



Nanaimo registered clinical counsellor Deborah Marshall, seen here with Traveller, has been doing “equine-facilitated psychotherapy” for seven years. “Horses have a magical way of really understanding what goes on with people,” she says.

Katherine Dedyne/Times Colonist

Healing on the hoof: Horses as therapists

'Equine-facilitated psychotherapy' a lifesaver
or a 'gimmick,' depending on whom you ask

BY KATHERINE DEDYNA
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Sometimes, talking things out with an understanding therapist just doesn't do it. So how about a session with a silent but insightful horse?

Horses are slowly cantering into the counselling world thanks to practitioners claiming to harness their ancient wisdom to tackle modern malaises.

Seekers don't have to saddle up for a full-speed gallop; they just spend quiet time "in the moment" with these majestic and sensitive creatures.

Registered clinical counsellor Deborah Marshall is an Island trailblazer in what she calls "equine-facilitated psychotherapy." The lifelong horsewoman, in private practice for 20 years, spends nearly half her time with clients seeking healing with one her 11 horses at Generations Farm.

"Horses have a magical way of really understanding what goes on with people," she says.

Horses might just walk away from someone who is distracted and negative, or lick and love up someone who shows their vulnerability.

Her role in all this? "Learning to stay out of the way and let the horse create the teachable moment."

Whoa.

Where did all this horse sensitivity come from?

Horses are huge, but because they spent eons as prey, "they can assess instantly our inner state," Marshall says. "People may fool others, and they may fool themselves, but you can't fool a horse."

Marshall describes one client who fought despair due to childhood sexual abuse but wasn't getting anywhere until a visit to her farm.

With no prompting, one of the least social horses came from the back of the

field and leaned his enormous head against the man's heart. "And stayed there for five minutes." The man wrapped his arms around the horse and despite his skepticism, found it gave him hope.

Along with healing trauma, being "present" with horses can improve people's moods, fight depression and anxiety and expand their confidence and passion, she asserts. For a price —

Being "present" with horses can improve people's moods, fight depression and expand their confidence and passion, Deborah Marshall says.

slightly higher than regular therapy.

The first session costs \$150 and lasts up to two hours; subsequent sessions cost \$115.

Victoria registered clinical counsellor Susan Duffy has treated only one client with equine therapy — she had to borrow the horse — but plans to go deeper into it. She finds horses "very sensitive" to human emotional energy.

"It can help women, in particular, with setting boundaries," she believes. "It gives people who might not respond so well to talk therapy a different approach — I see it being more body-centred."

It all sounds like "a gimmick" to Simon Fraser University psychology professor Barry Beyerstein, who thinks it's "overblown to call it a therapy."

How about horses' ability to instantly assess the human mindset? "I think that's a pretty long stretch," says

Beyerstein, a contributing editor of the journal, the *Scientific Review of Alternative Medicine*.

Seeking healing with horses isn't going to do any harm, he says. It would probably even relax people, and if they buy into the whole picture, could steer them toward conventional therapies.

But he's "very dubious" about any major psychological problems being solved with horse sense, and he has concerns about people paying for treatments not proven to be effective in medical literature.

About five of 1,600 members of the B.C. Association of Clinical Counsellors practise equine therapy.

"We're completely supportive of it," says association executive director Jim Browne.

After 10 sessions with Marshall's horses, Kate, a mid-life woman suffering physical damage from overwork and hyperstress, needs no more convincing about finding personal truths through equine therapy.

"It calls me to deeper and deeper authenticity in my life, which does keep the stress down and slows me down and keeps me in the moment."

Sandra Wallin of Maple Ridge praises the insights of her mare, Grace.

"Grace will move into that person's space and push or pull her boundaries," says Wallin, who recently gave a workshop called *The Equine Apothecary* at the University of Victoria Body Heals Conference and did a year-long apprenticeship in Tucson, Ariz., with Barbara Rector, co-founder of the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association.

"These are the most beautiful creatures and the most wise. They can tell when people are pretending to be kind when they are really angry or brave when they're not."

If someone needs to learn humility, Grace might just ignore them.

Being near a horse can lead to unexpected reactions. "People just approach a horse and start to cry," she says.