

Horse Whisperers

Through Equine Assisted Therapy, many addicts are learning to recognize and change their behavior, while rediscovering themselves.

by Kimberly French

At 22 years old, Susan has struggled with multiple substance abuse issues since the age of 12. She's been jailed several times, attended various treatment programs and enrolled in numerous rehabilitation facilities, but nothing seemed to help her move any closer to recovery.

That all changed nearly four months ago when Susan heeded the advice of her therapist, altered her approach and engaged in Equine Assisted Therapy at BayStar Equicenter, about 30 miles away from downtown Cincinnati, Ohio.

"I honestly thought this would be an hour of awkwardness," Susan says. "I wondered, 'What could I possibly learn from horses?'" Still, at the urging of her therapist, she decided

Alex Poffenbarger, friend of Changing Tracks, with Sierra the horse.

to give it a try. “I’m glad I decided to go,” she says, “because what I learned from the experience was enlightening.”

Watching the horses out in the field, Susan was struck by their behavior. “[It felt like] the “light” horse was my recovery and the “dark” horse was my addiction,” she says. “They mirrored my own behaviors.”

Initially she tried to keep an eye on the light horse, but, as with her addiction, Susan’s gaze kept straying back to the dark horse; she found it compelling. Whereas the light horse came to a mud puddle and paused, considering the obstacle, Susan recalls, “the dark horse strolled over to a container filled with party supplies and knocked it over,” making a mess of the yard.

Observing the animals’ behavior allowed Susan to step outside of herself and notice parallels between actions and their consequences.

“I went into this session at the beginning of my fifth attempt at recovery,” she says. “The horses helped me visualize, and then identify unhealthy beliefs I needed to work on in order to recover. I previously thought addiction was more exciting than recovery. Since realizing and changing that belief, along with others, I have been able to progress farther in my recovery.”

Susan’s session at the BayStar EquiCenter took place last May during a six-week sojourn between her release from jail in neighboring Butler County and her entrance into a nine-month treatment facility in Rockford, Ill. Unfortunately, she never received the opportunity to follow up on this initial session, but Mary Jean VonderBrink, who together with her best friend Loni Sander opened the BayStar Equicenter after witnessing how horses helped her sister-in-law’s niece cope with substance abuse, has been in contact with Susan and says she is progressing “magnificently” in her program.

“She was in very desperate shape,” VonderBrink says of Susan. “She’s not out of the woods, but she’s much further along than she has ever been. I’m not telling you an hour in the ring was responsible for this, but it could be and it certainly couldn’t have hurt. That’s what makes this form of therapy so powerful.”

Making the Connection

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) was developed more than two decades ago by Nebraska native Greg Kersten and was formally named in the early 1990’s.

Kersten, who spent his formative years on a ranch surrounded by Quarter horses, began to piece together the EAP program after working with troubled teens in Washington, D.C. He had always been fascinated by horses’ nonverbal communication, the resourcefulness of their herds and their behavior when threatened, and he felt interaction with horses could prove vital to placing these teens on the right path.



Is EAP for me?

Practitioners believe EAP can be a breakthrough experience for many people working toward recovery from addiction, trauma or strained relationships. Before beginning any program though, Lisa Baugh, a licensed marriage and family therapist with a Master’s in counseling psychology, recommends keeping a few things in mind.

“There is a difference between equine assisted therapy and equine assisted psychotherapy,” Baugh says. “Therapy is a word that gets thrown out there as a blanket term and it could mean anything. Psychotherapy involves a mental health professional and that is an important differentiation,” she says.

Before starting any EAP program, Baugh recommends checking for an EAP certification.

“There are programs developed by horse people with no real training in EAP,” Baugh says. “When the average person and other treatment centers look at that and think that’s what equine assisted psychotherapy is, they need to be reeducated. It makes it even more difficult for them to wrap their brains around this type of treatment because instead of seeing it as real psychotherapy, they tend to look at it as recreational. I have had some patients do that too until they experience a real session with me.”

A final component to consider is cost. Currently, individual sessions are more costly than groups, however most EAP therapy programs tend to cost about the same as traditional office therapy.

“There really seemed to be no resources to provide an outlet for these teenagers with criminal backgrounds,” Kersten recalls. “Also to meet my own financial needs, and maybe for a little bit of mental health benefit myself, I started training horses again.” Kersten found a woman who owned several horses in need of training and got to work.

“[The horses] reminded me of the kids I worked with and the kids reminded me of them, so I took that opportunity to use the basics of building relationships with horses with some of these teenagers,” says Kersten. “This all happened in the mid to late 1980’s, but I didn’t really put a name to it until about 1991. By then I had developed specific procedures I used and developed a system.”

Kersten’s system gained momentum and by 1999, he had developed the nonprofit Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), which he funded primarily by certifying other therapists in his technique.

Currently, EAGALA has more than 500 different programs and more than 3,500 members worldwide. They offer various workshops, a two-part certification program and continuing education, and promote EAP and Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) through what they call the EAGALA Model.

Although Kersten is no longer part of EAGALA, having begun his own new program series, the O.K. Corral with his wife in 2005, the organization is considered by many to be the leading nonprofit resource for professionals seeking to treat mental health, substance abuse, addiction, eating disorders and family issues through EAP in the world.

Seeing is Believing

The EAGALA Model emphasizes a team approach, whereby a mental health professional, equine specialist (someone with a background working or owning horses) and horses work together with the client in every session.

There is no riding involved and all work is done on the ground. Although EAGALA protocol requires programs to adhere to a strict code of ethics for the best possible care, the sessions allow clients the necessary freedom to interact with the horses and discover their own solutions.

“It never ceases to amaze me that the horses appear to magically respond to a client or play out what a client is feeling or experiencing,” Joan Rieger, a licensed psychotherapist at the Gestalt Equine Institute of the Rockies, said in a 2009 interview about how EAP works. “It isn’t magic, but it looks like it.”

Rieger refers to horses as “teachers of self-awareness.” She says that “For some clients, working with the horses is the first time in their lives they’ve felt an authentic relationship with another being.” Like humans, horses are social. Unlike us however, horses do not have the agenda or motivation to manipulate, overpower or abuse.

Lisa Baugh, a licensed marriage and family therapist with a Master’s in counseling psychology, offers EAP both privately and through her work at Seaside Palm Beach, a rehabilitation center located in Palm Beach, Fla.

“Honestly, I see all kinds of people; addicted to substances, for depression, eating disorders, and blending families from divorce,” Baugh says. “Horses have a very profound effect and so can this type of therapy.”

After working with teen youth groups through her church, Kathy Perretta, a horse owner for 15 years, decided she needed to begin researching how these animals could help people and became certified through EAGALA in 2005. She chose to open her own nonprofit organization, Changing Tracks, two years later in Marseilles, Ill.

“There are times in life when we all are faced with some kind of pressure and it causes us to react and respond,” Perretta says. “It’s the same thing with horses. Horses tend to have kind of the same needs as we do: They have a great need for socialization, they have a great need for food and they have a great need to protect their safety. The only difference is whereas man is a predator, the horses are objects of prey, so the psychology of the animal changes, especially if you allow the horse to operate with more of a herd mentality.”

After her first five years with Changing Tracks, Perretta says she’s a whole-hearted believer in the power of EAP. “[Horses] really do read the human nonverbal behavior much better than we do. I’ve seen some amazing things from this therapy and it ranges from clients with depression to substance abuse.” ■

Kimberly French is a freelance writer who resides in Louisville, KY. She specializes in the horseracing industry.

RESOURCES

EAGALA eagala.org — Includes comprehensive directories of members, practices and university programs around the world

O.K. Corral Series okcorralseries.com — Features information on how Equine Assisted Therapy was developed and workshop/conference information, as well as a membership database

EPONA eponaquest.com — Information on memberships, how to apprentice, various workshops, newsletter sign up and current events involving Equine Assisted Therapy

Sagittarius Rising sagrising.com — Website by Equine Assisted Therapist Lisa Baugh with news articles, background information and treatment options

Seaside Palm Beach equinetherapytreatment.com — Luxury alcohol and drug rehabilitation center offering Equine Assisted Psychotherapy as part of their treatment program

BayStar EquiCenter baystarequicenter.com — Mary Jean VonderBrink and Loni Sander share pricing, event coverage and information pertaining to equine therapy

National Alcohol and Substance Abuse Information Center addictioncareoptions.com — Listing of nearly all treatment options available including information on Equine Assisted Therapy

Equine Assisted Assets equineassistedassets.com — Provides history of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy, information on how to establish your own business and a list of schools/centers that provide this treatment

Sky Horse Ranch skyhorseranch.com — Website by author and horsewoman Ariana Strozzi with background information and treatment options as well as using horses for Equine Guided Education