

# The Horse Who Read My Mind

Equine-assisted ADHD therapy forced me to align my actions with my intentions and to exude the calm confidence I asked for in return. Horses, I learned, mirror what they see in our hearts and feel in our heads.

by Zoë Kessler

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"I wish you could hear yourself." As I child, I heard this often from my non-ADHD mom. I thought she was crazy, my hearing was fine.

After my ADHD diagnosis, at 47, I realized that people with attention deficit disorder are poor self-observers. It took 40 years, but I finally knew what my mom was talking about.

My words and actions were at odds with my intentions. Until my treatment, this mismatch played havoc with my relationships, leaving me hurt and baffled. Since then, I've discovered Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) -- which uses a horse's uncanny ability to mirror the emotions and attitudes of his handlers. As you interact with a horse, you learn to observe and respond to his behaviors instead of staying stuck in your patterns of behavior. After a session, counselors talk with clients about what they learned. This therapy has helped me become aware of how others see me and how to make sure my words and actions match my intentions.

Many children and adults with ADHD are drawn to EAP, because it is stimulating and fun. Although kids and adults love to work with horses, the focus of EAP is not on riding or horsemanship -- the participants remain on the ground -- but on following the instructions of their therapy team: a certified Equine Specialist (ES), a licensed mental health professional, and a horse.

Sue Bass, an equine specialist at Hope Ranch, in Rochester, Minnesota, and her team had been working with three young siblings from a blended family. The two eldest were frustrated by the youngest daughter, who, says Bass, "had no boundaries, would barge into their rooms, and generally annoy them." Bass noticed that when the youngest child entered the arena, a young miniature horse started annoying the big horses. "He reared up at them, nipping," says Bass. "Then, he started going after the youngest girl's shoes. He didn't hurt her; he was being a total pest." This annoyed the child, who tried to get away from him.

"The older girls looked at each other, and asked their younger sibling whom the horse reminded her of," says Bass. "The focus of the session changed, in a flash, to the youngest girl's behavior." The young girl had a firsthand experience of what her sisters went through every day. "We couldn't have planned it better ourselves!" adds Bass.

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## How Equine-Assisted Therapy Works

Horses are big, powerful, and, sometimes, scary. They get our attention, but they're nonjudgmental when they mirror our behavior. This enables clients to learn about their behaviors without getting defensive. Through targeted questions, therapists help participants analyze their interactions with the horse and the other participants.

Based on the client's needs, the therapy team gives the client a set of instructions, such as, "Observe the horses to see which one gets along with you" or "Build an obstacle course by choosing items that represent things that distract you throughout the day; then halter the horse and lead it through the obstacle course." No further instructions are given, and the client completes the process (or not) as he sees fit. "It isn't the task that is important," says Bass, "but what the client becomes aware of -- his thoughts and emotions, as he works with the horse." There isn't a lot of research supporting EAP's effectiveness. One EAP study, conducted by

researcher Kay Trotter, PhD, LPC, NCC, showed that horse therapy improved hyperactivity and impulsivity in at-risk children and adolescents.

As a national certified counselor, Trotter followed two groups. One group participated in equine-assisted group counseling treatment, while the other group received an award-winning, curriculum-based school counseling intervention.

The results of Trotter's study suggested that equine-assisted treatment was statistically more effective in improving kids' ability to focus and stay on task. The therapy also significantly improved symptoms of aggression, depression, and anxiety in the group. The participants of equine-assisted treatment adjusted better to new routines and teachers, and easily shifted from one task to another. Self-esteem and self-respect increased, and friendships were less stressful.

Instant feedback is part of the reason that therapy with these "powerful and interesting beings" is so effective, says Kit Muellner, founder of Hope Ranch and a licensed, independent clinical social worker. "What's more, clients feel that they've achieved something on their own, rather than being told to do something by a parent or teacher. A 1,500-pound animal responds the way you want him to because you were able to focus. So you've accomplished something that you wanted to do, versus doing something somebody else wanted you to do."

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## How EAP Helped Me

I took the plunge in an EAP workshop for women. We were paired up and told to halter a horse and lead it to a certain area. No problem, I thought, having worked with horses before. Then the counselor said, "You're not allowed to talk." I panicked.

First, I was in an unfamiliar setting. Second, I was working with someone I didn't know. Third, I couldn't talk. I suddenly realized how much I depended on words, and how I was lost without my voice. On the other hand, since childhood, my words had gotten me into trouble because I blurted them out.

To succeed in this task, I had to use nonverbal communication. I had to trust someone else to take a leadership role. My stomach clenched, and I began to sweat. I've never forgotten that lesson, and the glimpse it gave into my life with ADHD. Suzi Landolphi, a certified EAP therapist, at Big Heart Ranch, in Malibu, California, who holds a master's degree in psychology, says that, to work effectively with horses, "your thinking, emotions, and body language have to match. And isn't that what ADD keeps from happening?"

Muellner told me how EAP helped one young adult with severe ADHD. At Hope Ranch, the horses are allowed to come and go. While working one-on-one with the client, Muellner noticed that "some days we'd walk into the barn and [the horses] would just hang there. We'd go out another day, and they'd be gone." Muellner says that the horses bolted because they felt anxious around her tense client, and that he learned to quiet his mind before entering the barn.

Katherine, whose daughter Sarah was diagnosed with ADHD at age 12, found that EAP helped bring about many positive changes for her daughter. Sarah was going to junior high when she was referred to EAP. "Sarah had a lot of challenges," says Katherine. "She was rebellious, her grades were taking a dive, and she had social problems."

Sarah was assigned to a group of seven girls who attended daylong sessions every day for a week. Each girl was assigned a horse and a counselor. Like many participants, Sarah had never been around horses. Prior to therapy, says Katherine, "Sarah's shyness and aloof behavior had put other girls off, and she couldn't make friends." As Katherine watched her daughter during one session, she was impressed with Sarah's kindness and her compassion toward another girl who was struggling in the group.

"She also displayed respect toward [the therapist] and the other counselors at a time when she wasn't very respectful of adults," says Katherine. "I saw a different child, as did Sarah's teachers." Best of all, many of these changes stuck with her long after she stopped doing EAP.

***Names have been changed.***

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