

Gestalt Equine Institute of the Rockies

(GEIR)

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Supporting health, growth and healing through relationship

In the world of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy I believe there are 4 major categories of work and presentation from what I have been able to ascertain. The first one that also may be the oldest is what is now being called Natural Horsemanship. This is the process of working in relationship with the horse and supporting a natural process that can happen between us and the horse. This work is primarily focused on training the horse for riding and other horse related activities. When doing this we become aware of the predator/ prey relationship and how we must move into a place of mutual respect for how each of us are in the world.

Natural horsemanship is as old as the initial relationship between the early humans and early horses. This makes sense as the only way for there to be anything other than the hunter/prey relationship. We as humans would be required to enter into a relationship in a different way because at that time we did not have the bits, halters, saddles etc that we have now. No one really knows exactly how this came about, however as we have recreated this in the present we have learned that the relationship between us and the horse is essential. Even though natural horsemanship in its many forms has greatly influenced how we work in therapy there is not emphasis on psychotherapy in this modality.

I am not sure if the next part would be considered the second process or if it actually is integrated with the original natural horsemanship process. This aspect is the work with horses that is spiritually based. This has been around for a long period of time and intuitively developed from a very early connection between horses that at the time was truly about life, death and survival. Horses at that time were seen as a source of food, transportation and moving heavy objects that humans could not. This has been inherent for thousands of years as early cave wall paintings as old as 4000 - 3500 BCE have shown. More recently there has been a

renewal of spiritually based work with the horse at the core of this teaching. This is largely based on relationship with the horse, the environment and spiritual process as defined by whoever is leading the work. Some of this work brings in natural horsemanship with the horse(s) and some involves only contact with the horse and does not include riding or working with the horse in what we would consider horsemanship. When this work is integrated with meditation and other kinds of transpersonal work it can be very powerful and growth producing. This is usually seen from a perspective of personal / spiritual growth and is not seen as psychotherapy. In this model there is not an emphasis on horsemanship and each facilitator seems to find their own level of expertise and experience.

(I do not want to have an unrealistic fantasy that all was wonderful in past years, I am suggesting that when we as humans really needed the partnership of the horse we treated them with deeper respect. It is in this respect that both the spiritual and the partnership have developed. This is now re-evolving and growing in a way that is being explored in many places in the world.)

The third category seems to be the work that is about setting up exercises and watching horses and clients as they complete a task. The idea here is to watch the client and see how the human responds. This process is meant to bring the "client" to an awareness and an analysis of what they are doing. This often involves a therapist and equine specialist for more input and safety. In this model the therapist does not have to know much about horses. This is the role of the equine specialist. This method also does not include much regarding the relationship between the client and the horse or horses in the therapy. The core of this model is the therapist observing and bringing awareness to what they see with the process of the client(s).

In this fourth area the emphasis is on the relationship. It is the relationship with ourselves, others and the horses that is the core of this level of work. When we go deeper what we are really exploring is our experience of relationship while in relationship with another. This is also the core of Gestalt Therapy. When we

integrate the relational work of gestalt and the natural relational ability of the horse we are often able to go places that we cannot go in traditional therapy.

There are a number of underlying philosophies about how horses should be treated, the role of the horse and the role of the therapist. We strongly believe that to be able to truly deepen this work the therapist must know the process of the horse and the herd of horses and as well as the process of the client(s) the therapists must be a knowledgeable horse person as well as a knowledgeable therapist. We believe this is ultimately important because so much happens between the horse(s) and the people that is subtle and intense and if the therapist does not know horses they will miss a great deal. In other words, the therapist must be in full relationship (contact) with the environment, the horse(s), the people and themselves in this work. We call this the "field" and we are of the field and in the field at once.

Gestalt therapy is the first therapy based on experience and experiment. Therefore it is the primary experiential therapy and an "umbrellic" theory that many other experiential therapies use as their foundation. When we are working from a Gestalt Equine Psychotherapeutic base we are working from this experiential/experimental base. We do not have a set of exercises that we work from. We start with what we are given by the people and the horses and the environment to create an experiment / experience to deepen and support the process of exploring and growth for the person in relationship. To do this we must be willing to know ourselves, the horses and be willing to step into relationship with the horse, and our clients and the environment as the core of the therapy.

The following are some of the core tenants of this work:

- 1) The focus of this work is the exploration of our experience in and of relationship while in relationship with the horse, the therapists and the environment.
- 2) The relationship between the person and the horse is truly the "client" that we work with. This then can transfer to other relationships.
- 3) We work with the present and what emerges.
- 4) A core aspect of this work is experience and expression.

- 5) Many times a person's homeostasis is disturbed while supported in relationship.
- 6) We rarely know exactly what will happen in the work. Much of this work is based on creating and following what we call an "experiment"
- 7) This experiment is based on what emerges from the environment, the client and the horses.
- 8) Our growth comes through challenging ourselves with internal and environmental support.
- 9) The experiments and experiences while in contact and relationship with ourselves and the horses are unlimited and can include everything from watching and being in herd to grooming to riding. This may incorporate all the other aspects of work such as natural horsemanship, spiritual work, exercises, groundwork, riding, feeding, personal health, equine health or care taking.
- 10) This is an inclusive process working, learning and growing.

Equine assisted work for personal growth and psychotherapy is very new in the world of healing. There are many great, wonderful, creative ideas out there and my perspective is that we have only touched the surface of all that can happen and be created in this work. The process of exploration and inclusion in this work is important because that is what will support the deepest growth for all involved. As we think about learning and training the importance of holding those that we will be working with is imperative. This includes the people and the horses that we include in this relational process of life.