

## Equine Assisted Therapy: Equine Talent or Magical Properties

*There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man.*  
—Sir Winston Churchill

Some people would say it's equine talent (Kohanov, 2001, 202). I say it's something more than just that. I say it's a whole bunch of things - some magical, some not so magical (Kohanov, 2001, 207). Let me explain what I am talking about. Perhaps I should introduce myself first. My given name is FCF Satinique, but I am called Misty by those I allow near me. I am a gray Arabian mare owned by Whispering Withers Ranch. I have heard my owners say they picked me for my special work because we Arabians are renowned for our superior intelligence and affectionate nature. I'm very loyal and I quickly become extremely attached to my owner (Barr, 2012). My finely featured face and my large eyes make my owners want to trust me (Rokusek, 2012).

My job is extremely important because I work with what is termed "at-risk" youth aged 11-19. I live at Whispering Withers Ranch, which is solely dedicated to providing experiential treatment to youth who must overcome obstacles such as trauma, abuse, neglect and incarceration (Aspen Hollow Youth Ranchers, Inc., 2012). I am the equine part of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. My team includes an equine and a human therapist plus human volunteers. By the end of my story of how I was able to help Maggie, you will agree that while Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) may not work for everyone (Craig, 2012), it is a very important and highly impactful way to help some people heal from their emotional wounds and become functioning and productive members of society.

Although I am officially owned by Corrine Faith of Whispering Withers Ranch, about a year ago I gave my heart to Maggie, aged 14. I was in the arena snacking on the tender spring shoots of grass while waiting for the group of kids to come. I heard the van bringing them before I actually saw it. I lifted my head and watched them file out of the van.

It didn't take me long to find the young person I would pick as my own. The human therapist explained to the group that they would be led into the arena where the rest of my herd and I awaited their entrance. They were told to pick a horse and put a halter on. The therapist didn't tell them how to put a halter on. She didn't tell them anything. She wanted to use the experience to naturally bring forth issues that the youth would need to address in therapy, such as self-esteem, self-confidence, fear, patience, and leadership, to name a few (Rothe, E., Vega, B., Torres, R., Soler, S., Pazos, R., 2005).

My herd and I are prey animals, meaning that predators use us as food. As a way to overcome being dinner, I was created with an innate sense of heightened awareness regarding my surroundings. Through this awareness, I was able to sense the fear Maggie felt as she trepidatiously entered the arena. There were about eight youth that passed through the gate. In order to keep the lower ranked in members of my herd away from my chosen young lady, I carried my tail proudly and whipped my neck in circles as I cantered around the arena driving away any horse too close to my Maggie. I saw her eyes grow wide in panic. I slowed to a trot and came up slightly behind her and planted my hooves.

I knew she didn't know what to do, so I lowered my head next to her arm and purred. Gingerly, she touched my nose. Because she touched me so softly and hesitantly, I knew she was afraid to hurt me. This told me that she had been abused and physically hurt in the past. Horses are known to reflect energy and mirror self and core issues (Gardner, 2012). Since I had

been abused and physically hurt when my handlers were breaking me to ride, I immediately knew I could be her friend and help her over her hurt by being a comfort, but it would require a great deal of patience from us both (Rothe et al, 2005).

Maggie started rubbing me all over, feeling the sleekness of my coat. By petting me, she was able to lower her level of fear and build her self-confidence. Unfortunately, she soon remembered she was to put my halter on, and she had no idea how to do so. I stood motionless with my head down, waiting for her to make some sort of clumsy attempt. Although I am not a mind reader, I sensed that she was struggling emotionally. When people think, they often have words replay in their minds (Ciccarelli & White, 2012, 254). I knew she was replaying harsh verbal accusations of being stupid and never able to do anything right. I could only wonder who had venomously spoken the original words which created an overbearing sense of shame and lowered self-esteem in Maggie.

Fortunately, Desi, one of Whispering Withers' volunteers, came to lend Maggie some guidance. Desi showed her how to "catch" me by draping the lead rope around my neck and loosely hold it. She then demonstrated how to unlatch the quick release snap on my halter, bring the nose band over my nose, slide the brow band over my ears, and finally how to clasp the quick release, and thus complete the haltering process. Desi reversed the process and asked if Maggie had any questions. When Maggie retorted with a snarky, "No!" she backed off a few paces, but remained watchful in case she needed to intervene, allowing Maggie to experience a personal success of her own. I was the only one who caught the raw smell of triumph in the air from Maggie, and I knew it was indeed a huge step in her recovery process.

The next activity of the day was for the youth to lead us to our stalls, where they were to learn and execute basic care for us to build their sense of responsibility and ownership (Craig,

2012). These activities included the following: grooming, hoof picking, feeding, filling water troughs, mucking, and ensuring our general safety. After my herd and I were safely stalled, fed, and watered, the staff at Whispering Withers Ranch took the students on a tour of the ranch and gave them responsibilities with the other farm animals. We have a flock of chickens that they were to feed, water, and provide clean shavings for without letting them out of the coop. This created an atmosphere where the youth had to work together as a team. They learned and started developing skills necessary for communication and leadership. At the end of the day, each student was exhausted with all the physical activity, yet they all started the personal growth process in a safe environment.

After having waited a full week, I could not wait for Maggie's return. Today we would work together as a dyad. I would allow her to saddle me and climb upon my back. I knew something was terribly wrong before Maggie even opened the gate to the arena where I waited for her. She fumbled with the halter and swore out loud even though that sort of language is not permitted. I followed her to the hitching rail and waited while she grabbed the grooming supplies. I felt very melancholy. I couldn't help it. Maggie was internally holding something in and I could only express that same melancholy. I was hoping that she would not be rough with the grooming. I heard that grooming decreases anger and promotes calmness (Craig, 2012) in the handler.

Maggie was not rough as expected. Initially, she brushed me with short, quick strokes, but the more she brushed, the calmer she became. She whispered to me that she was scared and asked me to be careful with her. After my grooming was complete, Desi appeared holding some of my tack. She showed Maggie how to properly place the saddle pad on my back so that I had a cushion for the saddle. Desi helped Maggie place the saddle on my back ensuring that my

withers and shoulder blades had freedom of movement. Desi demonstrated the proper tightness for the cinch strap: tight enough to keep the saddle in place, but not so tight as to keep me restricted. Maggie was shown how to place the bridle on my head and how to place the bit in my mouth. Desi made sure Maggie knew not to pull hard on the bit, because if she pulled too hard it would damage my mouth, and I would not be able to eat afterward.

Maggie was utterly terrified to get in the saddle. Desi showed Maggie how to do it without hurting me and without falling off. I could sense Maggie's shaking even before she climbed the mounting block. I stood particularly still. Maggie mounted perfectly. I could feel she was still quite anxious, but tremendously relieved and proud of herself at the same time. Desi kept the lead rope on and directed me to the round pen. Once in the round pen, Desi took off the lead and asked Maggie to get me walking once she felt comfortable. Desi did not tell Maggie what she needed to do to get me going.

Maggie tried bouncing up and down in the saddle. She tried saying "Giddy up." She tried kicking me in the ribs. She tried everything she knew to do. I wouldn't budge. Why, you may ask. I'll explain. She was not clear with her directions. She was giving me mixed signals. She kept the reins tight which put pressure in my mouth telling me to stop; all the while she was doing all sorts of crazy things. Her frustration grew, as did mine. Maggie eventually learned that I need loose reins so that I have the freedom to move my head. Because I am a prey animal, I am born claustrophobic (Parelli, 1993, 23). I don't like to be constricted. Neither does Maggie. Once we started communicating with one another in ways that were different from what Maggie was used to (Gardner, 2012), our bond of trust started developing exponentially. Maggie trusted that I would treat her in a safe manner, and I trusted Maggie not to keep me reined in.

Our next meeting was the one in which we gave each other our hearts. It was the end of the day and Maggie was alone with me in my stall brushing me down after riding me and developing her communication skills with me from the saddle. Maggie sat down on an overturned bucket and brushed my tail while I slurped up some cool, refreshing water. It was then that she broke down and confided in me that I was her only real friend. She told me that I was the only one she could trust. She had tried to trust her mom, but that bond had been broken through years of abuse.

Because I knew this moment to be of great importance, I allowed myself to mirror vulnerability (Gardner, 2012). I chose to lie down in my stall and rest my head on Maggie's lap so she could gaze into my eye and stroke my furry face while she shared her deepest secrets. She told me how her mother drank constantly and used drugs. She told of the first time her mother made her do drugs so she didn't have to do them alone. This was what led her to start habitually using a variety of drugs. Eventually, she got tired of always coming home to a strung out mother who would physically beat her or use her as an ashtray for cigarettes and joints. She then showed me the small scars where she had been frequently burned on her arms. After she ran away, she started selling dope to support herself. That's why she picked up criminal charges and was placed into the residential treatment center where she now lived.

She told me that her mom used to trade her for drugs. She sobbed and said she had no idea how many men had used her just so her mom could get a fix. It was when she started pounding her fist against the ground in anger that I became alarmed and rose to my feet, ready to bolt. Because Maggie started experiencing the cathartic release of pent up frustration, anger, grief, and unforgiveness, I became quite agitated.

The human therapist, who was watching the activity in my stall from a nearby bench, saw my agitation and walked over to ask Maggie what had happened. Maggie confessed she had gotten angry at her mom and started beating the ground which made me upset. The human therapist used this opportunity to connect with Maggie in a way that provided tremendous help since her normal emotional barriers were removed. Simply getting Maggie to a point like this was extremely significant, because during talk therapy, youth learn to speak the speak (Gardner, 2012), meaning that they will say what they think the therapist wants to hear and altogether avoid dealing with the root emotional issues. Maggie was unable to help herself and allowed others to come along side of her to offer the support she desperately needed, yet was unable to receive until this ground breaking moment.

The following day proved to be one of great significance. Whispering Withers Ranch had planned a tour for a grant committee. The committee was in the process of evaluating a grant request to fund our program. Several of the committee members wanted to see exactly what transpires with EAP because there were a few dissenters and skeptics in the group. It was important that they understood the process of emotional healing and personal growth for the youth that occurred in the sessions since we hoped they would provide us with monetary support so that we have the opportunity to reach many more adolescents with our unique form of inner healing.

One of the very first questions raised by a committee member was how we proved EAP was effective. His view was that unless something is measured, science would not concede it exists (Pert, 1987, 21). He said that science refused to deal with such nothings as the emotions (Pert, 1987, 21). Our onsite therapist agreed that EAP did seem to be a pie in the sky sort of therapy. She further confirmed that it was indeed difficult to quantify both the process and the

progress of the youth. Self-reports in the form of pre- and post-treatment evaluations from the youth combined with observations from the therapists at their residential treatment centers were the current methods of evaluation (Craig, 2012). She continued explaining that the results could be biased based on the fact that the youth were receiving a variety of methods of treatment, only one of which was EAP received at the ranch (Craig, 2012). Additionally, she said that EAP was not a cure all for all patients. Some of the youth at the residential treatment centers were not able to participate in EAP due to safety issues. If the young person had recently experienced a violent outburst and was found to be unsafe, they were not an appropriate candidate for therapy at the ranch. The safety of the youth, therapists, volunteers, and my herd was of paramount importance.

She then explained that many of the youth receiving treatment have incredible trust issues, and prior to their experiences at the ranch they are unable to comprehend that their actions have an effect on others (Buckingham, 2012) and are unable to experience empathy. A large number of the youth have been involved in the criminal justice system and have not had to do things for themselves (Torres, 2012). They are told by those in authority what to do and when to do it, meaning that they have an external locus of control. Similarly, they haven't had to fix problems on their own and have not had the opportunity to experience and develop the skill of effective problem solving (Gardner, 2012).

To drive home her point, the therapist led the group over to my stall and handed the skeptical man a hoof pick, and asked him to pick my hoof clean. Utterly stunned, the man looked at her and asked how to do it. The therapist responded that she could not tell him because she wanted him to be exposed to the same experiential learning that the youth are involved with at the ranch. I could sense that man was prideful and didn't want to appear daft in front of his



peers, so he climbed over the rails of my stall and stood next to me. I wasn't sure how I would respond. I partly wanted to make him suffer a bit for his disbelief in our program, yet I wanted to ensure we received our necessary funding.

The man bent down and tried a variety of ways to pick my hoof up. Did he honestly think he could make me lift my hoof by sheer force? Did he think he could make me do anything I didn't want to? I weigh nearly a ton and he significantly less. I stood with my hooves planted because I could not help mirroring his arrogance back at him. After about ten arduous minutes of trying to force me to lift my hoof, the physically exhausted man leaned in to me so as not to fall on the ground. It was then that I lifted my hoof and allowed him the opportunity to clean my hoof with the pick. He experienced the elation of accomplishment, yet he was not haughty, because he learned a valuable lesson about pride through our interaction.

I discovered about a week later that the grant committee not only approved our funding request, but they had also reached out to a variety of other charities to further our cause and secure additional endowments on our behalf. Not surprisingly, our doubting Thomas spearheaded the efforts.

There was a bitter sweetness that came with my final session with Maggie. She had grown tremendously in the eight weeks we had together. When she first came to the ranch she was angry, bitter, full of rage, and was dealing with drug related issues after having been diagnosed with polysubstance abuse. I could see her beaming with newly found self-confidence as she practically bounced out of the van that brought her and her crew up for their final hours with my herd and me. She had an exuberance and sense of freedom about her that was not there when we first met, as well as determination and increased self-esteem. She no longer depended

on illegal drugs as a way to deal with her strong emotions. Because she was well on the way of healing, she no longer needed to participate in EAP.

Our final day consisted of a leisurely trial ride through the fresh mountain air, a joyous graduation ceremony complete with cap and gown, and an extended grooming session. It was during our final moments of grooming that Maggie braided her tears of sadness into my mane. She confessed how much she loved me, although she hadn't needed to do so. I knew we shared a special bond from the first day we met. I wrapped my head around her and nuzzled her neck in a gesture of affection. She laughed and told me to stop because it tickled. She then said that because of me she learned how to start to forgive her mom for all the horrible things that she had done. Since she wasn't so focused on anger and rage, she was doing better in school and was excited that she would get the opportunity to serve as a peer mentor for the program up here for the next session.

She led me to the pasture so I could join my herd. I trotted in circles around the pasture while she climbed into the van. As the van drove off, she craned around in her seat and frantically waved good-bye. I nickered in return.

The next group of youth came just a few hours after my Maggie left for her residential treatment center. I sniffed the air as a group of boys sullenly emptied out of the van that transported them to my home. It was then that I saw Jake. We briefly made eye contact and I knew Jake needed me far more than Maggie ever did. I couldn't wait to see how long it would be before he gave me his heart.

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APA does not support interviews in bibliographies. Citations are in-text. I have included MLA format for the purposes of this bibliography only.

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