

Parade

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HOPE REINS

The Healing Power of Horses

How Equine
Therapy
Benefits
Veterans,
Victims of
Abuse and
More





Jaycee Dugard says, “Animals have taught me compassion and empathy and always made me feel loved, no matter what.” (Liesa Cole)

In 1991, 11-year-old **Jaycee Lee Dugard** was abducted while walking from her home to a nearby school bus stop. She was sexually assaulted and confined for 18 years before she and the two daughters she had in captivity were recovered from kidnappers **Phillip** and **Nancy Garrido**.

How do you start to heal after a trauma like that? One of the things that helped the most, Dugard says, was horses. She and her children and mother did equine-facilitated therapy (EFT) with **Rebecca Bailey**, a clinical and forensic psychologist who specializes in complex trauma scenarios. Dugard was so impressed with the experience, she went on to found the JAYC Foundation to give other families in crisis the same access to healing.

“Horses have the special ability to make you be totally in the moment, making talking about the trauma I went through so much easier and less painful,” says Dugard, now 38. “The work Dr. Bailey was doing really resonated with me. The way she incorporated horses into our sessions was so much more impactful than just regular talk therapy.”

In fact, EFT is a fast-growing therapeutic mental health treatment being used across the nation for everything from trauma and addiction recovery to therapeutic riding for special needs, including autism. The therapy can involve learning to care for a horse, riding or simply being around and learning to trust the animals. A mental health counselor and equine specialist are often present.

Veterans, inmates and first responders are all finding benefits in getting off the couch and into the stables. **Elizabeth** and **William Shatner** are big supporters of the therapy, and even judges have discovered that a session with horses makes them better at their jobs.

Although equine therapy itself hasn’t been deeply studied, research shows that horses are acutely tuned in to human emotions, and anecdotal accounts of their therapeutic impact abound. These are just a few of the heartwarming success stories.

How Horses Heal

“Horses are nonjudgmental and they don’t obsess,” says **Linda Kohanov**, author of *The Tao of Equus* and *Way of the Horse* and a pioneer in the field of equine-facilitated learning. “Horse wisdom is concerned more with the present than the past or the future. If they sense danger, horses

race to safety, then go right back to grazing. They don’t stay up all night worrying about lions. They go right back to enjoying life, taking it minute by minute, and they can teach us to do that.”

Enjoying life was not something that U.S. Air Force veteran **Ron Hathaway** thought he’d ever do again. Before being introduced to equine therapy in 2014, the Wisconsin man was in a major slump.

“I was in my chair in my garage, smoking cigars all day, completely suicidal, figuring out ways to kill myself and when and how I’d do it,” Hathaway, now 56, says. “I couldn’t talk to my family, couldn’t go anywhere, didn’t shower or bathe and I had a baby granddaughter I couldn’t be around. My life was spiraling down. I was losing my family.”

Desperate, his wife went into the garage one day, told him he needed to get help and got him into an in-patient mental health program at the Milwaukee

VA Medical Center. “I had no intention of opening up to anyone,” he recalls. “Just do my time and get back to the garage.” Then a recreational therapist told him to pick two activities. “Just checking boxes, knowing it wouldn’t help, I pointed to the first two on the list: a gym program and a two-hour-a-week horse thing,” Hathaway says.



Ron Hathaway credits horses for saving his life. (CDOdT2016/BRAVEHEARTS)

He kept to himself on the bus to the BraveHearts therapeutic riding and educational center, located outside Harvard, Illinois. It's the largest equine program in the country for veterans—providing free riding, ground activities and work with wild mustangs to veterans and their families. “When I got there, someone with a big smile and an Irish accent stuck his hand out and said, ‘We’re so happy you’re here.’ I just went off on my own, not interested in horses, the people or anything. I didn’t want to get attached.”

In spite of his protests, he eventually got on a horse called Boone. “I didn’t know nothin’ about horses. We walked around, and I was just looking at his mane and back of his head and, I don’t know how else to say it, I just had this deep sigh of relaxation and in a split second knew that

everything would be OK, which hadn’t happened for years. That feeling was so alien to me.”

The next day Hathaway’s mind started wandering back to Boone and the farm, and over the next weeks he and Boone got up to a trot, everyone cheering him on. “It was just totally freeing and such a release. I started talking to people on the bus, started talking to my wife and kids and telling everyone I knew about BraveHearts.

“Those horses are a miracle. People who haven’t been through what veterans go through just don’t understand it,” Hathaway says. “They see the results [of military service], but they don’t know what happens inside your mind and your heart to get there. I would *not* be here today if it weren’t for



Riding horses can help autistic children stay calm and speak. (Lindsey Brown)

BraveHearts and Boone. *That* is a fact. The program works so hard with each individual to be better and find a niche as a working part of society again.”

Last year, BraveHearts (where Hathaway is now barn manager, caring for 33 horses) served 835 veterans in 19,673 sessions at no charge. In 2018, to raise awareness about today’s epidemic veteran suicide rate (20 vets take their lives each day), a group of 11 veterans, one Gold Star father and three support staff from BraveHearts rode horses 20 miles in both Washington, D.C. (past the White House) and New York City (down Broadway through Times Square to Ground Zero).

Harnessing the Power

In the 2009 award-winning documentary *The Horse Boy*, **Rupert Isaacson** trekked his then 5-year-old autistic son, Rowan, on horseback into the depths of Mongolia to visit a shaman. Desperate to help Rowan, he thought shamanic cleansing rituals might help with his constant screaming tantrums, inability to communicate and defiance to “go potty.”

“People thought *I* was crazy,” says Isaacson. At the time, he was a journalist and activist helping bush tribes fight diamond mine land grabs in South Africa. “But if you hang out with hunter and gatherer tribes long enough, you realize they don’t do *anything* without some sort of a shamanic ritual for spiritual guidance.

“They use this ‘spiritual technology’ to heal everything from marital arguments to cancer. So when Rowan’s autism diagnosis happened, I had a gut feeling I was gonna have to do something along those lines. When horse Betsy came into

our lives I said, ‘OK, it’s going to be plus horses.’ And where does the horse come from? Mongolia. Right then, gut feel, let’s go! That was it.”

Isaacson is convinced that the long days of rhythmic horseback riding as well as the shaman helped his son. “Rowan’s transformation in Mongolia was *night and day*. We went with an autistic kid and came back with an autistic kid, but what we experienced in Mongolia riding hundreds and hundreds of miles across vast barren meadows and mountainsides plus the ceremonies shifted something. Rowan’s tantrums stopped, he started using the potty, he started communicating and playing and making friends.”

When it comes to the horses, Isaacson believes a number of things are going on. “When Rowan was on the horse, more speech happened. Science shows that autistic people have heightened fight or flight—high levels of cortisol so you act and don’t think. When a horse trots, it rocks its hips and the rhythmic movement releases oxytocin, the feel-good hormone, and relaxes the psoas hip-flexor muscle that tenses up in the fight-and-flight crouch.”

Isaacson wondered if the same effect could be created without a horse, with play equipment. What evolved was development of the Horse Boy Method of equine therapy and the Movement Method, an online accreditation that doesn’t require a horse and is now used in school districts in the U.K., parts of the U.S. and Germany for neurotypical as well as kids with special needs due to improved learning outcomes.

“Horses are also iconic, standing for power, freedom and dreams. We use language to describe them as being superhuman, and they’re beautiful. Working

with horses, you get a whole extra magic. They lend you their power, which helps when you're trying to heal. The moment you're on a horse, you're bigger, stronger, more powerful, more beautiful."

Acceptance & Love

In the golden light of a warm Southern California day, a young woman sits alone on a folding metal chair in the middle of a ranch pasture in the small town of Ramona, just east of San Diego. Slowly from the far corner of the field, a large bay quarter horse named Bruno breaks away from his small herd and ambles over. The 1,000-pound horse stops, gently faces her and lowers his forehead to hers. The woman (we'll call her Nicole to protect her privacy) knows he won't hurt her. Through the equine therapy here at the nonprofit Rebels Farm, Bruno has become her friend and confidante. He gently blows warm breaths in her ear. Happy he has come, Nicole quietly reads aloud from a scribbled note. Bruno stands with her, keeping her safe, while she shares a letter she wrote from her future self to the woman she is today. They are words that only she and he will know in the bond of trust gained during her therapy.

Rebels Farm founder and equine therapy counselor **Rachel Brodsky** looks on from a nearby picnic table, beaming.

Six weeks earlier, Nicole had arrived at the farm a tortured soul—visibly shaking, her voice barely audible as she hunched over the table struggling to speak or make eye contact, afraid of the stream of conflicting emotions raging inside her ready to explode. She was living at Solara Mental Health Center, an in-

residence psychiatric treatment facility in San Diego.

"Nicole came to Solara to get treatment for her symptoms of psychosis, including intense and uncontrolled episodes of anger," says program director and psychologist and licensed marriage and family therapist **Allison Brownlee**. "She has suffered from trauma, including abuse and many negative life experiences, and was stuck in her own mind, internally torturing herself. When I heard what Rachel offered at Rebels Farm, I intuitively thought equine healing would be helpful. But I didn't anticipate *just* how much.

"After the second session at Rebels Farm, Nicole's demeanor changed. She really started to open up. What's incredibly valuable is the amount of information we get about where the patients *really* are emotionally when they sit and process at the ranch. It's truly a gold mine that you can't get from an office setting counseling session."

Today, Nicole is a changed woman. "I love horses and they eased my anger," she says, thoughtfully choosing her words. "Being with Bruno and Warrior has helped me relax and get in touch with my feelings more."

On another day, a young man struggling with depression, an eating disorder and self-harming behaviors stands listlessly in the same field of horses, his posture defeated, his eyes closed. "Nobody's coming, right?" he mutters, his eyes still closed. Nobody does. The warm morning is silent for what seems like a slow-motion forever. "Nobody came yet," he mutters again, deflated. "Nobody ever does."

Then, slowly, a donkey walks quietly over behind



Rachel Brodsky (Rebel's Farm)

him. A miniature horse follows, then two of the larger horses. They stand sentinel, not moving. The man's eyes are still closed. He's unaware they're there or that three coyotes are stealthily approaching the fence line. The coyotes stop and stand motionless in a brief stare-down with the herd, who hold their post behind the man.

"Open your eyes. *Look* who came today!" shouts Brodsky with a smile. The man sees the coyotes scamper off and now feels the horses' breath as they move in closer. He puts his hands over his face crying, then throws them up to the sky, laughs and hollers: "Just *look* who damn came today!"

The horses protected him. The session moves on. The man keeps coming back. Brodsky

nods. "Small steps, big results. This is what equine healing success looks like."

Building Better Judges With Horse Therapy

"It's terribly difficult as judges to get defendants to understand how their behavior affects others, especially when invested in a child/parent relationship," says Katherine Tennyson, juvenile and family court judge in Multnomah County, Oregon. "We're always looking for new devices in our tool kit of ways to help families divided."

Tennyson recounts that when forensic psychologist **Rebecca Bailey** was a therapist on

one of her cases and testified in court, hearing about how Bailey incorporates horses in the therapy process made Tennyson sit up. She sent a particularly disrupted family to Bailey for intense resolution therapy, but also worked with Bailey to put on an equine workshop in Denver just for judges.

“We have an obligation to take care of our own mental health after listening to horrendous recounts of domestic violence, child abuse, custody battles and families torn, case after case, day after day,” says Tennyson, former president of the National Council of Juvenile & Family Court Judges. “[Working with horses] takes it out of the blame-and-shame category to a place where people can get reflective about how their behavior affects others, and you get a real chance of change. I’ve seen it, it works and it’s true.”

Tennyson describes seeing one of two adults taken away at an equine session; one is very distraught and the horses responded with distressed whinnying. “Then two small horses focused comfort utterly on the distressed horse, and you could feel their collective distress and feel their grief,” she recalls. “It’s a powerful image of families dividing or when a parent suffering their own grief isn’t capable of taking care of their children’s needs.

“You’re never going to be able to teach that to anyone in the courtroom, or gain that kind of insight, and it’s critical that [families] have it available to them to help them move off of the grief of loss and shame and blame and on to the healing part.”

As well as helping with their own vicarious trauma, attending an equine-therapy workshop provides judges with a direct experience. At Bailey’s Denver workshop, attending judges from around the country worked with the horses and each other to understand boundaries and personal space.

“Part of the goal is for judges to gain insight into how our own behavior impacts others in the courtroom. There are times when I’m not sure I have a lot of patience today, and that’s about being emotionally



(Hope Fisher/JayC Foundation)

overloaded. At the workshop I charged right up to a horse keeping itself apart and it didn’t want anything to do with me. I realized that I often come over as very direct in my questioning, wanting people to tell me exactly what’s going on, and the horses taught me I need to be more patient and guide people to come to the process themselves.”



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