

FIFTH EDITION



HANDBOOK ON ANIMAL- ASSISTED THERAPY

FOUNDATIONS AND GUIDELINES FOR
ANIMAL-ASSISTED INTERVENTIONS



Edited by
Aubrey H. Fine



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Snapshot Eight: Horses Touch More Than Our Skin: An Example of Equine-Assisted Palliative Care

Roswitha Zink, Renate Deimel

Ray of hope Farm for AAT at Otto Wagner Hospital (Lichtblickhof e.motion), Vienna, Austria

The ambulance comes up the driveway with screeching tires, as if it was an emergency. Laughter can be heard. 'It is lovely to drive Amelie to your place!' the driver says as he opens the sliding door. A bald girl's head with a pink head scarf appears immediately, a radiant smile on her face, her arms already reaching for the white-maned horse named Atacama. Amelie has a brain tumor. After countless surgeries, treatments, and therapies she is too weak to come by wheelchair, but this doesn't spoil her happiness. The mare inquisitively moves toward the specialized hospital bed as it is pulled out of the car. Amelie's mother and the equine therapist transfer Amelie from the ambulance onto the bed with practiced moves. This bed can be pushed through mud and into the stables. "It took a lot to convince Amelie's doctors and the rest of our family that equine assisted therapy would help her. Of course, the germs and bacteria in the stable pose a risk, but Amelie's joy is worth the risk, and everyone who doubts it should spend an hour with her and the horse. She gets all her courage from Atacama!" Amelie's mother says. Amelie has gently pulled the horse's head down to her chest and rests her forehead on it while the horse breathes warm air onto her stomach. She chuckles and looks up with bright eyes: 'Can I ride?'

28.29 INTRODUCTION

The agency emotion specializes in equine-assisted interventions for children in need of palliative care as well as children and young adults suffering from trauma. Founded in 2001 in Austria, it consists of two therapeutic farms: One farm is located in the Lower Austria and features accommodations in which children and their families can spend up to a week. The second farm is located in the city center of Vienna, more specifically within the grounds of Otto-Wagner-Spital, a psychiatric hospital. Approximately 300 pediatric outpatients per week come to this farm for therapy sessions or voluntary work afternoons. A total of 20 horses, 14 therapists, support staff, and interns do their utmost to provide the children with a sense of home, safety, and the opportunity for emotional growth.

In this snapshot we will share our approach toward equine-assisted palliative care. We will discuss four crucial aspects: the therapy setting, the training of the horses, and two important therapeutic effects: activation of the vegetative nervous system through breathing and restoring the patients' dignity.

28.30 CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Our aim is to provide meaning, a sense of dignity, and balance for children and young adults in need of bereavement support, trauma therapy, and/or palliative care while being assisted by horses. Patients receiving palliative care require a very flexible therapy framework. Our farm is accessible to wheelchairs and hospital beds that can be wheeled from the patient transport vehicle into the stables. We also have a heated room available for our therapy sessions, where patients can work with the horses both from their wheelchairs and their beds. An infrared box in the stables allows the staff to incorporate special relaxation and respiratory exercises on the horses. Typically, the patients usually sit on the horse underneath the infrared panel. They can feel the warmth of the infrared light from above and the horse's body heat from below. The horses are trained to be emotionally open and relationship promoting. We work hard in training the horses to stay relaxed in the presence of the patients and to become more comfortable with their smell and their sounds (e.g., pulmonary aspiration, oxygen tubes, cannulas, etc.). At the same time, the horses are highly sensitive regarding any nonverbal communication by the patients. The majority of the children are reasonably fit when they first come to us, but deteriorate in the course of their medical treatment. When weakness or pain makes riding impossible, nurturing, feeding, and caring for the horse becomes an important element. We make the most of this time by baking hay tarts or making cushions and bedclothes with hoof prints.

As Amelie's mum says: "When life suddenly stands still, everything is different, and you are the loneliest person in the world. You need acceptance and four feet on the ground." Children who are terminally ill and their parents often find their way back to feeling alive through the nonverbal acceptance and healing touches of our horses. Humans communicate more in the presence of animals, both verbally and nonverbally (Bernabei et al., 2013). Therefore, the horses help people in very frightening and difficult situations such as coping and dealing with terminal illness, keep the lines of communication open, and find words to connect with their human therapists.

28.31 HORSES TOUCH OUR RELATIONSHIPS

Nonverbal communication takes place between the horse and the therapist—and also between the horse and the patient. This method of horse-assisted, nonverbal therapy is called “equo-therapy.” It is built on the conviction that horses are highly capable of recognizing nonverbal impulses in human beings, and their feedback can give therapists invaluable insight into the patients’ condition. The relationship with the horse is based on a soundless language created by rhythm, body tension, facial expressions, and gestures. The horse’s impartiality and the motivation the children develop through working with these animals help to (re)gain resources and resilience. The nonverbal feedback loop between horses and humans does not only work on horseback but also at the bedside. In the latter scenario, the horse works by touching and exhaling warm air onto its human counterpart.

28.32 ENSURING ANIMAL WELFARE

The horses are at the core of our therapeutic work. We are committed to our animals’ well-being and take this responsibility very seriously. To help support their welfare, we have created surroundings featuring paddock trails and pastures for free movement. We also provide all-day feeding by means of special hay nets, fresh water, and clean stables for the horses to lie down. Because the horses have to deal with unnatural conditions during therapy, we train the horses to help us realize that their stress is rising where they blow air out of their nostrils. Finally, the horses at our institution complete 3 years of training before being gradually and carefully introduced to the therapy setting. The most important behaviors we train are counter-fear behavior, concentration, conscious snorting, and motivation. All our animals are encouraged to increase their self-efficacy and take an active part in our work.

28.33 HORSES TOUCH OUR PHYSIOLOGY

The rare experience of taking up the reins and being carried at the same time is paradoxical as it leaves a person both weak and powerful. On the one hand, the person is in control; on the other hand, someone is taking care of the person. Furthermore, fantasy plays an important part in equine therapy, fueled by countless symbols and stories; in many movies and books horses are characterized by their ability to empower and create dignity. Sitting on a horse is associated with appearing taller and being faster. Furthermore, these beautiful and strong animals can function as role models in therapy. Arguably, one of the greatest benefits of equine-assisted therapy is the effect on the patients’ affective self-regulatory efficacy. Socially competent individuals can coordinate their behavior with others by making compromises between self-realization and compatibility (Asendorpf, 2015). Physiological processes also play an important role for both humans and animals. Like dogs, horses tend to observe negative and potentially threatening stimuli with their left eye—a phenomenon called visual laterality (Austin & Rogers, 2007; Larose, Richard-Yris, Hausberger, & Rogers, 2006). This is complemented by auditory laterality (Basile et al., 2009). Sensory impressions from the left seem to increase emotional reactions such as fear or joyful arousal (Krueger, Farmer, & Byrne, 2011). The implication for therapy is to let the horse choose the patient’s left or the right side to walk on. Synchronization is important to our well-being and another beneficial factor in human–equine interventions; we are likely to respond to the heart rate of our interaction partner, and the human heart rate tends to decrease in the presence of horses as the latter have a slightly lower respiratory rate with 12–18 breaths per minute.

28.34 CONCLUSION

We are constantly developing and refining our methods. Having done so from the outset, we will continue to do so in the future. The opportunity to interact with horses gives terminally ill children a renewed sense of being alive. They are able to reclaim their dignity, learn about awareness and body language, and can balance their sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system through breathing.

The lever lift at the bottom end of the arena slowly lifts Amelie, and the swivel arm lowers her onto Atacama’s back. For the first time, one can see her pain, spittle dribbling out of her mouth, spasms in her hands. But none of it matters to her at the moment. Riding on Atacama is about pride, about being carried, and about becoming one with this wonderful animal. The mare stands still. She snorts once to balance her stress, which inevitably occurs when a horse is mounted in a therapeutic setting. Her snort also reminds the humans present to breathe. As soon as Amelie is safely on the horse, supported by her mother and the therapist, Atacama sets off with gentle steps. Amelie’s muscles relax, her limbs start moving again. After a few minutes, she radiates deep inner contentment and says softly, ‘I love Atacama!’



For more information find us on our website www.lichtblickhof.at or send us an e-mail at info@lichtblickhof.at.

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Snapshot Nine: The PATH to Success Program

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The PATH to Success Program (PTS) is an equine-facilitated learning (EFL) program that effectively enhances young adolescents' social competence and their ability to cope with stress. The PTS program was designed by an interdisciplinary team including a developmental psychologist, counseling psychologist, and experienced certified PATH International instructor. The program was developed, implemented, and evaluated at a Premier Accredited Center of PATH International at Washington State University in Pullman, Washington. The 11-week program featured once-weekly, 90-min lessons focused on individual, team, and group-centered equine activities. Activities were based on principles of equitation science and natural horsemanship (McGreevy & McLean, 2010) combining mounted and unmounted human–equine interactions, including observation of equine behavior, engagement in equine management (e.g., grooming, haltering), in-hand horsemanship (e.g., natural horsemanship games), some riding, and personal and group reflection. A total of eight child participants—divided across four equine teams—participated per day. The team consisted of one equine, two child participants, an equine specialist, and a facilitator. Children were assigned to the same facilitation team for the entire 11-week session. Each session was supervised by a certified PATH instructor. The weekly lessons were conducted on weekday afternoons and included transportation of participants from school to the program site and back immediately following their regular school day.

Each week participants first helped to prepare the arena and horses by assisting with the setting up of obstacles, preparing grooming and riding equipment, catching, haltering, and grooming horses under supervision. They were also taught a series