MSU Veterans Horsemanship Program
Our Story

• 2 Person Team
• 27 Veterans Served
• Natural Horsemanship Centered
• 6-10 Week Length
• Class size – Average 3 Veterans
• Trial and Error
What is the MSU Veteran’s Horsemanship Program?

• 10 week natural horsemanship based program provided each spring and fall and 6 weeks in the summer

• Open to anyone who has served our country in the armed forces and is not restricted with regard to theatre.

• The goal of the program is to promote wellness and facilitate healing for Veterans
How We Started

• We volunteered for the Semper Fi Fund’s Jinx McCain Horsemanship Program
• One Veteran showed up at the arena and asked for help with his horse
• We added two other Veterans
Beginning Of Sessions

• Complete participation paperwork
• MHP administers self-report assessments such as the PCL-5 for PTSD
• Introductions
• Pick out their horse in the arena
Groundwork

- Creates a bond
- Develops confidence in the Veteran and the horse
- Creates comfort
- Creates trust
- Creates safety
- Amount done depends on what the Veteran needs
Groundwork Leads To A Better Riding Experience
Riding

- Be Quiet
- Be flexible – ride when ready
- Have the one rein stop in place before they mount
- Turn off your micromanager button
- Trust them to learn at their own pace
- Everything works together in natural horsemanship – from ground to saddle
- Challenge and advance
Safety Goals

• Safety around horses
• Emotional safety in the arena
• What happens at the arena stays at the arena – they won’t hear their business in town
• Ask them what their goals are for horsemanship and for this experience as a whole
• No judgment zone
• Allow people to learn through making mistakes
• We close the arena down - participants only
Quotes

• I have been retired from the military for several years and I still had nightmares; they are completely gone since I started this program.

• Before this I had no joy – now I can experience joy. It’s really cool what a horse can do for you.

• These horses have taught me how to trust again…
Benefits

- Know the benefits so you can promote the program to Veterans and supporters
- Hope
- Decreased symptoms for PTSD
- Decreased symptoms for anxiety and depression
- Learn better regulation of emotional responses
- Decreased anger
- Better sleep
- Horses provide metaphors, especially helpful in developing self awareness
- Develop self-confidence
No, Don’t, Stop…

- Remove these words from your vocabulary
- They said if it has the word “therapy” in it then they aren’t coming
- We don’t have volunteers
- We don’t have visitors
- Each Veteran has his own horse for the duration of sessions
• Humor can fix a lot of issues
• Boundaries
• Ethics
• Integrity – do what you say you’re gonna do
• Dignity
• When you don’t know what else to do - listen
After Riding

• We debrief …

• What did you learn from your horse today?

• What was your favorite thing today?
End Of Sessions

• Administer Program Satisfaction Survey
• MHP can administer self-report assessments such as the PCL-5 for PTSD
• Celebrate with food and prizes
Veterans and Families
Starting A Veterans Horsemanship Program

- Start small
- Recruit locally – friends, Veterans organizations, University, resource fairs, Church, and invite yourself!
- Build on your strengths
- Use what ya got
- BE FLEXIBLE
- Ouch… Be willing to listen to what they didn’t like
What If?

• Have a plan for the what ifs…
• Be trained in mental health first aid
• Be familiar with VA resources online and in your community
• VA Suicide Prevention Hotline 1-800-273-TALK (8255) press 1 for Veterans
Best Advice We Ever Got

• Really LISTEN and take in what people say to you and about you (your program) that is critical…
• If it is something that you believe is true – then start working on it.
• If it is something that you don’t feel is true about you – then let it gooooo.
Do Your Homework

• Volunteer with a Veterans horsemanship program, outdoors program, athletic program, or any Veterans program to help you gain cultural competence
• Interview Veterans that you know
• Take online courses
• Take natural horsemanship clinics
• Build competence in de-escalation
• Veterans are service oriented – emphasize how they will be helping the center by attending
• There’s one in every group...
• Approach difficulties with curiosity – What is this about? What can I learn from this?
• The end.