



SEARCH OUR SITE

GO

[About us](#) | [Sitemap](#) | [Contact us](#)

PUBLICATIONS

COUNSELORS

STUDENTS

RESOURCES

PRESS ROOM

PUBLIC POLICY

CAREER CENTER

CONFERENCE

BOOKSTORE

JOURNALS

COUNSELING TODAY

NEWSLETTERS

COUNSELING CORNER

BOOK PROPOSAL
SUBMISSIONS

ADVERTISE

Counseling Today Online

Straight from the horse's mouth

(Counseling Today) 06.01.08

Counselors praise the benefits of equine-assisted therapy

By Angela Kennedy

Five years ago, Kay Sudekum Trotter arrived at a muddy Texas horse ranch wearing capri pants and sandals and wanting to learn more about equine-assisted therapy. By the end of the afternoon, her cute outfit was dirty, her shoes ruined, but this self-proclaimed city girl had been roped by this nontraditional approach in which horses aid in the counseling process.



Kay Trotter has an equine-assisted therapy practice in rural Texas

Today, Trotter is not only a licensed professional counselor and registered play therapist, but a certified equine-assisted counselor with the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association. In a countryish suburb of Dallas, this American Counseling Association member runs her own equine-assisted counseling practice, Mendin' Fences, where she provides unique counseling services to children and teenagers with behavioral and mental health issues.

"I'm not the traditional girl who grew up loving horses, so in the past few years, I've learned not only what horses can do in a therapeutic setting, but I've also had to learn just the basics," Trotter says. "They still tease me about showing up to the ranch in flip-flops." Not being a "horse person" has actually proved beneficial when speaking to other counselors about equine therapy, Trotter says, because she can let them know from firsthand experience that they don't need to be professional wranglers to successfully apply this approach.

As described by Trotter, equine-assisted counseling utilizes horses to increase clients' awareness of their own thoughts, words and actions. Through counseling, team building and equine activities, clients learn how to recognize

dysfunctional patterns of behavior and to define healthy relationships. This is made possible in part by the horses' innate ability to observe and respond to nonverbal cues. In the counseling process, the horses serve as living mirrors, reflecting clients' emotional and behavioral states.

"Because horses are prey animals, they have honed their skills to pick up on and read body language," Trotter explains, adding that horses are much more adept than humans at sensing when something is going on beneath the surface. "If I have an ADHD client come out for a session and he's bouncing all over, the horse will be leery of the client. The client will learn that if he wants the horse to change, he will have to change his behavior, thoughts and feelings. The horse is that sensitive."

"The other powerful element within equine therapy is the noticeable shift in control and power within the client," she says. "I've done a lot of work with young people in juvenile detention. Out here on the ranch, the head of the gang is no longer in control because he's now face-to-face with a 1,500-pound animal. You don't have that shift with other animal-assisted therapy."

Trotter says she has experienced some profound breakthroughs with teens in the juvenile court system while working with horses. "I have some of the most wonderful sessions with these juveniles because they don't realize they are in counseling," she says. "By the time these kids come to me, they are familiar with court-appointed therapy and traditional, four-wall counseling sessions. They can give you all the textbook answers. But you get them outside in this different setting, and they don't realize what I'm doing. They tell me everything, and it's so genuine."

In forging a bond with the horses, Trotter says, clients identify their negative behaviors and learn positive communication and problem-solving skills to handle frustrations, challenges and fears.

Horsing around

There are different ways to have clients interact with and relate to a horse, Trotter says.

- Tactile and touching: Includes grooming or giving the horse a massage. Interacting with such

- large animals empowers the client while increasing self-esteem and self-confidence. The rhythmic motion of grooming can also be soothing and calming for both the horse and client.
- Verbal: The way the client speaks to the horse can reveal how the individual relates to other people.
- Riding and ground work: Leading the horse from the ground or in the saddle can provide insight into a client's sense of power or helplessness.

Because of the large size of the horses, Trotter doesn't feel comfortable counseling children younger than 8. She believes, however, that equine therapy is compatible or appropriate with most diagnosed issues. With clients who aren't as activity-focused, such as some individuals with autism, Trotter instead helps them face their fears by building a relationship with the horse.

Trotter prefers to have clients perform activities on the ground rather than in the saddle. This ground work usually includes a series of tasks, challenges or simple grooming methods to help the client form a bond with the horse. As these activities transpire, Trotter works side-by-side with the clients to provide insight and help process feelings.

The ground-based activities also help clients formulate solutions to problems. The activities can be difficult, requiring clients to be creative and think outside the box. Through these activities, Trotter helps clients explore what skills were needed to accomplish the task with the horse. She can then prompt clients to think about whether they have similar problems occurring in their personal lives and consider if the solution that proved successful in working with the horse might work for the client outside the ranch as well. Following are two examples of equine activities Trotter uses in therapy.

Life's Little Obstacles

This activity challenges participants to get a horse to walk or jump over a PVC pole placed in the arena. The pole can represent any challenge that the group or individual is facing.

"It doesn't sound too difficult until we tell them the rules of the activity," Trotter says. "No physical touching of the horse, no halters or lead ropes, no bribing with food and no verbal communication with each other. The use of a horse provides great metaphors to children, and the process of trying to accomplish this goal ends up leading to some intense discussions and insights. They really have to think about it and be creative, but there's no one correct way to accomplish the task."

Temptation Alley

This activity involves two participants. An alleyway with varying widths and turns is filled with hay, grain, obstacles and other items that are potentially attractive or discomfiting to the horse. The participants must lead their horse through the alleyway without allowing the horse to eat anything, leave the alleyway or knock anything over. Each client must hold the very end of a lead rope with only one hand while also staying on the outside of the alleyway.

"In this activity, the horse becomes a metaphor for temptations that the clients are facing, such as addictions, gang pressure or eating disorders," Trotter says. "The processing that follows this activity can take many different directions. One might be where the participants focused — on the horse, the other person, the distractions or the goal — and what effects this had on the horse."

Success stories

Trotter recently began working with a third-grader who exhibited behavioral problems and poor social skills associated with pervasive developmental disorders and dyspraxia, a neurological disorder that affects motor coordination. At school, he displayed severe anxiety and oppositional behavior and threatened others. The boy had struggled with these problems for more than six years, and his mother told Trotter that her son had a hard time establishing friendships. He was usually left to play by himself.

After only a few sessions working with the horses, his behavior and social skills have improved significantly. The mother told Trotter that her son recently had his first play date, which lasted more than two hours without incident. He was invited to come back and play again whenever he wanted. "This shows us that this client is taking what he has learned (with the horses) and is using it in his everyday life," Trotter says.

Debra Bond is Trotter's business partner and a fellow licensed professional counselor at the ranch. One of her biggest success stories involves a young boy recently diagnosed as bipolar. In one of the beginning sessions at the ranch, he and another boy were partnered in a group session and asked to groom the horse. "The horse just wasn't having it," Bond says. "He kept on acting like he was going to kick or bite, though he didn't. We were keeping a close watch."



Children visit the Mendin' Fences Clinic at Bridlewood Stables

Bond needed to determine which boy the horse was reacting to, so she had them approach the horse individually. The horse reacted negatively to the boy diagnosed with bipolar. "That gave me the opportunity to ask him what he thought was going on with the horse. Why was the horse acting that way?" she says. "The boy just kind of rolled his eyes and said, 'I don't know.' I pressed a bit harder, and he told me that the horse just didn't like him. I asked him to think about that and why this horse might not like him. He left and came back the next session and said to me, 'The horse doesn't like me because I don't like me.' He was 9 years old! When I think about that kid and how many hours that would have taken in an office setting to get that kind of insight, it just amazes me that it came that quickly. Once that child

admitted that, he had no problem with the horse. They were congruent, and we saw all kinds of positive changes with him. That sticks out as the most dramatic example, but we see pieces of this type of transformation all the time."

During her eight years of leading equine-assisted counseling, Bond has worked with children and adolescents who have presented with a variety of issues, but she thinks the approach might have the most profound impact on children with Asperger's syndrome, a developmental disorder similar to a high-functioning form of autism.

"(These clients) tend to come out of their shell," she observes. "The barn environment is something so different from what they are familiar with at home or at school. It introduces them to a whole new set of stimuli, and because they are drawn to the animal, they learn to adapt more quickly." With this population, she notes, the therapy is less about mental health treatment and more about skills training and general improvement. "It may be romanticizing it a bit," Bond says, "but I think the connection between these kids and the horses is something very powerful for both the horse and the child. It's a very deep link made on an emotional level."

More evidence

While working on her dissertation at the University of North Texas, Trotter discovered in her research that equine-assisted counseling can be as effective as traditional clinical therapy or, in some cases, even more beneficial. She compared the experiences of children and teens in a 12-week equine-assisted therapy program with those who remained in a classroom setting for traditional guidance counseling. "We had over 205 volunteers, and 164 actually completed the study," Trotter says. "The students were in grades third through eighth with all different kinds of issues, from ADHD and autism to just being socially inept to being incest survivors."

Teachers, school counselors and parents referred the children and adolescents. The students were then assigned, by grade level, to one of two weekly therapeutic interventions: either two-hour sessions of equine-assisted group counseling held in a ranch setting or one-hour sessions of curriculum school-based group guidance in a classroom setting. According to Trotter, the study showed that equine-assisted counseling resulted in increased positive behaviors and decreased undesirable behaviors in clients.

"We discovered that both modalities were clinically significant, but the equine (therapy portion of the study) showed clinical significance in seven different areas that the in-school therapy didn't," she says. "Overall, the equine study showed improvement in 19 areas and the in-school only in five areas."

Trotter used two assessment tools in the study, the Behavioral Assessment System for Children—Parent Rating Scale and the Self-Rating Scale, along with the Animal Assisted Therapy—Psychosocial Social Form. "I chose the BASC checklist because that has assessments that I could give to both the parent and the child/client," she explains. "I had done a lot of play therapy research prior to that, and we never included the client. I thought it was important to know what the child felt about it, not just his mom and dad. With the AAT-PSF, I was able to run repeated measures, and it could tell me where I had significant changes between the sessions." She was then able to refer to her notes and see exactly what they had done during those sessions that proved so effective.

A copy of "The Efficacy of Equine-Assisted Group Counseling With At-Risk Children and Adolescents" is available for download (for a fee) from Trotter's website at www.kaytrotter.com/shop.

EPIC workshops

"Back in 2005, when I attempted to research empirical data from previous studies on the effectiveness of EAC (equine-assisted counseling), to my surprise, there wasn't any," Trotter says. "There was plenty of anecdotal evidence, but I could find no significant scientific research supporting the validity of using horses as an adjunct to traditional talk therapy. That discovery made me even more committed to conducting clinical trials. Now, with the evidence, I want to put this valuable adjunct to traditional therapy into the hands of other counselors."

To do so, she has created EPIC (Equine Partners in Counseling) training. With Bond's help, Trotter will be conducting two workshops on the ranch in June: "What Is Equine-Assisted Counseling?" and "Treating Autism Spectrum Disorders With EAC." Each session is \$75 and worth three continuing education units.

The first session provides counselors with the basics for effective assessment and intervention with both group and individual clients. Examples of equine-assisted counseling activities will be presented. The second session provides an overview of autism spectrum disorders and examines how equine-assisted counseling can positively affect psychological, physiological and social aspects for this population.

"The sessions are hands-on," says Trotter, an approved provider of continuing education. "Like any experiential expressive art, as a counselor, it's important for you to first experience it as a client before you lead others on that journey." More information about the classes is available at www.kaytrotterEPIC.com.