

EAP 101: “Equine Assisted Psychotherapy – A Strengths-Based Approach”

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- Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and Learning (EAP, EAL) is a strengths-based, solution-focused approach using the horses as a lens through which to see client’s behavior patterns and gain insight into their lives.
- Clients have the answers within themselves and with support can use their unique strengths to guide them toward positive personal development.
- The StrengthsFinder assessment can be incorporated in the EAP/L sessions to allow clients to discover and leverage their strengths in their everyday living.
- Experiential model – learn by doing – is based on wilderness therapy and adventure education models. EAP is similar to a ropes course – learning by overcoming challenges and increasing problem solving and conflict resolution skills.
- This therapeutic approach can help to reduce the barriers to building rapport with clients, especially at-risk youth and families. It can feel less like therapy and more like skills training.
- Known as many things (EAP, EAL, EFP, EFT), this is a ground-based approach using horses as a catalyst for the work that we do as therapists and counselors.
- Multidimensional applications – EAP/L has been shown to be effective with individuals, family, couples, groups, and the arenas of professional development, education, etc.
- Left brain vs. right brain thinking. Humans are more left brain dominant in society (driven, goal-oriented, results matter); horses – right brain dominant (intuitive, reactive, seeking harmony and survival) – by watching and interacting with horses, humans can gain sensitivity and being more attuned to the internal state of emotions.
- Homo sapiens – around for 200,000 years as the master predator; equine species in existence for 4 million years as the ultimate prey (in spite of having no horns, antlers, claws to defend – only hooves and teeth) ... Horses have been co-existing in harmony and partnership with humans in spite of the many differences.
- Language differs: human = verbal; equine = nonverbal – our goal in EAP is to bring greater awareness of our own internal dialogue, body signals – to better know what our emotions,

thoughts, and intentions are bringing into our world. The horses are a mirror for us to SEE our behavior and thinking through their eyes of survival.

- Horses don't lie. They are mirrors to our souls and to our intentions and emotions.
- The horses and the various props in an EAP session all become part of the client's story, creating metaphors for their own situation and challenges in life. Individuals can then practice new behaviors in a safe place, involving the horses.
- We can learn how to face fear just as horses do. When a horse spooks and gets scared, it often runs away (flight response), and then circles back to face what it fears. If there is no danger, it will often go back to grazing or resting. Humans react in many ways to fear, often partly because they cannot recognize and label the fear.
- Courage through cooperation: Everyone needs to face fear. Eleanor Roosevelt said, *"You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience where you stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do."* There's a certain irony in the partnership between humans and horses; we seek to improve them by supplanting their instincts with training, while they inspire us to expand our thinking through intuition (Hamilton, 2011).
- Dr. Allan Hamilton is a Harvard-trained brain surgeon, author, and well-known horse trainer who has worked in Equine Assisted Experiential Learning for 15 years. Dr. Hamilton said:

"The horse seems to simply take a shortcut around our language, our inner voice, which is constantly distracting us from connecting with the world around us. When free of language, we can relate directly, viscerally with the horses. We do not need to understand how the horse knows what we want, we need to feel it. Horses teach us that what we access by feeling is just as valid as what we know by reasoning."

References: EAGALA Organization; Dr. Allan Hamilton, MD and author of Zen Mind, Zen Horse. The Science and Spirituality of Working with Horses (2011).