

# HORSES & RECOVERY



A 12-Steps Approach to EAAT

*By Johnny Higginson*



EQUINE-FACILITATED PSYCHOTHERAPY IS AN INTERACTIVE PROCESS IN WHICH A LICENSED MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL WORKING WITH OR AS AN APPROPRIATELY CREDENTIALLED EQUINE PROFESSIONAL PARTNERS WITH SUITABLE EQUINE(S) TO ADDRESS PSYCHOTHERAPY GOALS SET FORTH BY THE MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL AND THE CLIENT.



Participation in equine-facilitated psychotherapy enables participants to access feelings, look at behavioral patterns and develop their introspection to better understand how they feel and act and how they can change. Often, this intervention is combined with more traditional approaches, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

Because EFP has been successful with people who have various mental health concerns, such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders and developmental challenges, this intervention can also help individuals with substance abuse. By basing sessions around the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous®, PATH Intl. Centers offering EFP can help individuals in recovery with an exciting, alternative way to heal. In 2009, Shadow Hills Riding Club (SHRC), a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center in Shadow Hills, CA near Los Angeles, created a pilot program using this combined approach. “Saddles and Serenity” helps those in recovery meet the

challenges of addiction by gearing an activity around each of the 12 steps. Those in recovery who are already in a 12-step program can specifically apply what they are learning in sessions to their program as they achieve and practice sobriety. Those who are not in a 12-step program also benefit because partnering with equines reinforces these principles.

“Whenever I come here I feel calm and at ease,” said one participant in the “Saddles and Serenity” program who had been diagnosed with both substance abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder. “Whenever I leave, I can’t wait to come back. This program has provided more healing for me than years of talking [traditional therapy] ever had.”

How do horses help heal those in recovery? Humans often mask truth through language; however, horses, like many other animals, communicate mainly non-verbally exactly what they are feeling. They primarily use body language and energy—a swish of a tail, the lick

▲ Participation in EFP activities addressing each of the 12 steps can help those in recovery from substance abuse meet the challenges of addiction. Photo courtesy of Shutterstock.

of a lip, a release of breath and a foot stomp—to communicate.

Horses also mirror a person’s emotion and behavior. If someone is feeling afraid or anxious, for instance, but masking this fear, the horse will act frightened and run off. If instead the participant is angry but trying to act relaxed and calm, the horse will respond by acting aggressively, swishing its tail or even cocking a foot.

The horse offers participants this unique feedback to how humans “show up” or interact with the horse by responding in a clear, honest, non-verbal way. This gives participants an opportunity to become most honest as they check perceptions of themselves against the perceptions of the horse. Looking at why the horse acted in a certain way can help participants get

in touch with their feelings during the session and better understand how their behaviors affect the way others respond to them. This immediate feedback can help participants better understand themselves as they work through their frustrations, overcome fears and build confidence.

## 12-STEPS OVERVIEW

The original 12-step program was formulated by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) to assist individuals with alcohol addiction and to address powerlessness over alcohol. Since Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith created AA in 1934, many other 12-step programs have evolved, such as Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Debtor's Anonymous, Adult Children of Alcoholics and Al-Anon. There's even a joke that goes around stables that those who are addicted to horses should go to HLA, or Horse Lover's Anonymous.

The 12 Steps of AA are divided into progressive ideas and actions that can be used as life tools for people recovering from addiction. Many believe the emotional development of the person with a substance abuse problem stops at the age when the person starts using the substance. Therefore, steps that many have learned in normal behavioral and cognitive development are often not understood by the person with a substance abuse problem and have to be learned when they are in the recovery process.

The 12 steps address values that include honesty, open-mindedness, courage, belief, integrity, willingness, humility, forgiveness, spiritual awareness, relationships, perseverance and service. This list can help guide licensed therapists, certified instructors and certified equine specialists in an EFP session by using exercises that bring up issues, thoughts and feelings blocking

the participant from moving forward and acting on these values. Let's look at the first three steps and exercises a therapist might use to foster an individual's emotional growth and development:

### STEP 1

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol (addiction) and that our lives had become unmanageable.

### STEP 2

We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

### STEP 3

We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood him.

## STEP ONE

All the following approaches are suggestions, like *The Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book* (the main literature source of AA 12-step programs), whose recommendations are not set in stone but can give those in recovery helpful guidance. Much will depend upon the individual, his or her stage of development and responses to the horse's reactions.

Step one addresses the need to be honest with oneself. If individuals do not admit or look within themselves at what they have become and where the addiction has taken them, they cannot move forward. If they cannot experience their vulnerability, they will have difficulty learning to have faith in others. In this exercise, "Trust in Others and Powerlessness Over Situations," a blindfolded person is dependent on both the horse and its rider for guidance. You will need a horse, two people, an obstacle course

and a blindfold. One rider, who is mounted bareback on a haltered horse, must negotiate an obstacle course, led by a person on the ground who is blindfolded. The mounted rider verbally guides the person leading the horse, and both communicate to each other where and when to turn in order to successfully traverse each obstacle. When the two are finished, they switch roles and start again.

This exercise is designed to address trust and powerlessness. Feelings that may come up in this activity are fear and issues related to insecurity, vulnerability and trust. The following questions asked by the therapist can encourage participants to explore these feelings and how they relate to daily living:

- When you were on the back of the horse, what did you feel?
- How was this different from being the one blindfolded on the ground?
- What did the horse show you in this exercise?
- How can you apply this to your life?

## STEP TWO

The idea of believing in a power greater than oneself can be challenging to some people. *The Big Book* states that what this power represents is up to each individual's understanding. Some people have no problem using the word God; however, many people in recovery have an aversion to that word and concept. Therefore, the term "higher power" or "power greater than ourselves" is used. To help people understand this concept, they may be asked: If the moon moves the ocean's tides, can you? Is the moon then a power greater than oneself? This can be a start for those who struggle with this concept.

Believing in a higher power can be seen as developing hope. We have to have hope in order to believe there is something in the universe greater than ourselves to be able to get out

of our own way, to let go of the ego and rely on other people. A common thread with most those who have addiction problems is a resistance to asking for help from others, so this exercise, “Having Hope and Asking for Help,” can be a way to break through this resistance. This exercise requires several horses at liberty in a large enclosed area with enough halters and leads for all participants.

Without an explanation or demonstration of how to halter and lead a horse, the individual or group of people are asked to catch and lead the horse back to the facilitator. The group may speak to each other and ask for assistance. They are also able to ask for help from the PATH Intl. Certified Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning who is there to ensure safety for horses and humans. They are not corrected, however, if they put the halter on wrong or attach the lead rope in a non-traditional way.

This exercise demonstrates to the individual that asking for help is much easier than chasing a horse around a pasture because he or she doesn't know how to catch a horse. This activity can bring up feelings of aggression, frustration and hopelessness, as participants struggle with how to approach an unfamiliar horse, and even if they are successful in catching the horse, they may still find they do not know how to halter and lead the horse. By closing this activity with a group feedback session, which can be led by a licensed therapist or a facilitator who has experience in the 12 steps, participants can be encouraged to examine those feelings and how and why they arise.

### STEP THREE

In step three, participants explore further what it means to have faith. This is not about embracing a particular religion or necessarily even believing in a god, but, as AA states, the concept of faith is all about HOW—having honesty,

open-mindedness and willingness. In order to progress through the 12 steps and acquire the understanding of “getting out of one's own way,” one MUST believe in something greater and more powerful than themselves. Because this can be a complicated and sometimes challenging aspect of recovery for those who question the existence of a god, *The Big Book* addresses this issue in a chapter called, “We Agnostics.”

An EFP session can help participants practice what it means to have faith with the exercise, “Willingness in Relationship With Something Greater Than Myself.” This is a joining-up session with a horse and human and should take place in a round pen or small corral. Joining up is a way for a horse to voluntarily submit to a human and thus establish a bond of trust between both beings.

During the exercise, participants learn to develop an understanding

with the horse by using non-verbal communication to move the horse away with energy and then draw the horse in by withdrawing that energy. When the horse shows a sign of submission (e.g., licking lips, release of breath, lowering the head), the participant pulls this outward energy in by dropping eye contact and becoming quieter and smaller in stature, allowing the two to become attached and form a horse/human bond. Typically, a joining-up session can take as little as five minutes or up to an hour, depending on the horse and the human's understanding of how to trust each other and have faith in that trust.

The horse can represent a power greater than a human both literally and metaphorically. By showing its willingness to cooperate with a person, the horse can also mirror what it is like to surrender control. The process of joining up symbolizes



Even what appears to be a simple task—correctly and safely leading a horse—can tap into deep-seated anger, fear and frustration. Photo courtesy of Shadow Hills Riding Club.



what a participant must do to develop faith in a power greater than oneself. Processing with the licensed therapist after this activity gives the participant an opportunity to look at how he or she was able to join up with the horse and express any ideas or possible shifts in his or her attitude and behavior that made this bonding possible.

## HORSES AND RECOVERY

A person with substance abuse problems who engages in an EFP program that bases lessons around the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous has an opportunity to learn many life lessons he or she might have bypassed while addicted to alcohol or drugs. These include:

- learning problem solving
- developing strength with commitments and responsibility
- being accountable for one's actions
- developing an understanding of teamwork
- establishing a stronger work ethic
- improving attitude
- achieving a sense of empowerment

Programs like “Saddles and Serenity” can also address defects in character development, such as aggressiveness, which can be acted out through bullying, domestic violence or disrespecting other's personal boundaries. Even what appears to be a simple task—



**Left: In this exercise, “Trust in Others and Powerlessness Over Situations,” a blindfolded person is dependent on both the horse and its rider for guidance. Right: By basing sessions around the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, PATH Intl. Centers can offer individuals in recovery an exciting, alternative way to heal. Photos courtesy of Shadow Hills Riding Club.**

correctly and safely leading a horse— can tap into deep-seated anger, fear and frustration. Then, during the processing period generally done at the end of a session, participants can share what they felt the horse was communicating to them and what they learned about themselves. This feedback can use literal techniques such as responding to questions, as well as metaphors, symbolism and analogies to help participants understand how the session related to the values embodied in the 12 steps.

Incorporating the 12 steps with EFP encourages participants to start living their values through active practice and reflection and begin to embrace their own healing. As one of the participants in recovery aptly said, “Anger is one of the many issues that I must deal with. When I am on a horse, I am able to put my

issues behind me for a time and just experience the pure love of a horse.”

Johnny Higginson, a professional horseman, PATH Intl. Certified Advanced Instructor and owner of Shadow Hills Riding Club, a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center in Shadow Hills, CA, has 11 years of continuous sobriety. He presented at the 2012 PATH Intl. Conference on 12 Steps and EAAT. He is co-authoring a forthcoming book, *Recovery and Horses: The 12 Steps and Equine Assisted Activities and Therapies* with Susan Kelejian, MSW, who works with the “Saddles and Serenity” program. She is a mental health professional in the area of equine-assisted psychotherapy, a PATH Intl. Certified Instructor and Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning. Higginson can be reached at [johnhigginson@aol.com](mailto:johnhigginson@aol.com).