

## **What make horses so unique in therapy?**

What is so special, so truly unique about horses that these particular creatures are able to so successfully and repeatedly help individuals struggling with behavioral and mental-health issues and addictions? What role can a horse play in the recovery process for addicts, trauma survivors, or individuals dealing with grief and loss issues?

The answer is simple: Horses know how to attune to people and their environment because of their nature.

Unlike humans, dogs, cats and other predatory animals who have eyes on the front of their head, horses are prey animals with eyes on the sides of their head, which helps keep them safe by allowing an expanded visual field. These powerful yet vulnerable creatures have a large limbic system, the part of the brain responsible for emotion and intuition, which greatly contributes to their keen ability to detect danger. Perhaps most importantly, this also plays a part in their heightened sensitivity to human emotion, body language, and energy.

Horses sense our emotions and often move away from fear and anger because these register as potential danger. However, they don't feel threatened by the more vulnerable emotions such as sadness and loneliness. Horses can sense the feelings in us that are often out of our conscious awareness and, thus, give us information about ourselves. They mirror our feelings back to us through their body language, which is clear and immediate; they teach us how we impact those around us.

Horses relate from a place similar to the way the right hemisphere of a human brain functions which is nonverbal, creative, emotional, and intuitive. Compared to our egoic left brain, which is logical, verbal, goal-oriented, and focused on the sense of "I" or individuality, our right brain is involved with community, connection, and the sense of "we," much like horses are focused on inclusion in their herd. In addition, horses function, as does our right brain, in the present moment. They are not thinking about the past or planning the future, and they do not judge themselves or us. Sound familiar as a goal in recovery?

Relating to horses gives us humans a much-needed break from our left brain, which is where most of us spend most of our waking time. Horses inspire us to halt our thinking and begin feeling. They teach us what it means to just be – in the moment, in connection, without words – which isn't necessarily a familiar or comfortable place for many of us.

Research on the efficacy of various psychotherapeutic interventions indicates that the relationship between the client and therapist is a primary factor related to positive outcomes. Although the equine therapist, along with the equine specialist, is involved in that relationship with the client during an EAP session, the horse plays as significant a role, if not greater, in attuning to the client.

**For additional information contact:**

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