

Prior to coming to PMRC as a resident, I learned that equine assisted therapy is part of the program, but I could not find much information on what that is or how a horse might help me recover from an eating disorder. Now, months later, I have my own horse and am happy to talk about what I have learned.

Why horses?

A horse's brain develops similar to a traumatized human's brain. As prey animals in their natural habitat horses are always prepared to fight or flee. Their brains develop and organize around the need for constant vigilance and immediate reactions to threat. This is why we work with horses (though donkeys, goats, and other animals have also been used). They provide a bridge for those of us working through the same issues. The principles we learn can be applied in any relationships.

The ultimate goal is to build connected relationship, for relationships are where healing and change happen. A horse creates a safe environment to learn new ways of being in relationship. Personally, my horse never talks to me about diets or tells me I look good. She never judges me harshly or shares my secrets with others. She is present and allows me to take comfort in her nearness. When my way of relating doesn't work well, I am given an opportunity to work through this in a non-threatening, non-confrontational way, leading me to think my horse is a very gentle counselor.

In the round pen:

We begin with the principle of pressure - every request brings some pressure to the relationship and once there is an appropriate response, the pressure goes away. Responses to requests are met with either cooperation, ignoring or resistance.

In the round pen we begin with the lowest level of pressure, perhaps a soft cluck, paying attention to our body energy because that is a form of pressure. If the lowest level of pressure is ignored, we increase it gradually. We might move our body and bring up the energy level, then begin to swing a rope or whip until we get a response. If there is resistance, we maintain pressure.

Resistance in a horse can be as subtle as a glare or it can be a toss of the head and a kick. We try to notice resistance before it builds up to kicking or biting, but we do not punish it. Resistance is the search for an answer and our horse is allowed to keep searching till it finds the answer that will bring a release of pressure. If we release pressure prematurely, we tell our horse that resistance *is* the answer. If we increase pressure, things escalate and we engage in a power struggle.

We want the horses to have a relationship in which they have choices so we ask for consent before petting, brushing or putting on a halter, etc. To halter my horse, I hold up the halter and wait for her to give consent by turning an ear my direction or slightly lowering her head. When she gives consent, I am free to slip it over her head. If she ignores my request, I shake the halter. If she moves away from me or her ears go back, I maintain pressure. When she stands still or brings her ears forward I release the pressure for a bit before beginning again with another request. By now we have done this so often that if I notice resistance I look for what is going on. Did she try to tell me something I missed? Is she afraid of an unusual object? Is she

overwhelmed with too many new things or doesn't she want to leave the other horses in the pasture? Last week it was because I was standing in the way for her to chase away a fly.

The first task we learn is attachment, asking our horse to be with us and stay connected. We request this by facing the horse's tail and directing our body energy at the tail. This position gives her many options – she can choose to go to the other end of the pasture, throw me a kick (so I am sure to allow space for this option) or to come connect. Will she face me, giving me an ear or an eye, and then follow by my side as we walk around the round pen? What about stepping over a log? Can she stay connected to me when the other horses are whinnying in the pasture or she hears a tractor nearby?

When attachment is comfortable for both of us we are ready to move to detachment. The goal of detachment work is to build a strong internal sense of connection. A healthy internal sense of connection results in a felt belief that I am not alone in this world; even though I am not physically with an important other, I remain connected to them. In detachment work we ask for connection with distance.

In detachment we direct our energy toward their shoulder, perhaps waving them out away from us to walk or trot around us. Can she stay connected for four rounds before we ask her back in? Can she navigate obstacles? Can she change directions and do figure eights? All these and more are tasks we do in detachment as part of ground work before we are ready to ride.

Eventually we ride, if we want to, but connection remains the goal. We usually ride bareback so that communication is not hindered and we can notice the rhythm of her movement, another way to help our brains.

My experience:

I got to start my equine assisted therapy with Ruth Ann, one of the therapists, and I chose Brenda, the grandma horse, because she felt safe to me. They taught me a lot of basics and I enjoyed my sessions with Brenda, noticing that I felt calm and present with her. I spent a lot of time brushing her, telling her my stories and taking her for walks.

Ruth Ann works with me to help me self-regulate. I need to learn to control my body energy so that my energy doesn't affect my horse and our work together negatively. If I am anxious, my horse will reflect that. She assumes I know that there is a reason to be afraid so she will also become afraid. I cannot help her stay calm and able to think if I am not calm. One way I often check in with my internal world is by doing a SIFT exercise with Ruth Ann, naming Sensations, Images, Feelings and Thoughts or naming what my five senses are telling me. As I do this, my horse is standing with me and quite often she licks and chews which tells me she is releasing tension she has been holding.

After a few months of working with Brenda, it was my turn to go to a horse sale and choose a horse for myself with assistance from board member Jonas. I came home with a lovely paint mare that I named Chiquita. Now I have a fresh reason to begin each day with energy.

Jonas has a knack for helping girls choose horses that match their temperament or that will work together well as a team. I have enjoyed watching for ways that my horse is similar to me. Last week we spent an entire session trotting in circles in the arena because it was her solution or search for an answer. It wasn't what I wanted, nor what she wished for, but maybe it seemed best because it was her idea – or maybe she was unsure of the answer that would bring a release of pressure, but she was unable to calm herself enough to think of a better solution. In these ways I get to reflect on what works best in relationships, especially in my relationship with God. Also encouraging is noticing that as my relationships with Chiquita and others grow, my eating disorder loses power.

- A PMRC Resident