

The Global Gallop August 2024

The Global Gallop

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**International
Events**

**Clinical
Supervision in EAS**

**HETI 18th
International
Congress recap**

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CONTENTS

01

IFIE and SIPME share the effectiveness of working with horses in EAS

06

Dr. Sarah Urwin discusses clinical supervision in EAS

11

Sue McIntosh looks at the benefits of not being given an instruction manual

17

Member news -This issue hears news from members in France, China, Croatia, Austria, the UK

34

International Events - Hear reports about events from all over the world.

49

In Equine welfare we look at the use of Osteopathy when working with horses.

53

We hear of the power of horses when working with terminally ill patients.

Horsepower gives years and yes to life!

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Lichtblickhof, Austria



Image credit: Lichtblickhof

"Horses give me strength", "I can recharge my energy", "They carry me", "I can relax with horses", "Horses give me self-confidence and they listen"

Young people reported this and much more when asked what they think horses could give them. As part of a research project at Lichtblickhof (Ray of Hope Farm), horses were used to promote resilience. It became clear that with horses, young people can recharge their batteries and gain energy for everyday life, can relax and recover from strenuous and challenging experiences, horses offer them a strong shoulder to lean on and an open ear to listen to.

It is precisely through a palliative

diagnosis that children and young people come into contact with existential threats very early on and face their fate with great helplessness.

They are accompanied by many thoughts and feelings: sadness, fear, worry, devaluation, loss of control, anger,... that cannot be put into words. This is exactly where therapy horses can come into play so effectively and bring in their special ability for non-verbal dialogue: With their special training, which is based on being able to read/feel the quality of human movement and their unconscious emotional expression, horses have to - in analogy to what they learn from other horses know- learn. And in most cases, thanks to their great gift

for very fine perception, they can read us humans BETTER than our fellow human beings can. The "non-human" interaction makes it possible to give space to all these feelings and thoughts that - for now - cannot be put into words. If I don't expect judgment based on human standards, my motivation and willingness to perform increases to deal with myself and my problems or to consciously move them out of the center of my attention and, for example, to perceive the horse as a person and thus distract myself from myself and the circles of thought. Regaining quality of life and joy are major goals when affected by a life-limiting diagnosis. Horses make one proud, give dignity in a complex way and carry a part of life's journey. Often it is also the ability to endure: with their powerful presence one can feel a togetherness that gives strength to face challenges and the blows of fate. They give strength and meaning to say YES to life despite everything.



Image credit: Claudia Blake

Paul has a brain tumor; it is incurable and costs him a lot of energy. Many examinations and many years of therapy are behind him; he is tired of therapy and tired of life. The list of restrictions that he has to endure in everyday life is long; his suffering is most clearly expressed, among other things, by spastic paralysis on one leg and one hand. His committed parents have made it possible for him to undergo a lot of therapy since he was born. The therapists were so successful that he was able to grow up almost like a normal child. However, his parents are missing something: Paul has apparently lost his joy in life because of all the practicing and catching up. With the therapy horses it quickly becomes clear that somehow everything in his life doesn't make sense. He practices and practices and will always remain worse than his friends. He practices and every new tumor growth takes away his abilities, hope and will to live.

In therapy, too, he encounters his therapy horse Tamino as a new exercise and therapy object. He wants to do everything correctly. Tamino mostly stands still, withdrawn. Even when he is being cleaned, Tamino rarely tries to make contact. The therapy deliberately focuses on caring activities such as mucking out, cleaning, preparing food or taking Tamino to the pasture. Over time, Tamino knows that when Paul comes there will be a great "I'll let myself be cared for and pampered" hour and greets Paul with an exuberant snort or neigh. Paul can't believe it, Tamino needs HIM. It's a very small contribution that has a big impact. He has to clean and feed him, without him Tamino

would be at a loss, he is dependent on him. Paul has a job. Taking care of Tamino gives his life strength and meaning to say YES to life despite everything. Paul starts thinking about Tamino even during the week, sending him messages and photos and collecting everything he knows about him and what they experience together.

Resilience through therapy horses

Resilience refers to the resistance or inner strength, the strength with which people can overcome crises and adapt to challenges, difficulties, tragedies, threats and stress factors, as well as recover from difficult experiences. Resilience is often referred to as the immune system of the soul. Wolter (2005) counts resilience resources, therefore the characteristics of resilience, as:

- the acceptance of the crisis and the feelings associated with it
- the search for solutions
- accepting help and not solving problems alone
- staying optimistic
- not to blame yourself
- and future-oriented planning.

The evaluation of the questionnaires from the above-mentioned research project showed that both the young people and their parents perceived a positive effect of the horses on the young people's everyday lives. The therapists, parents and young people were interviewed and it became clear that the horses played a central role and that interacting with them had a positive effect on the resilience of young clients. Friendship with horses is very important for young people; the animal provides support and new energy, fun and

strength for challenges in everyday life. The interaction promotes resilience-promoting factors such as the pursuit of goals, perseverance, pride, responsibility and friendship with the horse. For parents surveyed, there was a strengthening of self-confidence, independence, self-control and self-confidence as well as an improvement in social skills and endurance. Especially in difficult everyday situations, horses would give their children a lot of strength, they would gain positive experiences and radiate happiness and joy after their therapy session.

In their answers, young people showed very clearly that friendship with "their" therapy horse is of great importance. For them, the horse is not just a medium that is used in a therapy session, but an integral part of everyday life. So, they call "their" therapy horse the "highlight of the week", something they can look forward to every week or especially "when things aren't going so well", memories of shared experiences they can think about in difficult moments and gain strength from it for everyday life, and that the thoughts of "their" therapy horse calm them down, give them courage and make difficult times go by faster.

Christian is a bright young man, but behind this brightness lies great insecurity and disappointment. Due to his incurable heart defect, he has difficulties in almost every area of life. Various therapies have helped Christian, but at the moment he is simply "hard to reach" for people.

When they first meet, the therapy horse Atacama looks at Christian calmly and

softly, her head bowed. Christian doesn't seem to notice her. He looks around the room. We set off quietly for a walk. Then Atacama stops, perhaps by chance, perhaps for a specific reason, but I pay attention to her because I know that as a horse, she can perceive other people's feelings much more sensitively than a human. Christian turns to her and asks: "Who are you?". Atacama stretches her nose towards Christian and gently blows warm air from her nostrils. Actually, no words would be appropriate now, because the two of them have just met without words. What I probably wouldn't have been able to do: she managed to find the moment in which Christian wants to get to know Atacama.

We don't speak much during the first few hours and Christian enjoys the quiet, harmonious moments in communication with Atacama. Atacama, for her part, gets to know Christian and challenges him every hour by letting him ride her and following him as he leads her. Little by little I notice how she begins to test Christian, contradicts him, doesn't follow his direction when he leads her, doesn't stop when he wants to. Christian learns in a very small way to endure this "disharmony" and to either change his wishes or convince Atacama of his plans. His anger at Atacama's "own" will repeatedly interferes with his otherwise appropriate way of dealing with her, but he makes an incredible effort to maintain her friendship and therefore begins to compromise with her. He will soon be able to transfer this ability to me and my wishes and we will begin a relationship with words to complement Atacama's "without words" therapy. The

friendship with Atacama is very important to Christian; interacting with her promotes, among other things, his perseverance, pride, responsibility and the pursuit of goals.

Therapy offering at Lichtblickhof

At Lichtblickhof we offer regular outpatient therapy with horses as well as inpatient projects in which promoting resilience plays a major role. The newly gained horsepower expands the skills of children and young people. This can be used to break the vicious circle of negative thought patterns (such as fear, devaluation, victimhood, powerlessness, etc.), which strongly influence actions and feelings. Horses make proud, they carry a bit and endure every fate. These are very basic experiences that contribute to a new self-image and a sense of meaning and self-efficacy. In a gentle alternation of rhythm and impulse, which underlies every non-verbal, body language interaction, synchrony and symmetry, but also the alternation of harmonious-coordinated and disharmonious - challenging moments characterize the interaction.



Image credit: Lichtblickhof



Image credit: Julia Salzer

Sebastian was born with a palliative diagnosis. Because of his disability, he stands crookedly on two wobbly legs and leans unsteadily on a crutch. Therapy horse Kurumi gently blows into the young man's face. His face lights up at this contact. We often talk about the fact that Kurumi is a descendant of wild horses in Uruguay, that horses there survive in wind and weather, stick together and, thanks to friendships, master many adventures. He gently strokes the short, wavy wild horse mane. He stands up straight. A touch of a wild horse's honor is expressed through his body and his weak limbs tremble with strength and exertion. Horses can't give him his legs back, but his honor, Kurumi has lent his dignity as a wild horse to Sebastian!

The natural environment of the farm

and the spontaneity of the animals provide valuable components for therapeutic interventions. In the flow of unity, horse and therapist work equally and the animals take on part of the responsibility. They get involved because their increased sensitivity makes it possible to practice affect coordination. The better the therapist knows and can assess the therapy horse, the finer horse's feedback about child's emotional state will be and the easier it will be for him or her to support the horse in difficult moments and to support and accompany it. The feedback on the feelings of children and young people, which is given from the perspective of the horses, is so valuable because it helps therapists to understand more precisely, to feel better and to provide more targeted support. This perspective from horses can minimize the "mistakes" or

"prejudices" that we therapists often fall into. It is less easy to put children in a diagnostic box too quickly and our view remains open and focused on the essentials, the feelings and actions in the here and now. Therapy horses can also help in many crises for the therapist's own psychological hygiene and as a good animal-supported team you can fully count on the horse's creativity with valuable impulses.

Horses are a key factor in the resilience of clients and therapists that have a lot of positive effects. Promoting equine resilience became very clear in our last article on audible exhale communication: Helping animals to lead a fulfilled and learning-focused life through targeted, well-considered supervision and training is one of the major tasks for everyone who works with animal support. (Naber et al., 2023, Can equine communication via audible exhales improve the welfare of therapy horses? – A pilot practice project: <https://www.cabidigitallibrary.org/doi/epdf/10.1079/hai.2023.0039>)



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Image credit: Lichtblickhof

Learn more about Lichtblickhof here:
<https://lichtblickhof.at/>