

Not just horsing around ... psychologists put their faith in equine therapies

Health professionals say horses can reflect our emotions to bring relief from addiction and stress



The psychological benefits of working with horses are being recognised by growing numbers of therapists. Photograph: Marcelo Del Pozo/Reuters

In a Sussex field, a large bay horse is galloping around, tail held high. This magnificent creature is one of a new army of animals that is helping therapists to treat everything from addiction to autism to post-traumatic stress disorder.

Reports last week showed that dogs, already known to be invaluable helpmates for blind, deaf, diabetic and epileptic owners, were also being trained to help dementia patients.

Now the psychological benefits of working with horses are being recognised by growing numbers of therapists who work with autistic children, young people with behavioural problems, adults with depression or celebrities with addictions.

"The horse is the perfect mirror, they are very emotional beings; we're only starting to realise how intelligent they are," said therapy counsellor Gabrielle Gardner, of Shine For Life, watching the horse dance around his pen at a farm in Blackstone, a village a few miles north of Brighton.

"A lot of my clients start off being very nervous, so I wouldn't always use such a big horse. One of the reasons I think equine-assisted therapies work so well is that everyone has a reaction to horses; nobody is indifferent. People either love them or fear them, so that's two big emotions that immediately reflect what most of life's issues revolve around. If you can work with an animal like this and overcome the fear, then it isn't a bad starting point."

Gardner has worked with all types of clients, including young offenders, and says a horse picks up on the way people are feeling, mirroring their emotions and responding. As a herd animal attuned to stress and body language, a horse will move away from an angry person, follow someone it trusts and be unsettled when it senses fear.

"It's especially good for people who don't take to talking therapies. Counselling is not a 'one size fits all'. While you might forget a conversation you had with your counsellor a few weeks on, it's unlikely you'll forget what happened when you stood in a field with your counsellor and a horse. It's not like patting a dog; it's a big animal."

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Gardner, who runs sessions for clients alongside a mental health professional, says the sudden explosion in popularity of horse-based therapies has been helped by the success of the book and film *War Horse* and a TV series that saw Martin Clunes investigate our relationship with the horse. But another reason is the runaway success of the therapies in the US. Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (Eagala), a US-based organisation, trained 1,500 therapists in Britain in 2011. Coral Harrison, from Cumbria, is their regional coordinator for Europe. "We're seeing hundreds of new inquiries, whereas a few years ago it would be a handful."

Scientific research remains thin on the ground and the therapy's effectiveness remains mostly anecdotal, although The Priory clinic offers equine-assisted therapies, while in the US equine-assisted activities and therapies have attracted celebrity clients including Robert Downey Jr and Sophie Anderton. American horse trainer Franklin Levinson is establishing a regular base for his courses in Dorset, working with troubled children.

"It has been clinically documented that just being around horses changes human brainwave patterns. We calm down and become more centred and focused when we are with horses," he says. "Horses are naturally empathetic. The members of the herd feel what is going on for the other members of the herd."

The Horse Boy Foundation – set up by Rupert Isaacson, who wrote a book about riding in Mongolia with his autistic son – is running a new programme of equine therapy camps this summer for autistic children and their families in Britain.

Such efforts have the tentative approval of mainstream scientists. Dr Nicola Martin, an autism expert at the LSE, said she thought anything that brought children and families together would have a positive effect.

"It's certainly not about healing or curing, because autism is for life, but being out in the countryside, close to nature, doing something enjoyable like interacting with horses, has got to help families come together."

In Scotland a charity called HorseBack UK is achieving tremendous results using horses to rehabilitate injured and traumatised members of the armed forces. Jock Hutcheson, a former marine, had retired to breed horses when he offered to take a group of former combatants riding. Self-confessed as "horse daft since I was three", he said that even he hadn't expected the horses to have such a huge impact. Last year he had 156 people through his Aberdeenshire centre.

He said the trick was offering "mobility with dignity". He added: "Soldiers don't make good patients and they don't want pity, but we want to create a way for them to come back into the world again. The horses have had an enormous effect on them, empowering."

Using animals as therapy is not new: the Greeks documented the horse's therapeutic value in 600BC and French physician Cassaign concluded in 1875 that equine therapy helped certain neurological disorders. Dolphins were used in the former Soviet Union to treat nervous disorders and rabbits lower stress levels in American old people's homes. By the 1950s British physiotherapists were exploring the possibilities of horse therapy for all types of disorders. The Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) was founded in 1969 with the enthusiastic support of the royal family and the Queen still shows a keen interest in the work of Californian horse whisperer Monty Roberts, who has been working on bringing horses and troubled children together for several years.

Whether scientists will ever prove that they offer real medical value, our love of animals shows no sign of abating. As Churchill said: "There's something, about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man."