



From the Horse's Mouth: Understanding Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP)

Crazed horses with teeth bared charging at everyone in their path, a misunderstood equine lounging on a sofa pouring out tales of a troubled childhood, Smarty Jones lamenting the loss of his big race...these are the kinds of mental

images the average person has when they first hear of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. The truth is a little less imaginative but still extraordinary.

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is an emerging field in which horses are incorporated as partners in emotional growth and learning for people. Experiential in nature, EAP's versatility makes it an effective tool for a broad spectrum of theoretical approaches—particularly cognitive, gestalt, person centered, family systems, transactional analysis, and reality therapy.

EAP utilizes horses, dynamic and powerful animals, in interactive exercises that require clients to demonstrate communication, assertiveness, problem-solving, leadership, responsibility and relationship skills. EAP sessions allow for direct observation of behaviors, emotional responses and patterns in real-time situations and can be a powerful adjunct to the self-report style of traditional counseling. The session allows a therapist and client to practice new behaviors in a dynamic situation with a living creature, similar to role-play, but with the added benefit of authentic reaction from a living animal who exercises choice. Rather than discuss a new behavior, then go out and try it in their lives and report back in the next week's session, clients can try a new behavior with the present support of their therapist and process the results.

As the field of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy gains increasing popularity, it can be beneficial to know what you should look for in a program:

EAGALA Certification: The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) provides the only internationally recognized certification in EAP; setting the standard of practice for ethics, safety, and professionalism in the field. EAGALA certification ensures that high standards of ethics and professionalism are upheld to instill confidence in clients, professionals, and their communities.

The Team Approach: The EAGALA industry standard calls for a team approach of licensed therapist and qualified equine specialist. This partnership strengthens the ability to respond to the session competently by ensuring a fully qualified professional in both fields, able to attend to both the horses

and humans effectively. Emotional and physical safety are best met with two sets of eyes and two perspectives, creating a higher standard and ensuring a better service to the client. Both a licensed therapist and a qualified equine specialist are necessary; anything less is not the EAGALA approach.

Licensed Mental Health Professionals: EAP is a highly specialized and advanced form of experiential therapy that should be provided by a therapist who is fully licensed, insured and experienced. In the event that EAP is facilitated by a therapist under supervision, expect the supervisor to take an active role and have extensive experience in the field of EAP.

Qualified Equine Specialists: Expect the equine professional to have specialized training in the use of horses in mental health and human development. Both physical and emotional safety are essential in EAP sessions; it is unsafe and unwise to rely on a person experienced with horses but not EAGALA Certified to provide EAP.

Experience with EAP: Look for a program dedicated first and foremost to providing quality mental health services for people using Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. A "jack of all trades" is master of none.

Privacy: Confidentiality is essential, so beware high traffic stables in which privacy is compromised.

A Healthy Environment for Therapy Horses: Look for a program with a healthy lifestyle for the therapy horses including daily time in a pasture with a herd. Living in a stall fulltime is not a horse's nature and can lead to behavioral issues that impact the therapy session.

Flying Change was founded in 1996, making it one of Georgia's oldest Equine Assisted Psychotherapy programs. Based in Vinings, we are dedicated to providing mental health services and personal growth opportunities for people utilizing Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. EAGALA certified equine specialists and licensed mental health professionals partner to provide services to individuals, families, groups and corporations. Flying Change contracts with licensed counseling professionals in providing our psychotherapy services; we also partner with mental health agencies and private practice therapists in making EAP available to therapists' own clientele.

As with any experiential approach, the best way to understand EAP is to experience it firsthand. We invite you to call Lissa Corcoran at (404) 512-0634 or the Flying Change office at (770) 917-9627 for a demonstration, or visit us on the web at www.flyingchange.org.