

Embracing the Horse as Co-Facilitator

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CREATING THE SAFE ENVIRONMENT

“One cannot take a deep look at one’s self or try out new ways of being in the world unless they feel safe.” Kathryn McMurdock MS,

CCL-SLP, former case aid of at-risk youth

Full Value Contract

Animals as Natural Therapy (ANT) uses the full value contract at the beginning of all groups, private sessions, with staff and board members. It is used a foundation to create a safe environment for all involved, including our co-facilitators, the horses, and other animals on the farm.

- **I agree to keep myself and others physically and emotionally safe.**

Participants wear boots (and helmets when riding).

We keep the horses an elephant’s length apart from each other.

We close the gates behind us.

Participants do not enter animal pens without a staff member.

We refrain from putting anyone down: ourselves, other participants, mentors, staff or horses.

- **I agree to give and receive respectful feedback.**

Participants get to ask questions and give feedback. We honor their need to ask for a pause if they are feeling overwhelmed. We encourage the participants to give the horses feedback and point out when the horses are giving participants feedback.

- **I agree to work as a team**

Who is a part of the team? All of the participants, mentors, horses, other farm animals, the bugs, the fences, the weather and the wild animals that show up.

HONORING THE INTUITIVE NATURE OF THE HORSE

We see horses as sentient beings who mirror us and our feelings. They reveal aspects about us that we are often not aware of. Horses bring awareness to how we behave in relationship. We read the horses by closely observing their slightest responses (eyes, ears, lips, brow...). They support us as we discover appropriate ways to communicate our needs.

ALLOWING GRACE TO HAPPEN

This concept is about taking the time to be influenced by, to question, to interpret and to make sense of information received from the horse, our own intuition and that of a personal higher power. We don't claim to have all of the answers about why or how things take place when they do, but try to stay in a curious mind set to be co-created between the horse and participant.

CREATING METAPHORS FOR LIFE

Metaphors are created during a session in response to the behaviors the horse brings or sometimes by what the horse is mirroring. For example: A horse moving slowly, we might ask if this is in response to the participant's low energy? A horse pulling the participant to the grass, we might ask if the participant has a compulsion addiction that jerk them around. Often times before the participants leave for the day we reflect on the challenges presented during the session. We ask how their response to the challenge presented today might be used as a tool in other circumstances in their lives.

CREATING A CONTRACT BETWEEN A PARTICIPANT AND HORSE

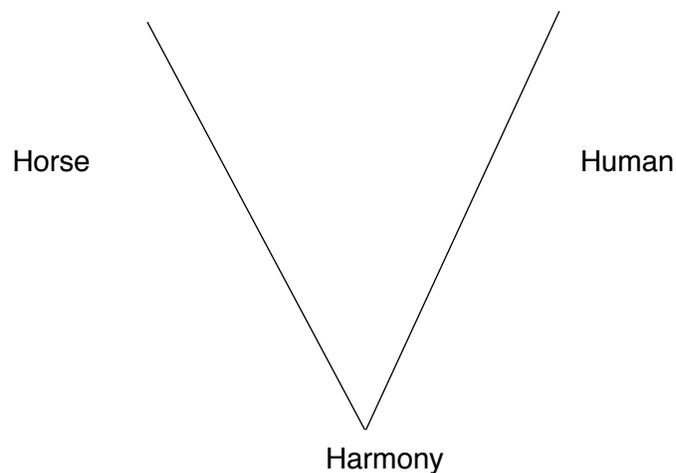
This is a model for letting horses as well as people know that you will do your best in challenging circumstances. We use it when kids are really nervous when first working with a horse and every time before they mount their horse. We ask our participants to stand next to and look their horse in the eye and say the following:

I promise to keep you safe and I need you to keep me safe. If I make a mistake I need you to forgive me and if you make a mistake I will forgive you.

This empowers participants to ask for what we all need in healthy relationships: We need physical and emotional safety and forgiveness.

V THINKING

Think of a relationship as being in the shape of a V. There are always two sides that respond to one another. This can be said between friends, a parent and a child, a horse and a human. The success of the relationship depends on how the two communicate. The whole point to “V-Thinking” is figuring out how to relate/respond to that other being in relationship. The higher up someone is on the V, the more energy it takes. Figuring out when and how to respond to that level of energy is key in moving down the V, eventually getting to the point at the bottom which represents togetherness and understanding. The success depends on how the two communicate.



Horses are in tune to our feelings and their surroundings. If you're feeling nervous or anxious they will mirror those feelings. Sometimes horses are easily excitable which makes them shoot up the V, when this happens you have to be able to see and sense this to respond their energy.

The negotiation

When one side of the V recognizes where the other is on the V, they will be able to raise or lower their energy to match their partner. Sometimes there needs to be a pause and ask questions: Is there something I am not understanding? Are we in a power struggle?

In relationships we all can get stuck in being overwhelmed. In the role-play scenario the parent offered to help get the child started on cleaning their room. How often in relationship with family members, co-workers and horses do we need to offer help or support in some form to change the intensity of the situation?

Have you ever been in a situation where your horse was triggered and if you became frustrated it made the situation so much worse? If we go into an emotional response the situation escalates. If we take a step back and realize the horse isn't doing something to us (don't take it personally/forgive) we are better able to get back to the bottom of the V.

There are times in relationships where they become physically and emotionally unsafe. When you look at the top of the V notice how far apart the two beings in relationship are from each other. This is a point where there needs to be some form of outside support called in. If it's an abusive relationship call the police, or a counselor, if it's a horse that is completely outside of your ability to manage, find a professional trainer to help you.

As you begin using the V thinking model you will develop stronger, healthier relationships and will notice when great relationships can be better and hard relationships can be managed more easily. *We thank Frank Bell for introducing this concept to us.*

TRUST

This is a lesson we use to create self awareness around trust issues. It works well with kids as young as 9, up to adults.

TOOLS NEEDED

A container large enough to put your hand in and out of it. Glass gems (find at a craft store). You will need enough to fill your container 3/4 full. A white board or flip chart and colored markers. A scribe to write the lists.

THE LESSON

We begin by showing the full container of glass gems and explain that it represents us as a vessel, a human being full of trust. Next we ask: **What takes away Trust?** Each person is encouraged to name one thing that has taken away their trust. We allow for individuals to repeat what another has said. The container of glass gems gets passed from one person to the next around the circle, each takes a few of the gems and shares what takes away their trust. This continues until the group runs out of ideas or the container is about empty.

The leader speaks about the fact that trust between people depends on the relationship. The clerk at the grocery store is typically someone who you have a limited relationship with and a family member is someone you have a long term invested relationship with. The amount of trust needed for a clerk is considerably less that that of a family member.

WHAT BUILDS TRUST

The above process is repeated with an emphasis on: What builds your trust?

As the list of trust building ideas are shared and written the white board the container is passed around the circle and participants refill the container with the glass gems, until the container is full and the list is complete.

My favorite part of this lesson is to ask the participants; “Which of these items that we have named do you think the horses need in order to feel safe and trust us?”

We then put a star by the named items. Coincidentally most all of what’s on the list is what horses need to trust people.

We thank Brene` Brown for introducing this concept to us.

CREATING OBSTACLES

The creation of obstacles is a tool we use from EAGALA (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association) model. Participants create an obstacle representing a challenge they are currently struggling with in their life. Once it is built we ask that they name it, posting the name on the obstacle.

In our after school programs we have individuals build obstacles; with families and corporate groups a single obstacle is built. This is an opportunity for participants to name their personal challenges. Through experiential learning they create metaphors for how the horse made it easy or hard to handle various parts of the obstacle.

TOOLS

Cones, poles, barrels of differing sizes, jump standards, about anything you can think of that is safe for a horse and person to walk over, through or around. Paper, pen and tape to put the name of the obstacle on the obstacle.

THE PLAN

As participants are finished creating obstacles we ask them to take us through their obstacle, this not only shows us their plan but we may question them about anything that might not be safe and ask them to adjust it accordingly.

There are at least three ways to work with horses and participants with obstacles.

The first is to have the horse at liberty and the participant(s) have a goal of getting a horse to go thru the obstacle without touching or leading the

horse. What might be identified is what a struggle it is to attain the goal or outcome (a metaphor) without added support.

The second is to have the participant lead their haltered horse through or over their obstacle.

The third is to have the participant ride their horse through the obstacle that they created, it often takes more than one time to pass through. We encourage our participants to talk to us about the process as it is playing out.

The horse may be uncomfortable going through the obstacle. We take this opportunity to ask the following:

What's happening? What's working? What isn't working, Why do you think it isn't working? We help the participant problem solve and evaluate the situation themselves.

Metaphors are created and empower the participant to learn from their experience. With pre-teens and older, we focus on asking what they thought about the experience. It can be surprising to hear an extensive amount of information about their reality and self-talk.

If there is enough time, we have the participants share each other's obstacles. Often times the obstacles are not unique to just that individual. It can be empowering to test their abilities in a variety of ways.

CLOSURE

Finding the metaphor

At the end of our groups we encourage our participants to discuss:

WHAT?

What happened today? What was your challenge? What went really well?

SO WHAT?

What did you think, feel or do about the situation?

NOW WHAT?

How does what happened today relate to your life outside of the farm?

