

What Exactly is “Equine Facilitated Mental Health and Equine Facilitated Learning”?

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No one would deny that farms, horses and riding are good for one’s health and well-being. Many human-interest stories, case studies and research projects all clearly validate that riding is an effective form of treatment for many physical and cognitive disabilities. Miracles have happened. People have gotten out of their wheelchairs. Mentally retarded riders have triumphed in Special Olympics. Fabulous pictures pull at our heart strings showing glowing children in wheelchairs getting ready to mount up. NARHA’s own logo shows a horse blending with a person and a crutch. Great PR pictures have been taken to promote the theory that riding and being involved with horses is wonderful, fun and productive for physically and mentally challenged children and adults.

In the last few years, however, the definition of therapeutic riding has been expanded and enhanced by including those whose mental health, emotional well-being and ability to learn has been severely challenged. Programs all over the United States, and indeed the world, are starting to serve clients, patients and students who want to become riders. Instead of coming from physical therapy clinics and rehabilitation hospitals, these riders are coming from local school gangs, psychiatric hospitals, foster homes, jails, juvenile detention programs and homes for unwed mothers.

They are referred by parents who do not know what else to do with Johnny. The riders are brought each week by a teacher who knows they can learn better if they feel better about themselves. They are brought by therapists who hope that horses can reconnect lost feelings, bring back “good touch,” rekindle the love that has been missing in the lives of their patients who have endured years of sexual abuse, physical violence and neglect. Psychiatrists who know their thrill seeking needs can be met in a healthier way than by drugs send them. They come with probation officers that do not want to see the cycle of poverty; abuse and detention continue in yet another generation. The lineup of people, both young and old, needing the healing power of the horse, riding, being a part of a farm, or finding a new community of caring people goes on and on.

These emotionally challenged riders are often not terribly photogenic. It is hard to capture their problems on film. It is hard to measure gains to use in writing grants because how can the human soul be quantified and can the rebirth of the human spirit be calibrated? Cute stories for the newspaper are hard to write because of confidentiality.

Yet, this type of therapeutic rider is every bit as limited as someone who needs a wheelchair to get around or as someone who has low brain function. Their muscles work and they have the capability to learn and to contribute to be good citizens. However, their hopelessness, lack of ability to communicate, depression, chemical dependency, family history, behaviors, record, and abuse all add up to being every bit as confining as any wheelchair.

Because this type of therapeutic riding is so subtle and hard to measure and articulate, the field of Equine Facilitated Mental Health and Equine Experiential Learning has only just started to be organized into a body of knowledge. Definitions, methods, philosophies, protocols, contraindications and standards of the industry are just beginning to be accepted. Textbooks are being started. Conferences are being held. Course work is beginning. To accomplish these goals, a new approved section of NARHA has recently been formed. This section is called the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association or EFMHA for short.

The EFMHA Board of Directors and Membership are working diligently to develop this new body of knowledge, research, certifications, credentialing, standards, etc. in order to professionalize what all of us already know in our hearts work like magic. EFMHA wants to legitimize what so many great riding teachers have done for centuries, which is heal the souls and spirits of people.

EFMHA members, parents, teachers, therapists and hospital administrators, far and wide, are seeing first hand that self esteem grows by leaps and bounds once riders experience their own competence on and around a horse. This "can do" attitude, with success built in, helps develop a sense of worth that is essential to the whole process of rebuilding broken lives.

The bond that so often develops between the human and the horse, whether mounted or on the ground, is a powerful antidote to the ravishing affects of abuser. This sense of connection with another living being helps to ward off the loneliness of depression, isolation and "virtual reality" of today's world. The ability to work as an important part of a team doing a project at the barn serves to pull members together in a positive way, with much the same magnetism as a gang member feels doing negative "projects" in the inner city.

Being responsible for the care and comfort of another living being brings with it learning that is hard to replicate elsewhere. The partnering and parenting skills so lacking in today's family can be experienced and explored by riders who might not get this chance until they have their own child screaming at 2 a.m. The chance to learn how to work and feel the satisfaction of a "job well done" is often absent in today's world of malls, technology and efficient household machines.

Horses, riding, farms, exercises, fresh air, all the things we often take for granted, speak volumes to a child who is forced to sit in a chair in a classroom all day. The agony of trying to sit still for a hyperactive kid or the repeated failure of a "hands on" learner in a "hands off" environment is every bit as violent to their ability to learn as repeated blows to the head. Following directions, sequencing, working in a group, listening to the teacher, completing task, building skills, focusing, finishing a project, and trusting adults, having confidence, all enable a student to learn.

These skills naturally evolve for a child who is eager to be with a horse because a horse is extremely "hands on". Barns and farms demand lots of movement, physical activity, thus they are ideal environments for children to thrive. Also, because horses are bigger than kids are, respect happens naturally. Boundaries and limits make sense. Order prevails. From respect, boundaries, order and all of the critical skills needed to learn can be practiced. It makes sense to the student to follow directions, do things in a logical sequence, work with the group, focus, finish the job, trust the teacher. As these critical

skills are practiced, rewards for the child happen naturally, automatically. Best of all, the child can feel within that he did it "right" because the horse responded. No judgment, no blame, no shame.

As hearts start to mend and learning becomes successful, people of all ages, genders and economic backgrounds begin to rebuild their shattered lives. Fun, relaxation, pleasure, renewal, refreshment, friendship, connection all start to work their magic in the human spirit. Lives change for the better. Good citizens are made. Our world becomes a better place thanks to the healing and loving presence of a horse.

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