

# Equine Therapy



## **Equine Therapy: A Caring, Effective, and Natural Treatment Solution in Mental Healthcare**

Horses and their relationship to humans can be traced back centuries. Ancient Greeks used horses for therapeutic aid for individuals suffering from incurable diseases. While the exact timeline detailing the domestication of horses isn't certain, it can be said that the complex relationship between the two species has undergone an evolution over time. For the most part, horses have been our friends and allies for nearly 5,000 years, and as the significance of horses has changed throughout the centuries, their value in contributing to the quality of our lives has never been in question.

### **The Role of Horses in Mental Health Treatment**

For centuries, horses have played a role in the treatment of human psychological concerns. Equine Therapy includes, Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP), Equine-Assisted Learning Therapy (EAL) and Hippotherapy. In EAP sessions, a partnership between licensed mental healthcare providers and credentialed equine professionals helps individuals work toward psychotherapy treatment goals. In Equine-Assisted Learning Therapy (EAL), individuals focus on the development of essential life skills, such as communication, self-awareness, trust, respect, and honesty. Hippotherapy refers to how occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech language therapy is an evidence-based practice that utilizes horses to engage sensory, neuromotor, and cognitive systems in treating physical health conditions and promote purposeful outcomes.

Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy as it is practiced today, did not publicly emerge as a field of therapy until the 1990s. While there was experimentation with the concept prior to that time, it was not until 1996 that the first national group in the United States, the Equine-Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA), was formed. In 1999, the Equine Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) was formed as a main certification organization in the United States. Sierra Tucson therapists follow the EAGALA model.

What makes horses adept at helping humans overcome their mental health struggles is their keen ability to sense human emotions and tap into our energy field or "aura." They can readily pick up on our anxiety, anger, and other emotions from our body language. In addition, research has also found that horses can even recognize and react to our facial cues alone.<sup>1</sup> Horses are known to be "great teachers regarding authenticity."<sup>2</sup> They respond to the electromagnetic field humans emit - a natural ability that ultimately contributes to their survival.

In a herd, wild horses are always in dynamic communication with each other. This "sixth sense" helps horses understand one another and trust each other's suspicions should they feel danger threatening the entire herd. This energy tracking system is innate to horses and helps them decipher moods and feelings of other living creatures, including human beings. If they feel a positive energy field within us, they will trust our relationship with them. However, if they sense anxiety for example, they will give signals indicating their apprehension.

Experts in understanding and interpreting those signals are Equine Therapists and Equine Specialists. These professionals know how to interpret a horse's sixth sense as it relates to the patients. As prey animals, horses rely on their intuition. Those behaviors bear a striking resemblance to important attributes of healthy recovery - remaining in the present and listening to one's intuitions.

When an individual says they are fine and instead are feeling anxious, stressed, or out

of control, the horse knows. When such an individual approaches a horse, it may look uncomfortable, toss its head, back away, or pin its ears flat against its neck like a cat. Horses may exhibit stress by refusing to hold still, stomping their feet, or exhibiting rapid breathing. Their heart rate can elevate to match the individual.

<sup>1</sup> How horses read human emotions (equusmagazine.com)

<sup>2</sup> Horses and Electromagnetic Fields (linkedin.com)

### **Horses and People: A Healing Combination at Sierra Tucson**

The Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy staff at Sierra Tucson consists of Equine Specialists and Equine Therapists. An Equine Specialist is an individual who is a professional equestrian with a level of horsemanship experience that not only includes owning their own personal horses, but also has extensive experience and training working with other horses. Equine Specialists are primarily concerned with the safety of the horses and the residents as they observe and interpret the interaction. Together as a team, both Equine Therapists and Equine Specialists are dedicated to understanding the signals given by both the horse and the resident and work to maximize the treatment session to uncover and address struggles.

Horses chosen to be part of the therapy team will typically be calm, even-tempered, gentle, and serviceably sound. Sierra Tucson specifically chooses horses for Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy due to certain natural characteristics inherent within their personalities that equine experts believe will fit the program. While the horses are not specifically trained to be therapy horses, they receive continuous mental and physical health conditioning to ensure they are happy and healthy.

At Sierra Tucson, individuals may enter a variety of mental health treatment programs to address their needs, including addiction, mood, pain, trauma, or co-occurring disorders, such as the eating recovery program. Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy at Sierra Tucson focuses on groundwork rather than therapeutic riding, horsemanship, or hippotherapy. By focusing on the relationship with the horse, residents can see firsthand the metaphors that surface from their interactions and relate them to their specific issues in recovery. Horses are also good at setting boundaries and practicing self-care around their own safety – another lesson they teach residents about behaviors to aspire to in recovery.

No matter the program, Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy is built into residents' treatment schedules as an effective treatment modality. What distinguishes Sierra Tucson's Equine Program from others is the dedicated, trained, and certified staff who are passionate about their work and their love for the horses. Combined with the wide-open outdoor spaces for the therapy sessions, the sweeping Santa Catalina Mountain vistas, and the enjoyment of observing the neighboring wildlife on the property, Sierra Tucson offers a unique opportunity for residents to step outside of the traditional treatment environment to experience interaction and therapy to explore their struggles in a new light.



*“The level of education, experience, and training of the staff, the quality of the horses, and the work that we do is above and beyond. Our committed and passionate team members make a huge difference to our residents. It is apparent that we love the work and are committed to it. That passion comes through! I’ve worked at programs around the Midwest, in Oklahoma, and Michigan, and this is a beautiful place to do Equine Therapy. We can be outside most of the year. The experiential modality is a game changer for a lot of folks. When they come out here and look at the mountains and lead a horse or see a coyote or deer around, they experience a level of healing that is unique, and that really sets us apart. We put our residents first, but we absolutely care about the horses, and I give them a lot of credit for the work that they do together with our talented staff.”*

**- Sierra Tucson Equine Therapist and Department Supervisor**

The staff at Sierra Tucson help residents understand what they are about to experience and anticipate as the session begins. Residents individually are either instructed to choose a horse to work with, or they are assigned a horse that the staff believes will be most helpful in rendering therapeutic support.

For decades, this evidence-based practice at Sierra Tucson has helped patients progress in their treatment. During group therapy sessions, therapists carefully observe how the horses react to each individual. Approaching the interaction as a partnership, horses naturally seek a healthy relationship. If the horses feel any hesitation, they let the Therapist and resident know with signals indicating that hesitancy. The interpretation of the interaction leads to a discussion with the residents and frequently opens doors to topics that may not come up in a traditional therapy environment.



## Positive Psychology and Recovery

In some instances when a resident has issues that may not be immediately apparent, such as anger control issues, or a history of violence, the horse will immediately give them feedback by perhaps backing away or showing signs of not wanting to engage. In these circumstances, horses are mirroring what a healthy relationship can be, which is not about dominance or power, but partnership. Part of the therapy session sometimes requires halting the activities and acknowledging and discussing what is taking place.

Often residents are unaware of what they project when it is detected by the animal. When residents liken the horse walking away as a rejection, therapists will call their attention to their choice of words and dig further to help residents understand how that experience symbolized a rejection that can be related back to their relationships with the people in their life. This awareness provides an opportunity to work through the issues.



Equine Assisted Psychotherapy is solution-focused with the foundation of belief that the individual has all the answers inside themselves. As a result, sessions spark conversations between therapists and residents. Here are a few conversation starters that can occur prompted by feedback from the horse:

- *What did you notice about that horse moving away?*
- *How did it feel?*
- *How is that behavior similar to relationships in your life?*
- *How is this experience like the unhealthy relationships in your life?*
- *What are you doing to contribute to an unhealthy relationship?*
- *How does this play out for you at home and/or with your spouse/children?*

## Trauma and Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy

Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is part of Sierra Tucson's Red, White, & Blue Program for veterans and first responders suffering from post-traumatic stress. Through EAP, individuals who may be struggling with nightmares, anxiety, depression, anger, irritability, and other debilitating effects, may gain a new self-understanding and consequently, emotional growth.

At Sierra Tucson, other trauma survivors, such as sexual assault victims, also work with the Equine Team. During Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy, therapists work with individuals to relate the activities back to their trauma recovery goals to fully help residents leverage session benefits. Engaging with a 1,000-pound animal can help individuals regain feelings of empowerment, resiliency, and strength, and create a bond with the horse that enhances feelings of partnership and trust evidenced when a horse follows instruction and cooperates.

Whether individuals are working on trauma, depression, addiction, or other behavioral health concerns, the horses bring an authenticity to their recovery experience by offering an unbiased and unconditionally loving support system. Horses rely on their heightened senses

for survival and consequently respond without any ulterior motives.

Some of the benefits for victims of trauma and other mental health disorders include:

- Self-awareness: Interacting with horses helps individuals develop a more realistic view of themselves through awareness of their size in relation to the horse.
- Communication: Horses are sensitive to non-verbal communication and assist individuals in developing greater awareness of their emotions and non-verbal cues.
- Trust: Participants learn to trust the horse helping them in the restoration of trust in others, which is especially difficult for those who have suffered abuse, neglect, and abandonment.
- Anxiety Reduction: While some patients may initially fear horses, their authenticity and affection typically help individuals experience a significant reduction in anxiety levels.
- Boundaries: Working with horses can teach individuals to operate within the boundaries of a relationship that is mutually respectful, even with a creature as physically powerful and potentially intimidating as a horse.



### Sierra Tucson's Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy Team

- One Equine Therapy Department Supervisor
- Four Equine Therapists
- Two Equine Specialists
- Seven large horses
- One pony
- Two miniature horses

## Benefits of Equine Therapy

Since horses can recognize human emotions and respond in an intentional way, humans bond to horses similar to a mother-child relationship explained by attachment theory. As a result, the psychosocial effects of engaging in Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy include improved self-esteem, a sense of self-presence, and feelings of freedom, independence, and competency that can help individuals process traumas and learn what healthy relationships can look like.

In addition, self-confidence builds as does a sense of empowerment. Individuals can learn to trust themselves and others by working with the horses or even speaking to the horse about things that they find difficult saying to anyone else. Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy provides an opportunity to explore recovery from every angle and helps individuals see that things can change.

Outside of a traditional psychotherapy office they can confront issues and experience healing. After experiencing Equine Therapy multiple studies indicate a variety of benefits including:

- A decrease in PTSD symptoms in military veterans.
- Young people showing an increased motivation to stay in substance abuse treatment.
- Veterans showing increased resilience after experiencing Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy.
- Professional caregivers with compassion fatigue experience increased emotional intelligence.



Residents report that Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy is often one of the most memorable modalities they experience. Consequently, many pursue continuing Equine Therapy after they leave Sierra Tucson. Below are just a few excerpts from notes sent to the Equine Team from residents who experienced Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy at Sierra Tucson:

*“Thank you so much for giving me so much quality time with the horses as well as giving me a plethora of super helpful insights to help me through my recovery. There were so many topics that only came to light because of your expert guidance. The wonderful training that the horses have been and most of all your sincere, genuine, kind, and caring way you all are! Wishing you all the success, joy, and love...you are wonderful and talented. You touched my soul, and I will always remember you and my time here always.”*

*“Thank you so much for allowing me to experience equine therapy. From walking along and seeing what connections that I felt with the horses; walking Rico around campus; and journaling with the horses, every experience was unique. I was able to connect with small part of larger emotions thanks to the special horses here at Sierra Tucson. Being able to participate in feeding them allowed me to focus my anxiety into a task. Placing the cones and block the day I came with my process group has allowed me to realize that I need to break large chunks up and process them that way. Thanks Gunner! You are all very special and have changed my outlook on my recovery as something that is achievable.”*





