



*Horses and humans have always had a special relationship. Now, from California to Florida, treatment centers are offering equine-assisted therapy to help people with everything from drug addiction to cancer recovery.*



**BY ANNE KRUEGER, BARBARA HEY AND ANDREA REYNES**

# Horse Whisperings

*Many of us have seen* the positive relationships that can develop between horses and humans. Who can forget Roy Rogers and Trigger? Wilbur and Mr. Ed?

But long before Velvet and Pi were bonding in *National Velvet*, horses were being used to facilitate improved health and well-being in humans. The ancient Greeks documented the therapeutic use of riding horses in 600 B.C., and the first study of the value of riding as therapy was reported in 1875, when a French physician used it as a treatment for a variety of neurological and psychological disorders.

Today, scientific literature supporting the value of equine-assisted therapy abounds. At least 10 studies conducted over the past 20 years have shown animal-assisted therapy—of which equine therapy is a common form—is effective in treating conditions such as anxiety, autism, dementia, depression and attention-deficit disorder, as well as eating disorders and other emotional and mental illnesses.

Equine therapy continues to gain in popularity. In Tennessee, at Shangri-La Therapeutic Academy of Riding, horseback riders with spina bifida experience the exhilarating rolling movement of walking for the first time, via the four legs of a horse rather than their own two. At Green Chimneys in upstate New York, horses from Iceland, donated from Senator and former First Lady Hillary Clinton, help kids with emotional problems learn how to feel independent and self-confident. And from California to Florida,

treatment centers are offering equine-assisted therapy to help people with everything from drug addiction to cancer recovery.

Why horses? They're big and powerful, which means those riding and grooming them must overcome fear and develop confidence. Indeed, working with a horse can be a challenge. Horses have a way of seeing right through you; they see your fear, your feelings of inadequacy and your sorrow, according to research published by Edward J. Cumella, PhD, director of research at the Remuda Ranch treatment center in Wickenburg, Ariz. "Horses' sensitivity to nonverbal communication assists patients in developing greater awareness of their own emotions and nonverbal cues, as well as the role of nonverbal communication in relationships," Cumella reports.

Like us, horses have different personalities, and what works for one horse won't work for another. Horses also require people to be engaged and to persevere in challenging physical and mental work, a characteristic that comes in handy when dealing with other intimidating and challenging situations in life, whether it's an eating or behavioral disorder, a handicap or a serious illness.

A horse can become a nonjudgmental friend, but often its rider must adapt or change his or her behavior in order for the horse to respond. These changes, as demonstrated by the following three stories, can help a person in crisis find the strength to go on.



## A Horse Named Levi

I was slowly bumping along a dirt road through the scrub—dust clouds billowing around my car—when I saw my daughter off to the left on a tall brown horse. She was sitting up straight yet relaxed, helmeted head held high; she looked about 12 feet tall. I could tell that the horse was eager to get going, but Halley did something with the reins and he settled down, waiting to follow her lead. I slowed down and watched through the dust and my tears, as my 13-year-old turned the horse and trotted off toward the corral. She hadn't seen me, but I had seen a whole new her.

When I left my daughter at Remuda Ranch, a Wickenburg, Ariz., residential treatment center for eating disorders, she was a 90-pound weakling with

anorexia. She had been restricting her food intake to 500 calories a day and exercising so much that her heart had slowed to a dangerous rate and her body chemicals had become seriously out of whack. This was a kid who had lost sight of who she was and what she could do with her life. She was too ill to stand up in line at the airport, let alone deal with a 1,000-pound animal.

Not to mention that Halley is not what I'd call a horse person. She is a sit-in-a-garret-and-read-and-write-great-thoughts person. She was attracted to the idea of being in the middle of the desert outside Phoenix not because of Remuda's equine-therapy program, but because the ranch was far away from Tennessee and from the friends she compared herself to day in and out—and because she thought she could write in peace there.

Her dad and I, on the other hand, sent her there for Remuda's top-notch medical and psychiatric care and its 3.5-to-1 caregiver-to-patient ratio. When you're worried about keeping your child alive, you don't focus much on horse-riding privileges.

And yet, taking part in equine therapy at Remuda played an important part in Halley's recovery. When I picked her up 60 days later, she had a new ease—on and off a horse. Food and appearance were still big issues with her (and will be for quite some time to come), but her sense of and acceptance of herself were stronger.

"Horses aren't judgmental; they aren't looking to see what you're wearing or how big your thighs are. They don't care if you have a feeding tube in your nose," Halley says. "It was just nice to be around them; it took my mind off of my problems for awhile."

That's a key part of equine experiential therapy—the way it keeps participants actively engaged by directing their attention outward toward safe and caring interactions, says Remuda Research Director Edward J. Cumella. "A relationship with a horse during equine therapy is a wonderful way to help eating-disorder patients rediscover trust and get accurate feedback about how their bodies have been debilitated by their disorder," he says.

Halley and the other children at Remuda learned to care for the horses before they were allowed to ride them. "I had never groomed a horse," Halley recalls. "It was an interesting thing to learn. Since some of us couldn't ride because our

*Halley had been restricting her food intake to 500 calories a day and exercising so much that her heart had slowed to a dangerous rate and her body chemicals had become seriously out of whack.*

weights were too low and we weren't healthy enough, we combed and braided their manes and drew designs, flowers, and faces on them with chalk. It was a way to build our confidence and get to know them before riding them."

Halley was assigned a "flea-bitten Gray" named Levi. He wasn't exactly the horse of her dreams. "I asked for a horse that was gentle and easy to handle because I wasn't an experienced rider. And they gave me exactly the opposite," she says. "I guess they figured out that I wasn't a confident person and being with a stubborn horse would make me speak up for myself and become more assertive." It did. Halley struggled with Levi for several weeks, slowly learning how to make him



listen and obey. "It's all about challenging yourself," Halley says. "I know at the beginning Levi didn't respect me because I couldn't control him, but as I worked harder, he respected me more."

As Halley watched the other girls with their horses, she saw how they were each struggling with different challenges and how each horse helped them. "I had a friend who was younger and a little scared, and she got a horse that was very gentle and small enough that she could still feel in charge," she recalls.

As for Halley herself, feeling in charge was a great victory. "I learned that I was in control of the horse, not the other way around. Sometimes I feel out of control with the eating disorder, so it made me believe that if you can control this horse—something that you've never done before—you can take control and be in charge of your eating disorder."

After Halley met the Levi challenge, she was given another horse, Teddy, a huge half-horse, half-mule who was ready to take off and have fun. "I rode Teddy in a rodeo that we did during family therapy week. I was nervous because he always wanted to go fast and we had to go around barrels and the cones," she says. "Afterwards I felt good, proud of myself, because he got a stone in his hoof but I still managed to keep control of him and do what I was supposed to do."

Halley and Teddy went on many a trail ride over the desert at sundown, times that Halley came to value as winding-down time to feel at peace with the world. "Sometimes I feel like I'm useless," she says, "but not when I'm riding a horse. Then I have a purpose, and I'm more powerful."

A few days before Halley was discharged from Remuda, she decorated a rock she'd collected during one desert ride to be left in front of the stable. "Even though Teddy was now my horse and he was more fun, I decided to dedicate the rock to Levi because he had challenged me," Halley says. She wrote on the rock: "Levi, you taught me a lot and made me ready, so now I'm going to leave you for Teddy."

When we drove away from Remuda, Halley left Teddy, too, standing in the hot sun swishing his tail. She waved at him out the window, but then as we drove away, she didn't look back. She was ready.

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The relationship between a young girl and a horse can have long-lasting benefits—for both of them.

## Sienna and Caroline

"I am happy now," reports 15-year-old Caroline Pert of Boulder, Colo. "Working with the horses made me happy, and that's something that I really needed."

In January 2004, Pert joined the Hope Foal Project, run by Medicine Horse, a Boulder-based equine-assisted psychotherapy program that brings together at-risk teenage girls and foals born to so-called "Premarin" mares. Premarin mares

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are kept confined and pregnant to produce estrogen, which is then extracted from the mare's urine and used in the making of the hormone-replacement drug Premarin.

Pert joined the project at a time when she was depressed and struggling with self-acceptance, friendships and the demands of school. From the get-go, she was drawn to one horse in particular, Sienna, a feisty one with something deep in her eyes—angst, Pert thinks.

The description could have applied to Pert herself when she joined the project. She was in the middle of the rocky years of adolescence, never an easy time but made more difficult for her by bipolar disorder. Diagnosed at 9, Pert had been wrestling with the fallout of her condition ever since and

had trouble not letting her diagnosis define her. Her struggle was compounded by the side effects of medication—weight gain, and sleep disturbances—which were sometimes worse, she says, than the disorder itself.

Not so these days, however. Since her participation in Hope Foal, Pert reports a complete turnaround. “Sienna brought out in me what I wanted to deal with and helped me figure out what I had to do,” Pert explains. “For the first time I enjoy



Recent graduates of the Hope Foal Project, these yearlings provided a source of healing to the girls in the program.

going to school.” And though always a diligent student and artist, the output and quality of her work have improved. “My creativity has exploded. When I was depressed I used to write a lot of poems, but they weren’t any good,” She says.

That’s the alchemy of horse-assisted therapy. Put a horse and a human in breathing distance of one another, and something happens—a communion of sorts. Horses perceive us in a pure way, undistracted by words, appearance or social standing. Horses reflect back to us what’s going on within us, be it good, bad or just confusing. How they react—how we interpret their behavior—is information that can be used therapeutically to help untangle the murky issues of self, according

to Diane Kennedy, MA, a psychotherapist, registered riding instructor and founder of the 10-year-old program Medicine Horse. In short, “Horses mirror our emotions, thoughts and feelings,” Kennedy says.

The foals’ human counterparts are girls between 13 and 18 years old, all coping with mood or attention disorders. Some participate in self-mutilation, some are suicidal. Under the guidance of a trained facilitator, the girls use the experience of building a relationship with the foals to learn better ways of dealing with the particular emotional and mental-health issues they face. “We talk about how to build trust with the horses but also discuss what it would take for girls to trust other people,” Kennedy explains.

Hope Foal Project participants experience how their energy affects the horses and learn how to be quiet and approach the animals in a nonaggressive way. The girls work with the

*The horses become the girls’ nonjudgmental ally, helping them figure out how to set boundaries...*

horses by grooming them and handling them. And the horses become the girls’ nonjudgmental ally, helping them figure out how to set boundaries and how to relate to others without getting hurt in the process.

At the same time the interspecies bonding happens, the girls also grow close to one another. The friendships, built on honesty and respect, are unlike what they’ve experienced in the real world. “I got to talk to girls who have been through the same things I’d been through,” Pert says. The friends she made became like sisters and continue to be close. Now some of them have chosen to meet again, to work with the foals as a means of maintaining an ongoing support group.

The beauty of working with horses is that you can’t fool them. “Horses teach us to be in the moment,” Kennedy says. That means defenses are dropped and heart-felt interactions take place.

“The horse becomes a transitional object,” she adds, a creature it is safe to be intimate with and who gives back the same love it’s given. The girls get familiar with what that kind of solid connection feels like. Then they can take that knowledge into everyday life.

The project’s social aspect, the circle of friendship, was a plus for Pert. “I never really had a friend to help me through things,” she says. “Now I do.”

And because of all that, Pert has learned something profound about herself. “I am definitely more comfortable being me,” she says. “I used to think I had to conform. I was afraid to just be me. I’m not anymore.”

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## Ace to the Rescue

In November 2003, Donna Golden found herself standing beside a magnificent palomino horse named Ace. She put her arm over his back and walked toward his hindquarters. Then she placed the left side of her body against Ace as she moved along his side and, ultimately, behind him. This was a dangerous maneuver; walking behind a horse brings with it the risk of being kicked—and Ace is a formerly abused animal who doesn't give his trust easily.

The exercise Golden was performing is about coping with the inherent fear in having cancer—which she has had twice now. She was partnered with Ace at a four-day equine experiential therapy retreat for cancer

survivors held by the Sunstone Cancer Center at Rancho Bosque in Tucson, Ariz., amidst 17 acres of sown pasture, aleojo pines, mesquite and Arizona willow trees. The center is run by Allen Hamilton, MD, neurosurgeon and a professor at the University of Arizona, Tucson.

"Dealing with cancer is an unknown," says Golden, a former elementary school teacher who is coping with a recurrence of breast cancer. "The exercises [with Ace] are about learning to take the steps necessary to deal with cancer in a positive way."

Interestingly, participants in this equine therapy retreat never actually ride the horses. "Riding them isn't the purpose of the experience," Golden says. "The purpose is to learn to be in the moment with the horse, who is always in the moment."

Golden didn't have much time to think about attending the experiential retreat. She found the flyer nestled in a blue velvet sectional in the softly candle-lit room that hosts her cancer support group. It announced that the retreat was scheduled for the next day—nine months after her latest cancer diagnosis in February 2003.

Golden only had been around horses twice, on trail rides that "weren't interactive" experiences with the horse. But she signed up for the retreat anyway. And there she found herself, standing at the center of a round corral, the horse at the



Neurosurgeon Allen Hamilton, MD, says horses provide cancer patients a nonverbal vehicle with which to access their emotions.

perimeter. She was standing tall, shoulders back, stomach and diaphragm projected out, turning in a slow circle, her eyes directed at the spot she wanted Ace to go. Then she projected her gaze downward, and Ace stopped.

Daily exercises such as this one, conducted by Hamilton's wife Jane, a psychologist who specializes in animal-assisted therapy, have helped Golden learn that she has the power to control how she deals with her cancer. For example, she says, she has learned she can conquer her fear of asking her doctor about the effects of her chemotherapy instead of avoiding the question.

"The horse is a large, potentially dangerous and out-of-control being—a wonderful metaphor for cancer," says program creator Allen Hamilton, MD.

Hamilton first had experienced the effectiveness of equine therapy in a program he helped conduct for at-risk juveniles. Afterwards, he thought horses also would be an "evocative" way to treat cancer. "They are uniquely sensitive, providing a nonverbal vehicle for patients to access their emotions," he says. The pace of healing can be accelerated through emotional discovery, he explains. "It's a therapy experience, not a horse experience." Hamilton says he models his equine-assisted therapy on the Native American teaching that horses are a gift from the Creator and act as guides and spiritual brothers to the Sioux and Apache.

Back at the ranch, Golden was leading Ace over a low post-and-rail jump. As is the custom at this retreat, she was not riding the big palomino; she was walking by his side. As Ace took the first step over the jump, Golden relaxed.

"The exercise is all about not holding on to things I can't control," Golden says, "like whether the chemotherapy is working."

As a result of her experiences at the retreat, Golden says she learned to live with her cancer in a different way. "I can only carry on with my life in a healing way," she says, "not exacerbating my illness by hanging on to fear and anger, but instead restoring myself with affirmations."

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For more information on the equine-assisted therapy programs mentioned in these stories: \* **Remuda Ranch, Wickenburg, Ariz.** [www.remuda-ranch.com](http://www.remuda-ranch.com) / 800-445-1900  
\* **Medicine Horse, Boulder, Colo.** [www.medicinehorse.org](http://www.medicinehorse.org) / 720-406-7630 \* **Sunstone Cancer Center at Rancho Bosque, Tucson, Ariz.** [www.sunstonehealing.net](http://www.sunstonehealing.net) / 520-749-1928