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# STRIDES

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## Beyond Words

### The Power of Non-Verbal Communication at Lichtblickhof

*By Roswitha Zink and Anna Naber*

Interaction without words. The gentle flaring of nostrils. The melody of breathing. This special form of equine communication can have a profound impact on participants partnering with equines, especially in times when someone is thrown off-track by life events or when traumatic events are moving at overwhelming speed.

The Lichtblickhof (Ray of Hope Farm) in Vienna, Austria, provides a life-affirming environment for children with terminal illnesses as well as severe trauma. The team of mental health therapists rely on specially trained horses and other animals, like cats, dogs, sheep and rabbits, to accompany and support these children and their families. Regardless of diagnoses, the goal is to provide moments of joy and lightness even when a terminal outcome is almost certain. The farm's program offers hope and confidence and times of lightness and laughter. It is a treatment approach based in the now, in the moment.

"None of us are ever guaranteed a future; all we have is the present," said Roswitha Zink, the founder of Lichtblickhof.

### Support for Children and Horses

Meeting the horses at Lichtblickhof opens new doors of communication for children who may have given up, who do not trust the world that seems so cruel and has left them feeling powerless. Lichtblickhof's 20 specially-selected and trained horses of various breeds offer their strength, protection, safety and security. At times when no human seems to be able to help, horses can give a sense of control against feelings of being powerless. They offer accepting companionship when loneliness, isolation and feelings of being different seem overwhelming. They help instill the courage to persevere and find joy just by being in their presence. Interacting with the farm's horses has increased coping skills and improved resilience in even the most fragile children.



"I say nothing.  
The horse still answers me.  
I do not want to talk.  
But the horse asks me anyway.  
I don't want to answer.  
Again, the horse speaks.  
I'm listening ....and when they  
stop... I start to share my story."

Roswitha is enthusiastic about how the non-verbal communication between the children and the horses influences attachment and health: "Building the relationship between horse and child relies on subtle signals, on reading each other, on noticing the posture of an arm, the swishing of a tail, the widening of an eye," she said. "Supportive non-verbal signals are understood intuitively by the human nervous system; their message can improve health and mobilize well-being."

In order to facilitate this non-verbal communication dialogue and receive valuable feedback from the equines, the horses are encouraged and trained to actively participate in the therapeutic process and to use their exceptionally fine perception. Zink reports: "In recent years, we have anecdotally observed how our animal partners express themselves much more frequently and more nuanced when we observe their smallest reactions closely and react accordingly. We have not yet been able to prove this empirically but it appears animals can learn their insights are valued and understood by humans, and knowing this, they seem to pay more attention to interactions and use their non-verbal communication actively to give consent and feedback."

This ability to influence interactions and relationships in their environment seems to be a great motivator for animals. In fact, studies show having a sense of self-efficacy and being in control of a situation is one of the most effective factors in reducing stress. "As humans, it is our responsibility to react to the stress of the animals and to prevent it in the best possible way, or to teach the animals coping strategies on how to deal with increased stress," says Zink. "This requires targeted, well-considered training."

## **Audible Exhale Communication**

Since there are few specific strategies and methods for effectively reducing stress in horses in the literature and research to date, Zink and her team have developed the audible exhale communication (AEC) at Lichtblickhof. This training concept is based on human strategies for stress reduction.

Anna Naber talks about her supplementary work as a biofeedback therapist with AEC: "Breathing exercises are used to reduce tension and induce a relaxed state. Due to the close cooperation of the cardiological and respiratory systems, changes in the breathing pattern lead to changes in the heartbeat. Stress manifests itself—among other ways—by an accelerated heartbeat. A conscious, deep breath can influence this actually autonomic nervous system, and the heartbeat can be slowed down by breathing. Not only do horses give clients feedback about their states of tension and relaxation, but horses also use these types of breath relaxation exercises like humans."

The therapists at Lichtblickhof observed that horses naturally use audible exhales to reduce their stress levels when they are excited or frightened. The training concept behind AEC focuses on two aspects: Horses learn to audibly exhale when there is a high level of stress in order to effectively reduce their own stress. In addition, the audible exhales are an important feedback and communication system for the interacting human. The practitioners stress that equine professionals who want to use AEC in their work become properly trained in its methodology.

In a pilot program at the farm, 20 horses and participants were trained for six months to use this method. This training concept is based on positive reinforcement, focused body language dialogue and the horse-human connection to achieve mutual relaxation, physiological coordination and synchronization of movements. It is individually adapted to the current needs of horses and therapists and aimed at increasing the horses' self-efficacy. Horses were encouraged to use AEC as a stress-reducing strategy in the sense of a veto signal, letting the therapist know they needed to reduce the stress level.

To teach this concept, the trainer asked for different tasks in relaxed concentration and modeled calmness by, for example, taking deep breaths. If the horse reacted to this relaxation signal and demonstrated emotional tuning, that is by taking a deep audible exhale, the trainer would interrupt the main task, and the horse would get a positive experience as a reward. In this way, horses learned to use their body language to express their state so that humans could respond to their stress factors. Thus, AEC gives equines a tool to influence and control situations that may become stressful and offers humans more opportunities to help the horse relax and address their emotions. Future research should investigate the effect of AEC systematically.

"It has an impact on the animal welfare when we begin to pay attention to the horse noises and perceive their tone, rhythm and ending," said Zink. "You will be amazed at how sophisticated they are!"

Roswitha Zink, a psychotherapist, biologist and special education teacher, and Anna Naber, a clinical psychologist and biofeedback therapist, have been practicing psychotherapy with horses at Lichtblickhof for many years. They work with passion in therapeutic projects with the children and families, as well as in the training and education of their equine partners and in projects that attempt to scientifically illuminate aspects of psychotherapy with horses. They can be reached at [anna.naber@lichtblickhof.at](mailto:anna.naber@lichtblickhof.at) or [roswitha.zink@lichtblickhof.at](mailto:roswitha.zink@lichtblickhof.at).