

# How Horses Help Mental Health

Horses can make a much-needed difference for the mental health challenges so many in our world face.

Written By: [Horses For Mental Health](#)

## What are mental health services incorporating horses?

Horses have been a part of human evolution for thousands of years, playing roles in transportation, work, military service, sport, recreation and companionship. From a historical perspective, incorporating horses in mental health and wellness is still relatively young. The 1960's began a journey of incorporating horses professionally for physical health challenges and disabilities.

It wasn't until the 1990's that there began to be professional organizations specifically devoted to the practice and training of psychotherapy and counseling practitioners to partner with horses to treat mental health needs.

Since then, mental health services incorporating horses have been expanding and rapidly gaining awareness and credibility, with professionally trained practitioners providing programs worldwide, and a growing base of data and research.

Since there are many different types of equine-assisted services that can benefit people with different objectives, mental health services incorporating horses

---

means that there are trained and licensed psychotherapists or counselors who are practicing within their specific training and background to address psychological needs.

At its foundation, these services mean that rather than going to see a psychotherapist or counselor in an office setting, clients experience some or all of their sessions in an environment with horses.

**Involving horses in psychotherapy and counseling sessions can be beneficial in helping clients with mental health needs such as:**

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Bipolar disorder
- Behavioral disorders
- Post-traumatic stress
- Schizophrenia
- Eating disorders
- Addictions
- Adjustment disorders

These services may also focus on supporting individuals, families and communities through life and relationship struggles, transitions, or conflict, such as environmental and societal challenges, job transitions, divorce, grief and loss, as well as overall well-being, such as strengthening relationship skills, resilience, school success, decision-making, self-worth, and leadership.

## **Why horses for mental health?**

For their survival as prey animals, horses are highly intuitive to nonverbal messages and intentions. Because of this characteristic, horses may respond in ways to our presence that can reflect aspects of ourselves – bringing to the surface beliefs, attitudes, and unresolved trauma which may be impacting our



relationships and mental health. This natural, unbiased feedback supports clients in learning and transforming in a safe and powerful way.

Due to their size and presence, horses create a sense of **awe**, leading to an increase in **emotional safety** and **engagement** in the treatment process.

“

**Horses may respond in ways that reflect aspects of ourselves.**

As social animals, horses are a lot like humans. They have different personalities and hierarchies in their social structures, which includes at times challenging one another in those roles. They can be hypervigilant of their environment, which can be healthy or unhealthy. **It is easy to resonate with the similarities horses have to our own lives**, and which provides opportunities to learn from them that feels relevant to other life and relationship situations.

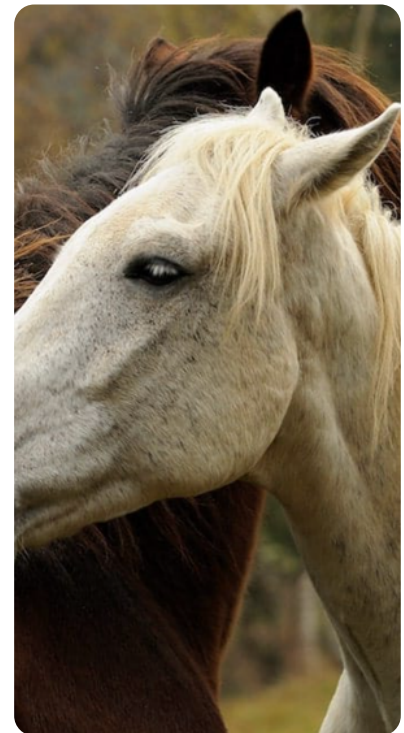
Horses provide a safe and dynamic environment, where peace and healing comes through the relationship facilitated by trained professionals.

## How Does It Work?

Despite their intimidating size, it is commonly reported by clients that they feel **safe, connected and peaceful** when in the presence of horses. It is through this, whether on the ground or riding, that horses help people **regulate** emotions.

Horses don't hold the biases that are common with humans. This **non-judgmental** experience provides an opportunity for relationship-building that can **rewrite past trauma stories** and provide **present-moment connection**.

Interacting with horses provides an experiential process where clients can feel, see, hear, smell, and



physically move in the change process. It is more than talk as the relationship with the horse provides **real-time feedback and application** of what is being learned. The relationship with the horse doesn't change until we change ourselves. And conversely, as the horses move and change, clients move and change with them. These **embodied experiences** are engaging and memorable, creating **long-lasting impact**.

The experiential and engaging aspect of this large animal can also benefit clients who tend to be non-verbal, resistant to therapy, or where traditional talk therapy is not as culturally supported.

The mental health facilitation team guides the process and invites specific interventions for the client to do with the horses to address treatment objectives. The professional team asks questions and provides observations to connect the horse interactions to life experiences, enhancing personal insights and providing space for the horse-client relationship to impact **hands-on change**.

“

**The relationship with the horse doesn't change until we change ourselves.**

## What a Typical Session May Look Like



Sessions will differ depending on the therapy model and psychological framework utilized by the mental health professional. However, at its heart, sessions involve engaging in activities with the horses or the horse environment. While the majority of these sessions are ground-based with horses (do not include riding), there are some interventions and approaches which may include mounted experiences.

Throughout the sessions, the mental health professional team, which commonly includes a mental health professional and a horse professional, are there with the clients supporting them in physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the journey to address their treatment goals.

---

**Some examples of what sessions may involve include:**

**Clients spend time observing the horses.**

Horses are a lot like humans, and as such, watching them can bring insights and learning that connects to life. Through projection, and with the support of the mental health professional team, client stories come to life as the horses begin to seemingly play out those stories. It is powerful for clients to get distance from their stories and watch the horses reflect what is going on in the clients' internal and external lives. What is especially interesting is how the horses start changing those stories as they move and change behaviors, providing new, surprising and powerful insights.



**Clients build relationships with the horses.** This could look as diverse as relationship-building does in human terms. It is through this journey of spending time with the horses, getting to know them, caring for them, doing different activities with them, moving or being still, and forming connections in whatever way that may look like, where powerful healing can occur. Relationship struggles, whether relationships with ourselves, others, our environments, or our beliefs and emotions, are usually at the foundation of mental health issues. Horses provide an opportunity to heal those relationships and learn new skills that can support healthier interactions.

**Many times, clients report that connecting with a horse feels like they're connecting with themselves.**

**Clients engage in activities that parallel life.** This may involve leading horses through paths and obstacles, to play out what it looks like to lead others, or aspects of our self, through life. Creating representations of a day at work, home or school in the arena or pasture, and experiencing what the horses and clients do in that scenario, can bring interesting insights and opportunities to work through here-and-now emotions and try new ideas.

---

## Discover More Resources

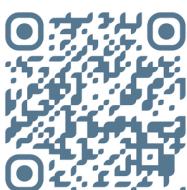
Whether you are seeking support for yourself or a loved one, interested in learning more about the research, or exploring professional training opportunities, we invite you to continue discovering the impact of mental health and wellbeing services incorporating horses.

### Scan to Explore Resources



#### **Find a Program**

Discover mental health and wellbeing services incorporating horses in your community.



#### **Watch Inspiring Stories**

Produced by Horses for Mental Health, these award-winning videos share powerful stories of how mental health and wellbeing services incorporating horses are making a real difference in people's lives.



#### **Explore Research**

Learn about the growing body of research and evidence supporting services incorporating horses.



#### **Professional Training**

Explore educational opportunities, certifications, and resources for mental health professionals, equine specialists, educators, coaches, and other helping professionals.



Helping more people discover, access, and support mental health and wellbeing services incorporating horses.

**Horses can make a much-needed difference. We invite you to discover how.**