

# Exploring the healing possibilities of equine therapy

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IMAGE: HORSES FOR HOPE OPERATES AN EQUINE-ASSISTED THERAPY PROGRAM IN KINGLAKE, VICTORIA (SUPPLIED/ HORSES FOR HOPE)

Most of us enjoy the company of animals. But is it possible to engage with them on a deeper level? According to a field of psychology that pairs humans with animals in a therapeutic relationship, the answer is yes. Cultural anthropologist and Top 5 Under 40 scientist Dr Kirrilly Thompson examines the potential mutual benefits of equine-assisted therapy. **Lynne Malcolm and Olivia Willis** report.

Anthropology has long sought to understand what it means to be human by understanding what it means to be an animal.

According to Dr Kirrilly Thompson, animals can serve as a metaphorical, symbolic and literal reference point that can help humans to make sense of themselves and their place in the world.

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ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR TANIA SIGNAL, CENTRAL QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY

‘Animals can play an important role in rituals, rites of passage and other transformational practices,’ she says. ‘Horses are an excellent example in this regard, as they have been found to symbolise such things as male and female, nature and culture, wild and tame. Because of these multiple and even contradictory meanings, horses can symbolise the transformation from one of those states to another.’

Thompson is an anthropologist who studies human-animal relations, and is a keen horse rider herself. She specialises in the significance of horses in our lives, and says they have the power to transform us, but not just on a symbolic level.

‘In equine-assisted therapy, for example, they are transforming people that need healing into people that can help others. In fact, there is increasing evidence that equine-assisted therapy can benefit people dealing with autism, PTSD and domestic violence.’

Associate Professor Tania Signal, a colleague of Thompson at Central Queensland University, has also researched animal-assisted therapies at length, and believes horses can offer humans a unique therapeutic experience.

‘Psychology has got a long history of trying to help people with a range of disorders and a range of problems. Unfortunately, it is not always successful, particularly in cases where you've got children who have been abused ... or perhaps you are working with non-traditional groups,’ she says.

‘There are problems with making the required connection with individuals so that we can help them, and it seems that animals are a great way of providing that bridge, of getting a really effective intervention going.’

Signal says the therapy is increasingly popular in cases where the therapeutic alliance between the psychologist and the child is difficult to establish.

‘So it might be someone whose language abilities or cognitive abilities are not quite there, through age or disability, or different cultural barriers.’

‘It's often an adjunct therapy when the psychologist has experienced that the traditional cognitive behavioural therapies don't work.’

‘Animals don't judge you, they don't care whether you've arrived with bed hair or that you've arrived with mismatched clothes, they don't care if you aren't saying quite the right things, there is no feeling of judgement with animals, so there's that unconditional ability to relate.’

Signal also believes the unconventional space in which the therapy takes place contributes to success of the treatment.

‘There is an advantage when the person is outside of their comfort zone. You're not going to bring them into an office and sit there on a couch, you're outside, it's different from everything that is normal and is part of the issues that that person is bringing with them,’ she says.

Although a broad range of animals have been utilised in various animal-assisted therapies, horses remain a popular choice for both practitioners and people seeking treatment.

‘Horses are a prey animal, so they react very strongly to hidden cues,’ says Signal. ‘So the client or the individual going through therapy has to be very aware of their own personal body language. They have to manage their emotions and manage their feelings and their body language in order to interact with that horse.’



**IMAGE:** EIGHT-YEAR-OLD MICHAEL DEDRICK-DWYER, WHO HAS CEREBRAL PALSY AND AUTISM, RIDES AT HORSES AND THE HANDICAPPED IN FLORIDA. (PHOTO BY TOM ERVIN/GETTY IMAGES)

This concept is echoed by Colin Emonson from Horses for Hope, a well-established equine-assisted therapy program in Kinglake, Victoria.

‘I think other animals have their own capacities, but horses in particular see us as predators. We are not part of the pack, and they are very sensitive to us as predators. So they monitor everything that is going on inside us, they monitor our breathing, our adrenaline and our heart rate.’

Emonson says this is exactly what makes them such perceptive counsellors.

‘That's the skill that they bring, the skill to be able to reflect back to us what it is that's going on inside, because often it's impossible for us to know that without some level of reflection. They do that at the same time as providing the people we work with a pleasant and enjoyable and hopefully helpful experience.’

According to Emonson, a typical first session of equine therapy begins with a brief lesson in horse psychology, followed by an introduction to the practice of working with horses.

‘We will then go into the horse yard and demonstrate the process of making a connection with a horse. There are particular exercises that you do. And following that, if the person with us is interested in having a go, we do about 10 minutes of training and then we get in the yard and work with them.’

According to Emonson, the aim of the initial sessions is for the client to replicate the role of the horse, build communication through their body language, ultimately inviting the horse back toward them.

‘To do that the person has to be able to show strength without aggression to the horse, to be able to show leadership, and to be able to push the horse away from themselves, and that's sometimes hard.’

Once participants have built up enough trust for the horse ‘to feel safe with them’, they are encouraged to assist the horse go through a situation it finds challenging.

This process often mirrors the experience of the person receiving treatment, says Emonson.

‘What happens for them when they are confronted with a hard and tricky situation? Who can they use to help them through those things? We would be engaging in conversations around those things as we are doing these tasks with the horses.’



IMAGE: KIRRILLY THOMPSON IS ONE OF RN'S 5 UNDER 40 SCIENTISTS (ABC RN/ALEX MCCLINTOCK)

Jordy, a 17-year-old participant in Horses for Hope, has been involved in equine therapy for seven months, and remembers one particular transformative interaction.

‘I had a session with a horse called Lucky that was in a pen ... she saw a ball and freaked out. Lucky wasn't sure about how to react to a ball and was uncertain that it was okay. So what my job was to do was to go in there and earn her trust first, and get her to feel safe with me and respectful of me,’ she says.

Once she gained the horse's trust, the trainers brought a small ball into the pen with Jordy and Lucky.

‘We let her sniff it, feel it and pretty much do whatever she wanted until she was okay with that. I walked around the ball a few times to let her see it before we went over to touch it. Once we went over, we let her slowly touch it herself while I was sitting next to it to make sure her safe spot was with me,’ says Jordy.

Once Lucky felt safe and secure around the small ball, trainers then introduced a large beach ball—the same ball the horse had been initially distressed by.

‘Once we walked the ball past the fence a few times she got very inquisitive about it, so we brought her over to the fence and the ball over to the fence as well. She then wanted to play with it ... so we brought the ball inside.’

Jordy explains that the relationship between the participant and the horse creates a safety net; the horse feels comfortable to challenge itself when the client is by its side.

‘Once I detach from her and walk away or unclip the leash, that safe spot may be broken between us. So while I was with her, she felt it was perfectly okay to touch the ball, but once I unclipped the leash and walked away she had that tiny bit of anxiety,’ says Jordy.

By the end of the session, Lucky was biting, playing and nudging the ball with ease.

‘It’s just creating that safe spot for her to realise that that ball is okay. And that’s like a life lesson, just for yourself as well, that not knowing something can be okay in the end.’

While most equine-assisted therapy programs use trained horses, Horses for Hope uses horses who are not only untrained, but who may themselves be traumatised in some way.

‘Most people that we work with, who come to us seeking help, are not used to being cast in the role of a helper. They are used to being the ones receiving help on the other end, and I don’t think we should underestimate how important it might be for people to actually be considering themselves as a helper, so contributing to something rather than just receiving,’ says Colin Emonson.

Associate Professor Tania Signal believes that the benefits of equine-assisted therapy are significantly enhanced when the goal of the program is to help both the person and the horse.

‘When an individual who themselves is going through trauma or is damaged or is presenting with issues, if they are working with an animal that they can identify with, that has a similarity to them in their experiences or in the need to be healed, that just helps facilitate that bond,’ says Signal.

‘I think we need to be very careful that we don’t simply make animals tools ... So I really like the approaches where an animal has been brought in as a co-therapist but the animal itself benefits as well.’



IMAGE: THERAPEUTIC HORSEBACK RIDING HORSE SHOW IN PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC (KARAKAL; VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

According to Signal, animal-assisted therapy is still very much in its infancy, and as a result it lacks empirical evidence.

‘There is a danger at the moment of the popularity outstripping the science, if you like. But it has a lot of anecdotal support.’

Signal says it’s critical for researchers to gather scientific evidence to substantiate the promising anecdotal claims, but admits it’s difficult to control the many different variables at work.

‘We need well-designed studies, not necessarily control group and all that kind of thing, because that's just not possible when you are working with traumatised people or traumatised animals.

‘If we can narrow down for whom it is the most effective and in what situations, then we can start getting medical boards on board, we can get psychologists on board, we can start rolling it out as a more popular therapy of choice,’ says Signal.

According to participant Jordy, the key to animal-assisted therapy is the combination of treatment from both humans and horses.

'You feel like you reflect yourself in that animal, and that helps you as well as talking to a human. I find it sometimes hard to talk to a human, so talking to that animal through my body language was reflecting myself on me,' she says.

'Each session taught me something different, and I learnt something new about myself and about life situations.'