

# An Innovative Approach for Learning Self-Awareness and Nonverbal Communication: Horses for Healers

JoAnn Jarolmen

**Abstract:** Nonverbal communication and interpretation of feelings is integral to the therapeutic process. Social workers learn to listen and respond to communication. Our challenges as social work practitioners are accessing skills and learning self-awareness through self-knowledge and personal perception. The Horses for Healers program helps practitioners access skills: body language, personal space, and nonverbal communication, as well as self-awareness and knowledge regardless of cultural or language barriers. It also develops the ability to use cognitive behavior group skills.

**Keywords:** Horses for Healers, equine-assisted learning, equine-assisted psychotherapy

## Background

Several years ago, I was watching the local news on television, and a project called Horses for Healers was featured. The purpose of the program was to provide assistance with developing bedside manner for mental health professionals, particularly psychiatrists. As a professor of clinical social work practice, I decided to investigate this program. Through the local news station that carried this story, I got the email address of the director of Horses for Healers and inquired about the program. When I received the information, I brought it to my supervisor and asked for permission to pursue the possibility of our students attending the program. She gave me permission and I followed up with the dean. It took a while to coordinate the process, but after much bureaucratic red tape, explanation, and rationalization for its significance to our students, we were given permission to attend.

Through investigation and research, I discovered that horses are used since they are extremely sensitive to emotional nuances. They are animals of prey, so in order to continue their existence, it is essential that their sensitivity is acute. We spend an undue amount of time as instructors of mental health professionals trying to help them develop self-awareness. It is often difficult for students to hear critical feedback from supervisors and liaisons who are charged with this responsibility. Self-awareness is a social construct that comes from one's inner personal self (Gardner, 2001). Horses for Healers provides exercises that use horses as a conduit for feedback of emotional nonverbal communication. They help mental health professionals encode and decode nonverbal communication to make them more astute in understanding and forming a therapeutic alliance with those they serve. The subtleties of nonverbal communication are explored, and an increase of self-awareness is developed through this experiential learning modality. Students are given the opportunity to interact with the horses, practice client engagement skills, and collaborate on effective treatment plans. The skills of cognitive behavioral group therapy (CBGT) are reinforced through the exercises provided in this workshop, which include tasks, brainstorming, problem-solving, and processing feedback. As a result, self-knowledge is also accessed through this modality. As per Gardner (2001), self-knowledge is reflected self-awareness; that is, receiving knowledge of oneself from others' feedback. As mental health professionals continue to seek out effective ways to assist their

clients, the students in our program now have another method of therapy to consider. A pre- and post-test was used to consider the effectiveness of the program, and a qualitative instrument was used.

As per Cohen and Cohen (1998), the most important social worker skill is the ability to be competent communicators. They define this as the following: “Competent communicators are better able to empathize, better at managing interactions, and can command a larger repertoire of communication strategies” (Cohen & Cohen, 1998, p. 358). To be a competent communicator, a social worker needs self-awareness and understanding of both verbal and nonverbal communication. Communication is seen as an essential skill along with empathy, reflection, and initiating difficult conversations with clients (Forrester, Kershaw, Moss, & Hughes, 2008).

### **Horses for Healers in Action**

This workshop helped participants learn about the usefulness of coursework involving equine-assisted learning (EAL), which “is an experiential learning approach that promotes the development of life skills for educational, professional and personal goals through equine-assisted activities” (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship [PATH], n.d.).

EAL integrates the interaction of humans and horses in a planned learning process with defined goals and expectations. Expectations include interaction to foster trust, respect, honesty, and communication (PATH, n.d.). Learners experience a variety of cognitively and emotionally processed activities through guided reflections (Kane, 2007). Horses and humans have a long history of interaction, but recent research has uncovered yet another place where horses and humans can interact to develop awareness, sensitivity, and feedback to nonverbal communication in mental health professionals (Dyk et al., 2013). EAL has been used successfully with nurses and doctors to develop awareness of nonverbal communication. The horse becomes the vehicle for this understanding since, as animals of prey, they are reactive to feelings of those in their domain (Walsh & Blakeney, 2013). They provide immediate feedback of feelings to their human partner. This intervention is not exclusive to mental health professionals. Many “at-risk” children, adolescents, and adults suffering from poverty, deprived socioeconomic environments, and so forth have benefitted from the learning experiences made possible through EAL and through equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP; Burgon, 2011; Cameron & Robey, 2013).

### **How It Works**

The curriculum is both didactic and experiential. Both take place in the natural environment. It begins with proper introductions, explanation of conduct and safety, and ends with proper closure. Participants agree on physical, mental, and emotional security before beginning. Each horse activity must include ample time for feedback and discussion. Questions should be open-ended. Activities are observational and hands-on: Students watch the instructor work with others (observational), and they work with the horse on a one-on-one basis (hands-on). Work is done on an individual basis and as a group.

The following are activities done with the horses:

1. observe the body language of horses (introduction to nonverbal communication),
2. notice when the horses notice you (awareness of sensory presence, personal space, and boundaries),
3. demonstrate safe and respectful behavior around horses (to feel safe, understand the behavior and psychology of horses),
4. choose a horse to work with in subsequent exercises (notice subjectivity in judging strangers and work on projection),
5. describe the mental, emotional, sensational, and intuitive aspects of the horse,
6. apply grooming brushes and combs to the horse's body (awareness of horse-human sensations),
7. pick up the horse's front leg and feel the moment of release (to get in sync with the horse's process of release, trust, and relaxation),
8. become aware of leadership and fellowship roles and skills,
9. get the horse to overcome and move through an obstacle course where some aspects may be perceived as scary and unsafe (become sensitized to how others express fear and resistance and the need for established trust),
10. move the horse around the ring perimeter (demonstrate personal style of assertiveness and motivation),
11. trot the horse on a lead rope (coordination and cooperation with horse),
12. use tactics to send the horse away from you, and then reverse tactics to draw the horse back into your space (gauge group energy and effect on horse), and
13. halter and saddle the horse with the application of extended appendage of three people being the brain, left hand, and right hand (examine teamwork, roles, communication; Kane, 2007).

### **Goals**

The goals of this experiential learning program are many. First, paying attention to the subtleties of nonverbal communication helps to increase self-awareness, enabling mental health professionals to better interpret the communication in which they are immersed. They also need to develop an awareness of their own nonverbal strategies, which is the first step for improvement in interpersonal communication.

Second, they need to understand the skills of CBGT. This is a cognitive learning experience that begins in class prior to the event. As such, they will make a connection between thoughts, situational triggers, and the elicitation of negative affect. Evidence-gathering and addressing thought distortions are essential to becoming more aware and objective about one's thoughts. The use of brainstorming helps with gathering ideas to use for experimental activities to reach their goals. This helps with the exploration of underlying beliefs of which students are not fully aware.

Third, the practice of CBGT skills is explored experientially through the cost-effective program of Horses for Healers. It is important for students to experience, with an open mind, the

viewpoints of others as well as the feedback from other group members about their strengths and challenges. They will develop with others problem-solving strategies, and they will get feedback on cognitive distortions as well as problem-solving techniques. Students will develop a sense of belonging to the group, which helps to decrease their insecurity as they view others experiencing similar issues. Students will learn to explore communication in a safe environment as well as sharpen their different problem-solving techniques that are learned from others, either directly or through modeling techniques. They will practice the skills that they have acquired in real time. When students support each other in the group process, better outcomes are achieved. Some of the methods used in CBGT that are applicable to this program are challenging thoughts, monitoring moods (including anxiety), brainstorming, and problem-solving.

### **The Student Experience**

The process in place in the Horses for Healers program is experiential and can be seen as more than educational because it includes dealing with the mental health of individuals, families, and groups (Notgrass & Pettinelli, 2015). According to Gardner (2001), “we learn by doing it rather than by explaining it, by being present in the experience rather than only by talking about or thinking about what might be” (p. 30). She refers to this concept as “active learning” (Gardner, 2001, p. 38).

Thus far, I have taken three groups of students to this program. Each group has had different experiences. All three groups have felt the benefits of the unique opportunity for participation. All students were part of the advanced clinical social work practice courses in the master’s level of the social work program at the university where I teach. When I first presented the program to my class in fall 2015, I was tentative in my explanation. I worried that the students would feel that it was an outlandish idea and would think it unfathomable. The reception was positive. I believe the students were eager to participate in an active learning experience. After all, social work is a practice profession.

The administration and dean of the graduate school were very supportive and funded this one-day workshop. Students raved about it and let the faculty and other students know what a worthwhile experience it was for them. Money had gotten tight in fall 2016, so it took some private donations for that group to experience the program. Thereafter, I reached out to resources at the university, and I took the advice to apply for an internal grant. To my amazement, I received an internal grant (Faculty Foundation Research Award), and my third group of advanced clinical practice social work students attended the program in October 2017. The program has evolved into a more clinically defined activity with an emphasis on CBGT skills. Self-knowledge is developed through interaction with classmates and nonverbal feedback from the horses. Therefore, CBGT is a natural outgrowth of this particular experience.

Below are students’ narrative comments from spring 2017:

1. What was your reason to or expectation from offering horses a chance to teach us about nonverbal communication and emotional intelligence?  
“To increase my nonverbal communication skills.”

- “To learn a little more about myself and my nonverbal communication skills.”
2. List one thing that you learned about yourself/others in relationship to bedside manner as a result of interacting with the horses.
- “I need to work on my initial engagement skills and time to ‘warm up.’”
- “I learned to be able to read from body language what people are thinking. I learned how to take a more empathic approach.”

Below are students’ narrative comments from fall 2017:

1. What was your reason for or expectation from offering horses a chance to teach us about nonverbal communication and emotional intelligence?
- “I learned that horses understand feelings.”
- “I felt it was very insightful.”
2. List one thing that you learned about yourself/others in relationship to bedside manner as a result of interacting with the horses.
- “Patience is important.”
- “I learned self-awareness.”
- “I learned perception through body language.”

It was enlightening to watch the group process unfold. Some students who were less academically astute seemed to excel in this practical setting. Others became leaders of the group. Other students who appeared quite self-assured seemed to become intimidated by the horses and had difficulty approaching and interacting with the animals. Others remained on the periphery with little to no interaction but stood back with caution. At one point, I intervened and asked the frightened students to link arms with me as we approached the horses. I felt their anxiety and reassured them through words and nonverbal communication. That included steadily approaching the animal with little trepidation. With their trust in me, they were able to approach the horse, and many eventually became comfortable with the process.

At one point, an older horse pulled on the sleeve of a student’s jacket. She came and reported this to me. I went over to the horse and he did the same to me. At first, it was a little jarring, but his behavior was explained by his running out of patience with the process. He had been working with the students for several hours, and just like clients, he got irritable and signaled nonverbally to stop. It was an actual learning experience in real time.

Students worked in groups and decided on the scenario that they would use as the issue that brought the client to therapy. One student would hold the task in hand (a large ball) as a reminder of the task that needed to be accomplished. The other students would decide upon the interventions to be used and how their goals would be accomplished. One such scenario was centered on an actual issue that the horse was having at the time. She had recently lost her mate and was not readily engaged. The students brainstormed several ways to achieve engagement with her, and in the end were able to touch and console her through nonverbal and verbal communication. As they processed the intervention, they realized how they each contributed to the process and were aware of the achievement they had made as professional social workers. Self-knowledge about their own abilities was noted. They were successful through persistence

and patience.

Of course, the interaction was voluntary, but no matter how involved the students were, they all gave positive feedback on both the qualitative and quantitative survey instruments. Some of the comments on the fall 2017 pre- and post-test were:

1. “One of the greatest experiences of my life,”
2. “It was a good learning experience,”
3. “A very useful therapy technique that will be helpful in field and practice,”
4. “This experience was incredible,” and
5. “Great experience!”

The pre- and post-test survey is seen in Appendix A. The frequencies for learning the difference between EAP and EAL (see Appendix A, question 1) is seen in Table 1: 16% did not learn the difference, while 84% acknowledged learning the difference. The result for the variable of learning about yourself through this experience (see Appendix A, question 9) is seen in Table 2: 24% said they did not learn about themselves, while 76% said they did. The result for the variable of the importance of nonverbal communication (see Appendix A, question 11) is displayed in Table 3: 32% did not think it was as important as the 68% who did.

Table 1

*Difference between Equine Psychotherapy and Equine Learning*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	4	16.0	16.0	16.0
	2.00	21	84.0	84.0	100.0
	Total	25	100.0	100.0	

Table 2

*Learn about Yourself*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	6	24.0	24.0	24.0
	2.00	19	76.0	76.0	100.0
	Total	25	100.0	100.0	

Table 3

*Nonverbal Communication*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	8	32.0	32.0	32.0
	2.00	17	68.0	68.0	100.0
	Total	25	100.0	100.0	

Although some students reported that they did not learn the difference between EAP and EAL, it would be interesting to investigate the actual explanation of what they felt they should have learned. It is important to probe further to investigate what students' needs are for better understanding the difference. Other students said that they did not think self-awareness was essential for mental health professionals. I also think that the development of nonverbal communication, self-awareness, and self-knowledge needs to be explored with those students who don't realize the importance of it in the field of social work.

### **Conclusion**

The Horses for Healers program is an innovative workshop and approach to help students learn nonverbal communication skills as well as self-awareness, relationship with clinical practice, bedside manner, and cognitive behavior group skills. With the evolution of the program to its present level of EAL, students have been experientially exposed to an innovative method of learning knowledge, skills, and affect to better inform their practice.

Although this modality is effective, it needs more rigorous clinical trials and replicability to stand up to evidence-based practice ideals. This process would ensure the reliability of the program. The possibility of using a control group would help in giving the program validity. Surveys that include assessing nonverbal skills and self-awareness for mental health professionals pre- and post-intervention would also add to the validity of Horses for Healers. Gardner (2001) developed a qualitative exploratory survey for self-awareness development that can be used to garner these attributes (see Appendix B).

Learning outside of the classroom experientially often gives students a different perspective and frees them to express themselves in this new environment.

### **References**

- Burgon, L. (2011). Queen of the world: Experiences of 'at risk' young people participating in equine-assisted learning/therapy. *Journal of Social Work Practice, 25*(2), 165-183.
- Cameron, J., & Robey, P. (2013). Healing through healing: The horse power of choice theory. *International Journal of Choice Theory & Reality Therapy, 33*(1), 87-98.
- Cohen, J., & Cohen, B. (1998). Graduating social work students' communication competencies and motivations: Their effects on satisfaction with social work. *International Social Work, 41*(3), 357-370.
- Dyk, P., Cheung, R., Pohl, L., Noriega, C., Lindgreen, J., & Hayden, C. (2013). *Effectiveness of equine guided leadership education to develop emotional intelligence in expert nurses: A pilot research study*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky. Retrieved from <http://www.e3assoc.org/resources/Documents/EGLE%20Research%20Pilot%20Report%20Final%205-20-13.pdf>
- Forrester, D., Kershaw, S., Moss, H., & Hughes, L. (2008). Communication skills in child protection: How do social workers speak to parents? *Child & Family Social Work, 13*(1), 41-51. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2206.2007.00513.x
- Gardner, F. (2001). Social work students and self-awareness: How does it happen? *Reflective Practice, 2*(1), 27-40. doi:10.1080/14623940120035505
- Kane, B. (2007). *The manual of medicine and horsemanship*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse.
- Notgrass, C., & Pettinelli, J. D. (2015). Equine assisted psychotherapy: The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association's model overview of equine-based modalities. *Journal of Experiential Education, 38*(2), 162-174.
- Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International [PATH]. (n.d.). *Path International*. Retrieved from <https://www.pathintl.org/60-resources/efpl/1029-equine-assisted-learning>
- Walsh, K., & Blakeney, B. (2013). Nurse presence enhanced through equus. *Journal of Holistic Nursing, 20*(10), 1-9.
- About the Author:** JoAnn Jarolmen, PhD, LCSW is Assistant Professor, Social Work Program, Marymount Manhattan College, NYC, NY (jjarolmen@aol.com).

(Appendix A and B are on the following pages.)



## **Appendix A**

### **Pre- and Post-Test Survey**

#### **Pre-Post Class Survey for Horses for Healers Experience**

**2017**

What amount of knowledge do you have about the following items:

1. High 2. Moderate 3. Low 4. None

1. Do you know the difference between equine-assisted psychotherapy and equine-assisted learning? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Is EAP (equine-assisted psychotherapy) a way for clients to gain confidence by riding horses? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Does EAP use the same psychological theories that are used in in-office settings? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Do you think that EAP is similar to pet therapies that utilize dogs or other animals? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Who does EAP work better for, children and adolescents or adults? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Is EAP covered by most insurance companies? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Must EAP be conducted by a mental health professional? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Should EAP be restricted to rural areas? \_\_\_\_\_
9. Do you anticipate that you will learn about yourself through this experience? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Do you think EAP is a valid method of doing psychotherapy? \_\_\_\_\_
11. How important is nonverbal communication for dealing with patients? \_\_\_\_\_
12. How important is nonverbal communication for dealing with horses? \_\_\_\_\_
13. Have you ever experienced cognitive behavioral group therapy? \_\_\_\_\_
14. Do you think it is the same as CBT for individuals? \_\_\_\_\_
15. If no, do you know in what ways it differs? \_\_\_\_\_

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B**

### **Gardner's Self-Awareness Survey**

The questions covered the following areas in a semi-structured interview format:

-Did your attitudes, values or beliefs change as a result of doing the social work course? If yes, how did they change?

-Were there any changes in your level of self-awareness, i.e. your ability to reflect on and be aware of your feelings, values and attitudes? If so, what sort of changes?

- What, if anything, were the factors in the course that brought about these changes?
- What in the course encouraged self-awareness?
- What in the course discouraged self-awareness?
- What changes would you suggest to encourage the development of self-awareness in students?
- Should we assess self-awareness and if so, how?

The interviews were taped and transcribed. I then started to draw out common themes using a matrix or chart so that I could identify the relative importance of the themes. (Gardner, 2001, p. 31)