

What is Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy?

Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy & Learning (EFP/L) are modes of therapeutic intervention in which carefully designed exercises with horses allow for emotional growth and learning in participants. The focus of EFP/L programs is not recreational riding, but the moment-to-moment opportunities to practice self-awareness, emotional honesty, and constructive relationship skills. The abilities developed translate readily to human relationships and environments. EFP/L can be especially effective for participants that have difficulty engaging in traditional office therapy.

Why are horses such effective therapy animals?

Horses possess keen intuition regarding human emotional states and are exceedingly responsive to the level of self-awareness and emotional congruence of people. Their imposing size and tremendous strength require respect, attention to safety and a great deal of sensitivity. Once a good relationship is established with a horse, the interactions are exhilarating and liberating – engaging the mind, body and spirit in ways that are profoundly transformative.

Horses display unparalleled sensitivity to non-verbal communication and behavioral consistency. They display confusion in the face of incongruities in thought, feeling and behavior, and they are incapable of masking emotion or lying, making them powerful therapeutic mirrors. As the person sorts out feelings and learns to express them appropriately, the horse responds with cooperation and generosity, providing immediate reinforcement for positive changes in affect, cognition and behavior.

Does EFP/L involve riding?

Most EFP/L exercises are conducted from the ground. This allows physical and emotional safety of all involved, and forms the basis for many of the benefits. Ground exercises and learning horse handling and safety allow participants to establish communication, trust, respect, and responsibility before proceeding into riding activities. The amount of riding varies from program to program, but is always determined by the needs, wishes and level of responsible self-awareness shown by the participant.

What problems or disorders are addressed?

Because EFP/L promotes positive emotional and mental functioning, positive benefits are apparent with a wide array of participants. Increased self-esteem, improved integration of cognitive and emotional functions, realistic appraisal of situations, and enhanced communication with others provide for improved functioning regardless of diagnostic label (horses don't recognize labels!). Participants include trauma survivors, conduct disorders or "at risk" youth, attachment and autism spectrum disorders, and mood/anxiety/attention disorders. EFP/L can be adapted for various age groups, family therapy, or people with physical disabilities.

How can I find a reputable program or learn more?

EFP/L practitioners can be found in many geographic areas, and may practice individually or in teams comprised of a therapist/educator and an equestrian instructor. Therapists must possess the credentials required by the state they practice in. Specialized training in EFP/L should be evidenced by certification from a major organization such as the **Epona Center** or the **Equine Facilitated Growth and Learning Association** (EAGALA). Reputable programs carry adequate insurance for liability and provide safe environments where both horses and people are treated with respect and sensitivity.

Human-Equine Alliances for Learning (HEAL) provides EFP/L services at the HEAL Ranch in Chehalis, Washington and conducts workshops across the US, Europe and Canada.