

Horse Sense



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Are you fed up with psychotherapists? We're a wordy lot, and talk (yours or ours) may or may not make you feel better. Suppose I say I can refer you to another therapist who will, if only you engage, improve your

- morale and self-esteem
- self-confidence and body image
- attention span and concentration
- sense of mastery and personal success
- acceptance of yourself and others
- peace of mind
- energy level
- empathy
- social relationships
- ability to assume responsibility
- willingness to take initiatives

Do I have your attention? Now hear this. Your new therapist may be a horse.

If you're willing to hoist yourself into the saddle, you can develop improved posture, muscle tone, strength, balance, spatial awareness, and coordination—benefits that loom larger if you suffer from cerebral palsy, polio, multiple sclerosis, vision or hearing loss, learning disabilities, or even autism or Down's syndrome. These benefits have long been known.

But a new school of equine therapy also boosts the psychic well-being of people whose challenges may not be visible to the naked eye. *And you don't necessarily have to ride the horse at all.*

To reap the greatest psychological benefits from the therapy, you will need to approach the relationship as you would a friendship with another human being, setting and observing boundaries. Just remember that the horse does not speak English and that it is a prey animal, by nature highly intuitive and sensitive to nonverbal messages in its environment.

The best therapeutic programs that use horses focus on helping people become more aware of their bodies and more at home in them. The horse reflects the human feelings it perceives, and people modify their behavior to communicate better with the animal, in the process increasing their emotional availability for all relationships. Our bodies and souls become healthier when we are able to be emotionally both authentic and congruent.

No, you're right, there's no couch—and not even a chair, unless you care to bring your own. Just chilling with the horse is highly recommended, but you can do this while standing around, or you can sit on the ground. A trained human facilitator will offer (verbal) suggestions.

During a first session, your facilitator might ask you to notice the vibes you get from different animals in a herd. You would then put your hands behind your back and approach the corralled horse of your choice. The horse, on the other side of the fence, would by its behavior mirror your state of mind, perhaps ignoring you, perhaps expressing curiosity, or perhaps dodging anxiously away from you.

Over time, with prompts from the facilitator, you might enter the corral, interact physically with the horse, longe it (ask it to run circles around you on a lead), and eventually ride. In the process, you would learn to ground yourself, to breathe into your fear, to speak your mind, honor your feelings, and to notice how you experience the horse in your body.

Such a therapeutic encounter might bring you face to face with intuitive knowledge you never knew you had. It would also be intensely spiritual. And as a change agent it might be far more potent and cost effective than a year spent talking to me.

Interested in knowing more? Visit the website for Epona Equestrian Services. You might also read Linda Kohanov's *The Tao of Equus: A Woman's Journey of Healing and Transformation through the Way of the Horse* and *Riding Between the Worlds: Expanding Our Potential Through the Way of the Horse*, published by New World Library (Novato, California) in 2001 and 2003, respectively.

If you do start down this bridle path, you will have the opportunity to reconsider the course of history, the nature of human consciousness, the role of language in defining culture, the implications for civilization of a nomadic versus settled way

of life, and—most important, perhaps—predator and prey species with their different ways of being in the world. But don't take my word for it. Check in with a horse, and be guided by its body and your own.

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