

EQUINE *Experiential Learning*

Can Horses Help You Become A Better You?

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Adding blindfolds is an advanced move in EEL. The removal of vision helps all the other senses become more involved.

Can horses help us become our best selves? I believe they can as evidenced by an entire discipline of horse and human therapy that has been gaining recognition for the past few decades. You may see this modality of horses and humans engaging for the purpose of the human's enlightenment referred to as Equine Experiential Learning (EEL), Equine Assisted Learning (EAL), Equine Assisted Activities and Therapies

what it is horses partner with me to do? The goal in its simplest form of the alphabet soup listed above, is to help humans discover and become the best version of who they were created to be, or at least that is my goal when I work with individuals or teams.

Still feel lost? So did I eight years ago when all of these designations came into my awareness. My first experience with EAAT was with a local therapeutic riding

It was incredible to see what the weekly rides did for him, not only physically, but also emotionally. When he was riding, his "blue moods" were less frequent and less lengthy. When there were breaks in the riding schedule, he physically and emotionally became more challenging.

Care giving can play havoc on relationships and my husband and I were no exceptions. We learned the hard way that if you don't take care of yourself, then nothing else is going to work. Three years after Bill came to reside with us, we had fallen into our own versions of depression. During our struggles, my friend and mentor told me of an EFP program for men. The ironic thing, as I was looking for something to help my husband, I found a program for me that changed my life.

If you've ever heard the saying "you don't know what you don't know", that was me. I was so busy taking care of the family (including our critters) that I was completely unaware of how shut down I had become. I was surviving, but barely. In the first 5-day workshop, I didn't

center. This came about as a result of looking for activities for my brother-in-law, Bill, who had suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI) in 1981 and had come to live with us. His life and his body had become such that he needed help from the family.

To meet the goal, I HAD to become the lead horse to both horses. It took quite a bit of coaching from the sideline, but once I got it, and the horses passed each other not once, or twice, but multiple times, a whole new world opened to me in that moment.

(EAAT), Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL), Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP). These are all the possible generic designations, so you can imagine how challenging it can be to concisely describe



connect with any of the activities until the 4th day. When we debriefed each activity, the other 7 participants had fabulous insights from their time with the horses and the reflective time we spent on mandala's (an artistic tool to tap into the right side of our brain). I am thankful for that group of women, because there was nothing but love and support from them as I kept coming up with goose-egg after goose-egg. I'm not sure what triggered in the facilitator, but after we completed a mounted meditation, and I still didn't have anything but darkness, she asked me if I would be comfortable entering a round-pen with two horses at liberty. I don't know if it was bravery, stupidity or desperation, but I agreed to put myself in a round-pen with two strange horses, with the intent to move them, while a group of up-until-that-week strangers looked on.

The goal: to move the horses at liberty (with no halters or lines connected to them) and get them to go the opposite direction of each other. To many, this may sound like a simple task. But to add to the difficulty, one horse was the leader, the other a dominant, two different roles in a herd of horses. When the time in the exercise came that would require them to cross, the dominant's natural tendency would be to turn and follow the lead horse. To meet the goal, I HAD to

become the lead horse to both horses. It took quite a bit of coaching from the sideline, but once I got it, and the horses passed each other not once, or twice, but multiple times, a whole new world opened to me in that moment. At the end, the horses started bucking and playing and it felt like they were celebrating the success with me. For the first time in my life I understood empowerment. At the

end of that week, I had also come to the realization that at my core, I still loved my husband and believed our marriage was worth fighting for.

The next year, the group of us came back together for Part II. It was at that time I was offered the opportunity to become an Eponaquest Riding Focused instructor. Since that time I have had the privilege of working with teams to help ascertain their strengths and weaknesses, helped a young lady who was continuously getting thrown from her horse in lessons learn how to shift her focus and connect with her horse, and helped individuals recognize they are presenting themselves based on other people's expectations rather than their true selves.

The beauty of partnering with horses is they provide this beautiful mirror of how we are showing up in the world. My job as the facilitator is to provide a safe environment and to ask the questions that help individuals or teams discover their truth. Yes, traditional self-help and counseling modalities can get you there, but often take much longer. Why? It is hard to deny the truth a 1000-pound animal shows you.



Renee at Liberty (no halters or lines connected) with miniature horses at Five Horses, LLC.