

In Practice

Gestalt Equine Psychotherapy

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Abstract

From the ground of Gestalt therapy and the field of Equine Facilitated or Assisted Psychotherapy emerged Gestalt Equine Psychotherapy (GEP). This article introduces the reader to the relatively new therapeutic approach of Gestalt Equine Psychotherapy. As far as the author is aware, there are two centres or programs offering Gestalt Equine Psychotherapy in the world – the Gestalt Equine Institute of the Rockies (GEIR) and Gestalt Equine Psychotherapy Australia (GEPa). This article begins with my personal experience with horses, and is followed by an introduction to GEP, the process of GEP, and the role of the therapist in GEP. Some brief cases are offered to give a taste of what the work may look like. Finally, some limitations to this approach are noted.

Introduction

GEP developed as a distinct therapeutic approach from integrating Gestalt therapy, the Equine Assisted Psychotherapy model of training and practice (Eagala, 2006), *The Way of the Horse* (Kohanov & McElroy, 2007), and my own experience that horses offer profound opportunities for self-awareness, contact, and relationship. My training with two Gestalt Equine Psychotherapists from Gestalt Institute of the Rockies (GEIR) in America - Duey Freeman and Joan Rieger - has been instrumental in developing and deepening my understanding of GEP. Both Freeman and Rieger continue to mentor my work. The fields of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and Learning, Equine Facilitated Therapy and Learning, Hippotherapy and Riding for the Disabled (RDA) are flourishing worldwide. However, Equine Psychotherapy is still very new in its inception, development and research (Hallberg, 2008).

My Journey with Horses and Awareness

My journey with horses began in later life, in my 30's, after a lifetime of seeking personal growth and self-actualisation in therapy, Gestalt therapy

training, reading, analysing and critiquing. Much of the potency of what horses offered me in relationship was an experience that was deeply located in my breath, senses, energetic waves of experience, feelings, and what I now refer to as ‘presence’. Presence supports a change in my experience, the awareness of a separate self observing the world loses its duality, and there is a pervasive experience of oneness of being, with myself, the horse and the ‘field’ (whatever that is!). How the horses offer what they do is likely to do with their profoundly embodied and contactful being, and some kind of energetic intelligence that provokes a deep yearning and connection for many people. Others in the field describe similar experiences. For example Linda Kohanov (Kohanov & McElroy, 2007) describes how horses help over-civilised people reconnect with the wisdom and rhythms of the natural world.

The last 10 years of my life have been full of awareness, contact and change, and my therapists, in the main, have been my herd of horses. Horses have been my primary teachers and have helped me emerge from my disconnected experience of continual thinking, analysing, and formulating into a more integrated experience of being with my breath, body, feeling and thinking intelligence in the moment. In my relationship with horses I have the privilege of deepening my understanding of my own unfinished business, key transferences, projections and core introjects as they are reflected back by the horse’s responses to me. Specifically, I have been made aware of my fear and shame of my fear and my pattern of controlling myself and my environment to avoid the pain of vulnerability and fear of death. Horses have taught me to love my sensitivity, to see it as a strength, to honour my feelings as information about my experience, and reach back to earlier decisions about feeling bad and wrong. I can then breathe myself back into loving myself, with my horses’ acceptance and love. Particularly my lead mares and lead stallion continue to teach me about the integrated, calm, aware and alert state of being required to lead my life in relationship to others. The power horses have to both elucidate and heal, with authentic being, never ceases to amaze me.

The Gift of Horses

Horses are beautiful, strong and gentle animals. They are both prey animals and herd animals and offer an exquisite combination of sensory and feeling awareness, and fullness of contact. Horses can provoke strong images and feelings, deep yearnings, projections, transference, and profound embodied experiences in many people. As Freeman (2009) states “horses live the essence of Gestalt” in their natural capacity for awareness, contact, congruency and organismic self regulation. These capacities are incredibly potent for many

people out of touch with their own sensitivity and immediacy of experience. People challenged by patterns of incongruence (for example, having an inner experience of hurt that is disconnected from or covered by a bodily or behavioural pattern of holding/tensing and smiling), receive immediate non-judgemental feedback by the horses. Because horses are prey animals they are tuned to the inner experience of those around them so as to keep them safe from predators. If a lion, full in the belly and needing a drink from the water hole, approaches, the horses sense the lion's intention, and continue grazing with awareness. If that same lion is hungry and stalking, the horses respond by fleeing to safety. Incongruent humans who approach are responded to by horses with either confusion or stress, or, they respond to the inner experience, rather than the behaviour that is presented. These are the gifts they bring to the therapy process.

Kohanov and McElroy (2007) in *The Way of the Horse* suggest that we can explore the wisdom of non-verbal, non-predatory, heightened sensory and extrasensory being that horses embody. Specifically Linda suggests that learning about a horse's way of being honours and speaks to trauma survivors, people who feel powerless and sensitive people who feel betrayed by our aggressive, disconnected and mechanised culture. Linda describes how horses model strengths of cooperation over competition, relationship over territory, responsiveness over strategy, emotion and intuition over logic, process over goal, and the creative approach to life.

When we respectfully climb on their backs, walk beside them or sit in their presence, these animals interrupt the hypnotic effects of our own human conditioning giving people unusually efficient access to forms of healing, perceiving, and relating. (Kohanov & McElroy, 2007, 206)

Gestalt Equine Psychotherapy in a Nutshell

Gestalt therapy offers a human to human encounter, where the therapeutic relationship is both an opportunity for an authentic meeting, and an experiment in relationship for the purposes of exploration and growth. Gestalt Equine Psychotherapy (GEP) offers a horse-human-therapist encounter where the horses offer a unique opportunity for experimenting with being in relationship, and experiencing authentic contact. Being in the presence of horses, and in relationship with horses, provides opportunities for humans to reflect on their relational impact, stretch into different styles of contact, build self and relational awareness, and, feel into their body, energy and feelings as information for strengthening self regulation, choice and responsibility. The work broadly

involves working with developmental unfinished business, core introject-projection systems and creative adjustments that get triggered by the process, with the authentic horse-human relationship as ‘the relationship that heals’. Being in relationship with horses can offer both a powerful reflection of oneself and one’s way of organising the field, and a powerful healing relationship.

The GEP Process

GEP is an encounter where the therapist and client are joined by horses in the process of exploration and growth. The therapy occurs in a safe place - a paddock, ménage, or round yard with a Gestalt therapist trained in equine therapy and horsemanship. There may be one horse or a herd available to the client. After an initial check-in and assessment, the client is offered a relational experience with a horse or many horses, specific to the needs and issues presented. The client is offered some guidelines about the process and the horses, and supported in appropriate ways that meet their safety needs. The Gestalt Equine Psychotherapist has an enduring relationship with the horses, and knows well their temperament, history, strengths and limitations as individuals, as well as the herd dynamics. The relationship between the therapist and the horses is central to the effectiveness of the work. It models authentic and respectful relating, trust, and deepens the possibilities of what client and horses can experience together. The relational experience with the horses is an opportunity for clients to explore, and make grounded and alive contact, and be guided into embodied awareness in the moment. The encounter is offered in the spirit of exploration, safety and support, there being no possibility of being right or wrong. The therapist, the client, and the horses together create a unique opportunity for deepening self understanding and contact, from the embodied non-verbal and verbal experience in the moment.

GEP is experiential, experimental, and embodied. The work is founded on awareness and contact theory, phenomenology, field theory, the paradoxical theory of change, and the notion of therapy as both relationship and experiment. It offers an opportunity for re-connection with the natural world in the contact with horses and the outdoor immediacy of the field/environment. Arguably, the inter-species work fosters respect and reconnection for a ‘civilised’ population in need of deep connection to the natural world. Being with the horses provides an opportunity to explore masculine and feminine intelligence and discover an integrated creative intelligence.

The Role of the Therapist in GEP

The role of the therapist in GEP is similar to that in room-based Gestalt therapy, in that the focus is on developing awareness and relational experience, exploring contact and contact styles, deepening the client's embodied experience, and addressing core themes and creative adjustments that unfold in the therapeutic relationship. The role of the GEP therapist, however, is more akin to a couples therapist. The GEP therapist shuttles between attending to the individual's experience and needs, the 'between' via facilitating and enabling the relationship between the horses and the client, and the horses' experience and needs.

The GEP therapist needs to be trained in GEP, be both a psychotherapist/Gestalt therapist and a competent horseperson. In particular, the GEP therapist needs to know their horses well, as this is the foundation of the safety of the work. The GEP therapist models the ability to be both grounded and present, and models an authentic relationship with the horses. The GEP process is focused on the client's presentation and needs, and offers grounded experiments that are graded and support the client's awareness, contact and relational experience in the moment with the horses and the therapist. The GEP therapist's role fosters the client's embodied awareness and experience, mindfulness, and reflective thinking, in relation to horses and the parallels that exist in other relational domains.

Brief Case Studies

Below I have outlined two case examples to illustrate GEP and its usefulness, names and information has been changed to protect confidentiality.

Peter – Exploring Boundaries and Attachment

Peter, 13 years, has experienced his mother's struggle with mental health and psychosis, his father's suicide, many foster care homes, and subsequent separation from his siblings. His referral for GEP came about after his refusal to see a counsellor, his current criminal charges for stealing, and diagnosis of reactive attachment disorder. Peter engages easily with all the horses and asks many questions. After meeting the herd of mares and young horses, Peter asks to meet the stallions. The senior stallion is awaiting us at the gate. Peter appears energised and pats him eagerly. Peter lays his arm on the gate as I talk about boundaries – because the stallion moved into my personal space uninvited and I asked him to move out. The stallion begins to run his lips up and down the boy's arm. I inquire, "Is that OK with you... he may decide to explore you with

his teeth unless you ask him to move out of your personal space and let him know your boundaries.” Peter ignores me. The stallion bites his arm, gently and slowly. Peter’s eyes appear terrified and he says “OOww”! His former incongruence around his tough exterior and bravado, and inner vulnerability and fear become congruent in that moment. I attend to his fright and pain as I ask the stallion to move outside our safe boundaries.

In the second session I invited Peter to meet the horses and create an obstacle (with props) or challenge, that represents a current challenge in his life, and choose a horse to invite over the obstacle. He does so easily and independently. Peter chooses not to share the personal challenge he had in mind. I acknowledge his use of intention, action, completion, and use of the available resources, and, like him, note the 2 horses that are “changing my obstacle!” (moving the poles and tyres around that he had set up). A lot of material unfolded to work with. Peter’s attention is drawn to the stallion’s penis (he is in the next paddock). Peter talks of watching an X-rated DVD of a horse and people drinking the horse’s sperm. Unalarmed I ask, “What were you watching that for?” Peter is a little surprised and comments, “Because it was fun”. I say something brief about how horses urinate and have bodily functions “all the time, and it is no big deal”. I set the boundaries casually and clearly. Before ending the session, Peter, without permission, sits on the miniature pony eating hay in the stable. The pony trots off and tries to buck Peter off. I comment, “You have been told...what did he just tell you?” Peter says “He didn’t like me doing that.” “That’s right, he set a boundary with you, and told you how he felt about your behaviour.”

The beginning sessions with Peter and the horses offered me insight and much assessment material about core themes and behaviours. I noticed particularly his disinhibited style; tendency to put himself ‘at risk’; lack of boundaries around keeping himself and others safe; tendency to provoke and find where I would meet him with values and boundaries; focus on sexuality and power; the possibility that he has experienced sexual exposure or abuse; and his many strengths around organising, actioning, completing, and engaging with myself and the horses. The work around building attachment, identifying and setting boundaries, and building self functions, is well in process with the horses leading the way. An important focus will continue on helping Peter be in contact with himself and others in a safe and healthy way.

Lyn – from disconnection to connection

Lyn, 60 years, a family support worker, has come to therapy for anxiety and has alternated between room-based therapy one session and GEP the next session.

In the last GEP session Lyn walked into the herd of mares. Two horses came to her immediately. Both horses began placing their heads towards her, smelling her, pushing their noses on her, putting their lips on her and chewing on her hat. All the while Lyn appeared oblivious to their presence and behaviour. She continued talking to me about what she had learned about herself during the last week or so. I offered, “What is happening for you right now? What is happening between you and the horses right now?” Lyn was surprised, “I don’t know.” I inquired, “What do you feel? What do you notice in your body?” Lyn replied, “Well I don’t want them taking my hat.” I responded, “OK. Take a breath. How do you feel about Lily taking and chewing on your hat? Do you want to have a conversation with Lily about where you are, what you want, what kind of contact you would like with her right now?”

Lyn notices that she was disconnected from herself, from the horses and from me. Lyn has very effective ways of keeping herself away from herself and away from being in contact with others. We were seeing how she stays in her thinking, dilutes her bodily experience and wants (by well worn ‘tuning out’ patterns), accommodates others and awaits instructions about what she ‘should’ be doing. The horses offered her engaging contact to organise herself around. The session continued around experimenting with contact and boundaries – becoming aware of what she wants, and what she thinks (and projects) that she should do. We experimented with where she was in her body, breath, feelings, thoughts, and meeting the horses at the contact boundary that she chose and co-created. Lyn ended the session describing an experience of feeling “free to be” herself, like no other experience she had had before.

Limitations of this Therapeutic Approach

There are some limitations to this work for particular clients. In general, given it is a new and unconventional therapy, people may have suspicions about the role and value of the horses in the therapeutic setting. Some may be unclear about the work and the difference from animal therapy that is utilised in aged care or prisons, based around company, unconditional presence, and/or animal training and experiences of mastery, confidence building and ‘feel good’ experiences. People that are terrified of horses, or those who have too many negative associations about horses may not be open to the work. There may be people who are disconnected from, and dismissive of, the natural world and the intelligence and value of animals, and thus would not be interested or available for the work. Certain people with physical limitations may feel this psychotherapy would be inappropriate or too physically challenging, and thus may not access the therapy. However, GEP can be tailored to suit the needs of

even severely physically challenged persons, given the presumption of meeting unique needs and grading all relational experiments.

In conclusion

GEP is an engaging and experiential therapy offering awareness and contact in the moment, with horses. Core themes, creative adjustments, projections and transference become evoked very quickly through contact with the horses. Being with the horses and a therapist in this process offers clients new awareness, and healing in a relational context. The horses cannot help but respond to clients with authentic contact and congruence. There is no judgement. There is a different presence where clients feel held emotionally. Being with horses also evokes an alert and heightened state of awareness, keeping oneself safe and attending to boundaries, and having one's senses stimulated in the outdoor environment. Thus more of an embodied fullness is potentially stimulated in relationship with horses in the GEP sessions. There is an assumption made that most core themes are relational in origin and nature, and therefore the relational experiences with the horses offered by the therapist taps into this relational potential for healing. The healing can begin, and then be transferred to the therapist and other humans.

GEP work is embodied, sensory, mindful, and contactful, and the processing is supportive of reflective thinking and understanding internal states, (feelings, desires, needs, patterns of contact) and how one organises experience. As a therapist, I feel the benefits of offering this work as an opportunity to continue developing my own awareness and presence, and strengthening a more creative integrated intelligence. It continues to be an honour and continual growth opportunity to be with horses every day.

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