connection with Jean and away from Adele. We had already debriefed some on Adele's family of origin issues with regard to feeling excluded and not being allowed to have a voice. During this exercise, I could clearly witness her attempt to have a perfect technique, which disallowed her ability to be fully present for Caesar. Her feelings also rippled through our dynamic as a group.

Also, clients often rush through the brushing exercise. To the horse, intentional brushing by a human is a glorious experience in somatic connection. Thus, a horse's response to one's hurry may be another reminder for clients to be present, get into their own somatic experience and let go of their agenda.

**Leading horse with halter and lead rope.** The goal of this exercise is leadership with connection. Horses, like therapy clients, are more comfortable when they know who is in charge. The issue of taking charge while remaining connected is an ongoing struggle for therapists with their clients, and thus, this exercise continually evokes feelings in the group. The participant's goal is to take charge while staying connected to and present with the horse by showing intention of where one wants to go. Just as the therapist is challenged to maintain the perfect balance of leadership, presence and connection with the client, the therapist client must communicate this balance with the horse.

Personal communication issues will most certainly surface for the group participants as they commonly

look at the horse rather than looking at where they want to go (see example of Jean under Rationale). I emphasize walking shoulder to neck with the horse to demonstrate this dilemma which is especially common with women who are not so encouraged to take charge in our culture. With this exercise, each member of the pilot group was able to tie in leadership and communication issues in both their personal and professional relationships. The exercise had a lasting effect on the participants because it is such a great metaphor for relationship.

**Awkward exercise.** The awkward exercise involves creating a situation that tests the participants' flexibility as well as their feelings about the unknown, rules and questions of professional competency. Without ever compromising human or horse safety or creating any humiliation, I lead participants through a series of exercises. For example, I ask the members as a group to move Caesar around without words, touch or a lead rope while I observe who takes charge and who stays behind. In another exercise, I snap off the lead rope and see if the horse continues to follow the group member. I observe at what place the horse breaks connection with the human, why this may have happened, and question how this may be happening in the client's life or work. Most often the participants are intent on performing the task rather than truly being with the horse. The goal is to match energies with the horse and step outside the box in the ways which we connect.

**Horse observation.** Clients need to notice how horses are responding to us, so this exercise is about our projections and observations about horses' behavior with each other as well as their responses to our energy. Often I will have group members observe horse behavior in a herd. I also encourage them to watch the horse's behavior when we're processing material as a group. Their observations frequently elicit our projections, such as, "That horse is really angry at the other one." And we seem to want to attach emotions to horses that are not there.

I also have them observe Caesar as he watches us from his stall. When we enter the barn as a group, I encourage each person to notice what horse they feel drawn to. Sally, for example, who followed my directives with great intention, slowly moved down the barn aisle, meeting and greeting each horse.

She clearly understood our effect on the horses as she took time to allow each to feel her energy.

**Bareback riding.** Bareback riding as a therapeutic exercise is intensely evocative for clients. Control issues arise and clients find it challenging to communicate the correct signals to the horse to keep him moving on his own and not returning to me as a reference.

Jean, for example, was very successful in establishing a strong connection with Caesar during the grooming and other exercises, and had left the fourth session feeling very positive. But her control issues surfaced when she took the reins and had to do the steering, and Caesar began moving in my direction. As we processed Jean's frustration, Caesar didn't move a muscle. He was responding to what he was feeling from the client and so he came to me. A horse doesn't just do what a human wants because they want it. Intention and anxiety are transmitted through one's body--thus the somatic experience plays a part.

Generally speaking, the seasoned riders will have more difficulty with the exercises because they are expecting to feel in control. Jean had show riding in her background. During the riding session, she took a show posture when she mounted Caesar, but he didn't feel her authenticity or her clear intention. She held the reins like a show jumper and her body wouldn't quite relax into Caesar. In our debriefing, we learned that it was difficult for her to take charge. She led Caesar with communication, but with unclear intention.

**Inquiry exercise.** In the sixth group session I ask the members, one at a time, to lead the horse of their choice to a private area. Here they are encouraged to ask a question on anything for which they desire insight. Out of this private time, all members of my pilot group reported receiving powerful images, profound feedback and guidance from their horses. Jean felt reassured that her decision to end her current relationship was correct. Sally felt guided not to join the next group and said her goodbye to Caesar. Adele received feedback that the path she had chosen to ignite her career was accurate. While speaking to Caesar, Adele imagined her process taking flight, like a bird. While the other members and I observed, a bird came to rest on the railing next to them. Not one member reported being self-conscious as all of us watched this magic unfold.

**Riding with a surcingle.** While writing this article I discovered a way to integrate Star, my other horse facilitator, into the group. Sally and Jean were becoming impatient to begin their riding lessons outside the group structure, and, wanting to continue the therapeutic nature of our work, I created a new exercise that would fulfill many of our common goals.

A surcingle, a strap that fastens around a horse's girth area, is used for ground training and vaulting on a horse. It allows the rider to have a bareback experience with the safety of handles on the side. It also allows you to work on your balance and somatic experience while holding you in position without reins for steering.

In this exercise I stand in the center of the ring holding Star on a lunge line while the rider sits on Star with the surcingle. As I move Star through the three gaits--walk, trot and canter--in a circle approximately 20 meters in diameter, the client experiences the physical positioning of riding. It was a pivotal moment when I told Sally, the least experienced rider, that I had the reins, because it allowed her to surrender to the motion in all three gaits. She closed her eyes and let go into her experience, exceeding our expectations.

Jean, who most desired the riding lesson, continued to want to "think" her position. Since her therapeutic issue was about letting go of control and allowing herself to be carried in life, I had her close her eyes and enter into her body. I felt so empowered and grateful to Star for his role in the work. He and I were truly a team working together to carry these women.

In conclusion, I must emphasize that although these exercises were designed to use with psychotherapists, they would be relevant in working with anyone seeking Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy. Horses are the most unique of all healers. They can smell if one is afraid. They can smell if one is authentic. The greatest gift of all that the horse can bring to psychotherapists is the gift of authenticity. Above and beyond everything, isn't this what therapists are required to be?