

What is Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP)?

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is the professional field in which horses are used as a tool for emotional growth and learning. EAP is a collaborative effort between a licensed therapist and a horse professional. Because of its intensity and effectiveness, it is considered a short-term, or “brief” approach.

EAP is experiential in nature. This means that participants learn about themselves and others by participating in activities with the horses, and then processing (or discussing) feelings, behaviors, and patterns. This approach has been compared to the ropes courses used by therapists, treatment facilities, and human development courses around the world. But EAP has the added advantage of utilizing horses, dynamic and powerful living beings.

Not all programs or individuals who use horses with clients practice Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. At a minimum, licensed clinical professionals need to be involved for it to be considered “psychotherapy”.

The focus of EAP is not riding, nor horsemanship. In fact, 100% of EAP takes place on the ground. The focus of EAP involves the use of activities involving the horses which requires the client or group to apply certain skills. Non-verbal communication, assertiveness, creative thinking and problem-solving, leadership, work, taking responsibility, teamwork and relationships, confidence, and attitude are several examples of the tools utilized and developed by EAP.

EAP is a powerful and effective therapeutic approach that has an incredible impact on individuals, youth, families, and groups. EAP addresses a variety of mental health and human development needs including behavioral issues, attention deficit disorder, substance abuse, eating disorders, abuse issues, depression, anxiety, relationship problems, and communication needs.

Why Horses?

Those who are familiar with horses recognize and understand the power of horses to influence people in incredibly powerful ways. Developing relationships, training, horsemanship instruction, and caring for the horses naturally affects the people involved in a meaningful way.

The benefits of work ethic, responsibility, assertiveness, communication, and healthy relationships have long been recognized. Horses naturally provide these benefits. The use of horses is growing and gaining popularity with the rise of new approaches in working with the horses, including the field of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy.

We are often asked, “Why horses, why not other animals?”

Horses are large and powerful, which creates a natural opportunity for some to overcome fear and develop confidence. The size and power of the horse are naturally intimidating to many people. Accomplishing a task involving the horse, in spite of those fears, creates confidence and provides for wonderful metaphors when dealing with other intimidating and challenging situations in life.

Horses are very much like humans in that they are social animals. They have defined roles within their herds. They would rather be with their peers. They have distinct personalities, attitudes, and moods. An approach that seems to work with one horse, does not necessarily work with another. At times, they seem stubborn and defiant. They like to have fun. In other words, horses provide vast opportunities for metaphorical learning. Using metaphors, in discussion or activity, is an effective technique when working with even the most challenging individuals or groups.

Horses require work, whether in caring for them or working with them. In an era when immediate gratification and the “easy way” are the norm, horses require people to be engaged in physical and mental work to be successful, a valuable characteristic in all aspects of life.

Most importantly, horses have the ability to mirror exactly what human body language is telling them. Many people will complain, “The horse is stubborn. The horse doesn’t like me.”, etc. But the lesson to be learned is that if they change themselves, the horses respond differently. Horses are also very honest, which makes them especially powerful messengers.

For more information go to: www.eagala.org