

CHAPTER 11

Security in Connection and Co-Regulation:

Safeguarding the Horse from Traumatic Re-Enactments in EQUUSOMA™

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EQUUSOMA™ is the integration of Somatic Experiencing®, polyvagal theory, attachment theory, and trauma-informed principles into equine-assisted trauma recovery. Grounded primarily in the work of Dr. Peter Levine and Dr. Stephen Porges, along with other trauma experts, therapists, ethologists, neuroscientists, and equine behaviorists, it recognizes the impact of stress and adversity on mammalian nervous systems; i.e. what happens when human and non-human animals are unable to successfully mobilize self-protective responses, and the importance of moving past traumatic re-enactments to experiencing renegotiation and repair within the safety of attuned, co-regulating relationships.

1. The Role of the Horse

From the lens of this particular approach, horses are seen as multifaceted, sentient beings that have a personality, a nervous system, attachment styles, needs, opinions, preferences, and life histories, and who are subjects in their own lives. While they have evolved primarily to flee when faced with danger, they also have the ability to show a range of other self-protective responses, such as fighting or other forms of aggression or posturing. Social engagement survival strategies involve finding supports, like calling to or seeking out band members for comfort and bunching with the herd for protection, as well as fawning or appeasement behaviors. Should none of these prove

effective or be possible, horses and other mammals can resort to a range of shutdown behaviors, including freeze (tonic immobility), fold (collapsed immobility), faint (vasovagal syncope), feigning death, and fragmentation (dissociation). Fidgeting (such as addictions, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, and other stereotypies) can occur during this process, whether as a stress signal accompanying lower and more moderate levels of arousal, or when the impulses to find, fawn, flee or fight are thwarted in some way.

As prey animals, their ability to attend to environmental cues and respond authentically (whether with full agency or in ways that demonstrate the impact of captivity on their reactions) make them particularly well-suited to helping humans heal. As mammals, their survival responses are much like our own. Unlike many of us, horses are unabashedly themselves, offering a form of honest, relational biofeedback not overly filtered through the neocortex, which helps people to recognize what is happening within themselves and others. Building a relationship with a horse can also be a stepping stone for building relationships with others, serving as a transitional “object” (or “subject”, as it were), especially if connecting with humans feels unsafe. By virtue of their size, they offer a potential source of co-regulation and coherence with which human bodies and brains can resonate in synchronization. This in turn may support healthier heart rate variability, vagal tone, and overall wellness (Baldwin, 2015; Baldwin, Rector & Alden, 2018; Gehrke & Walters, 2006). I say “potential”, because it is not always a given that horses will provide co-regulation for humans. Horses can experience co-dysregulation in the presence of a person experiencing emotional distress or physiological activation, and choose to move away from this source of discomfort if allowed to do so. Horses may also become agitated or activated for other reasons, which can trigger fear responses in people. Conversely, humans can support co-regulation for distressed horses through their own self-regulation.

The fact that horses have nervous systems and attachment patterns, in many ways similar to humans, and respond to stress and adversity in similar ways as well, also makes for rich interactions in which humans can come to understand themselves

with greater compassion. Indeed, embracing our animal nature helps us to be more accepting of what makes us human; a form of psychoeducation and self-actualization that cannot be achieved through cognitive processing alone. As stated by Lorenz (1952), *“what we are wont to call human weakness is, in reality, nearly always a pre-human factor and one which we have in common with the higher animals. Believe me, I am not mistaken in assigning human properties to animals; on the contrary, I am showing you what an enormous animal inheritance remains in man, to this day”*.

Although horses can represent powerful metaphors and archetypes, they do so as fully active participants in relationships, and the relationship built with a horse is a relationship in its own right. This is not unlike the way in which humans experience transference and projection toward other people with whom they have complex dynamics. It is for this reason that horses in EQUUSOMA™ equine-assisted trauma recovery are not considered therapists; that title represents a professional role based on a credential bestowed on a human facilitator (should a therapist be part of the human co-facilitation team). Making this distinction does not minimize their active involvement or importance in the process, however, nor does it cheapen their therapeutic value, a view that is espoused by others in the field as well (Jobe, 2018; Parish-Plass, 2013; VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2017). As succinctly put by Nancy Parish-Plass, *“I love to say ‘I don’t want a therapy dog – I want a dog with me in therapy.’ It is the animal’s presence, emotions, behavior, life cycle, that helps to raise therapy content. But it is the therapist who then must do something with this content”* (2018).

Indeed, we learn and grow within the context of our relationships. Our partners, children, family members, friends, supervisors, colleagues, and pets teach us a lot about ourselves; they offer us rich opportunities to work on our communication, behaviors, patterns, feelings, thoughts, impulses, and regulation. Attuned relationships by their very nature are how we experience limbic remodeling. This process, which is comprised of limbic resonance, regulation, and revision of our neural pathways and responses in relationship, helps us develop our felt sense of ourselves and set new templates for connection with others. While the profession of psychotherapy is

founded upon this process, it is not the exclusive domain of therapists (Lewis, Amini & Lannon, 2000). Indeed, few would consider their spouse, partner, or children their therapists, no matter what therapeutic or growth-inducing interaction was present supporting limbic revision. It is no different with horses, even though they bring unique qualities to the table that other humans cannot by virtue of their species.

Also, in EQUUSOMA™ the horse-human interactions will ideally be beneficial to both human and equine participants and, at a minimum, do no harm to either; i.e., the ethical principles of beneficence and non-maleficence. This kind of reciprocity is not typical of human-therapist dynamics, where interventions are more one-sided; that is, the intervention is not about therapists getting their needs met. This is another reason why horses are not perceived as therapists, since attending to the equines' needs is paramount. In keeping with this idea, interventions cannot involve an exploitative or abusive dynamic whereby the human client experiences growth and healing to the animals' detriment, which would constitute an unfortunate re-enactment that is at cross-purposes to the goal of equine-assisted trauma recovery. "Healing with horses" is not healing if it comes at the expense of the horse. Finally, whether facilitated by a single person or by a team, the human professionals have a duty to look out for the needs, nervous system states, attachment patterns, emotions, stress and calming signals of the horses during the activities. That the human facilitators have this responsibility also speaks to the fact that the animals are participants whose voice requires an advocate in the process.

2. Theoretical Approach

The feeling of safety IS the treatment (Porges, 2017).

EQUUSOMA™ is an integrative, phenomenological approach that centers on both the direct embodied experience of being as well as embodied intersubjectivity in relationship. Stanley (2016) describes this as "the interpersonal sharing of specific subjective experience in the moment", which requires facilitators and clients to "*develop*

new ways of knowing by attending to fixed and changing perceptions; seeing, hearing, and feeling the ways the body communicates its truth. To assist another in processing trauma and resuming the interrupted growth and development from trauma, a sense of safety in interconnection is essential. Relationships that value authentic, embodied intersubjective communications are at the core of healthy parenting, couples, families, friendship, and professional support.” Such relationships are at the core of healthy human-animal interactions as well.

With this in mind, EQUUSOMA™ draws from a number of different areas of knowledge. These include but are not limited to the following:

- **Somatics:** A field of study that focuses on the felt sense perception of the body from within.
- **Psychophysiology:** A field of study that focuses on the physiological basis of psychological processes.
- **Attachment:** Refers to the deep emotional and physical bond that connects two mammals across time and space.
- **Interpersonal neurobiology:** Also known as relational neuroscience, interpersonal neurobiology is both a field of study and working model that looks at development and functioning through a lens of the body, mind, and relationships.
- **Affective neuroscience:** A field of study that looks at the neural underpinnings of emotion across mammalian species.
- **Behavioral neuroscience:** The application of biological principles to the study of the physiological, genetic, and developmental underpinnings of behavior in humans and non-human animals.
- **Ethology:** The study of animal behaviour as an evolutionarily adaptive trait.
- **Anthrozoology:** A field of study that focuses on the human and non-human animal interactions.

Founded on animal models that have applicability across mammalian species, Somatic Experiencing®, polyvagal theory, and attachment theory offer concepts, frameworks,

and practices that fall squarely within these paradigms. EQUUSOMA™ is also founded on the principles of trauma-informed care, which are generally summarized as safety, consent, choice, voice, empowerment and agency, trust, collaboration, and compassion, trauma awareness, and abiding by the boundaries of one's scope of practice. Horsemanship approaches that align or are adapted with these principles – i.e., that integrate Somatic Experiencing®, or an awareness of nervous system states (Levine, 1997, 2010; Payne & Crane-Godreau, 2015; Kozłowska et al., 2015; Porges, 2017), stress and calming signals (Draaisma, 2017), and thresholds of tolerance – can be utilized in the context of EQUUSOMA™.

3. Primary Population

Sessions and workshops are primarily geared toward individuals who have experienced trauma, broadly defined, whether or not they meet the criteria for a formal diagnosis. This includes people who have a history of intergenerational trauma, pre/birth/perinatal and other forms of early developmental trauma (including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and neglect), attachment injuries, spiritual and religious trauma, colonial trauma, cultural trauma and discrimination, complex grief and loss, physical injury, sexual assault, betrayal, among other adverse experiences. Vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, or trauma incurred in the context of various professions is also part of certain clients' histories.

Issues faced by this population include emotional and physiological dysregulation, hyper- or hypo-arousal, dissociation and personality fragmentation, body memory, difficulty maintaining present time orientation, anxiety, panic, excessive or absent anger, shame, intrusive thoughts and images, cognitive distortions, chronic pain and other physical ailments, depression, insecure attachment and relational difficulties, overly rigid or porous boundaries, rigidity or collapse, an external (as opposed to internal) locus of control, and a limited window of tolerance for both distress as well as pleasurable experiences and calm, among other challenges.

Dr. Boris Levinson is one of the earliest pioneers in the field of animal-assisted therapy (AAT). Stretching back to the early 1970s, he and many others over the years have been vocal about how animals are not a panacea to every issue and ailment in existence. Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer and Shaver (2011) summarized this perspective: *“not everyone responds similarly to AAT, and in some circumstances, it is not the preferred therapy for a client. Therefore, it is essential to include questions in intake interviews about allergies to certain kinds of animals, phobias, and former experiences with animals. This information should be included in the client’s treatment plan and used to estimate the profitability of using AAT with this particular client.”* The question of fit goes beyond this sort of instrumental information, however. In some cases, AAT (or, in this case, equine-assisted trauma recovery) will not be the right tool for the symptoms, issues, and degree of dysfunction at hand. As has often been said, the right intervention at the wrong time is still the wrong intervention. While the target population for EQUUSOMA™ is by and large one affected by trauma, and equine interaction programs have been used to address trauma for many years, this does not mean that working with horses will be the best or first option for a particular client at a particular time.

Due to the complexity of trauma, sometimes other therapies may be more effective to address certain pieces, or equine-assisted therapies may not address particular issues altogether. By way of comparison, healing a broken arm generally requires A) resetting the bone, wearing a splint or a cast, and doing physical rehabilitation. Trying to instead heal the fractured limb by B) applying a poultice, meditating, and attending psychotherapy without doing any of the steps outlined in A) would not make sense. This is not to say that mindfulness practices might not help with reducing stress associated with the injury, that certain psychotherapeutic approaches might not be helpful to address residual psychological and body-based trauma symptoms, or that poultices would not be useful in reducing pain or soreness. Similarly, equine-assisted approaches can either be A) the most effective option, B) a supportive adjunct to other approaches, or even C) entirely irrelevant or contra-indicated, depending on the situation.

A crucial part of the work is recognizing when working with the horses is indicated (or contra-indicated), in order to not set up unrealistic expectations for the clients or place unreasonable demands on the horses (that could result in harm to both). This extends into how equine interaction programs are promoted and how the horses' involvement is interpreted or described. Making bold, sweeping statements that cannot necessarily be proven, such as "horses are expert healers; they can detect nervous system imbalances, will choose to offer people healing through co-regulation, and will release lower vibrations for us, so that our bodies can return to a state of coherence" is problematic on many levels, even if some of the terminology sounds scientific and appealing. Unfortunately, scientific terms and concepts can be used in a pseudoscientific way. That said, this does not mean that something is untrue just because it has not yet been scientifically proven; there are many things that science has not (yet) been able to verify or that are difficult to verify via the scientific method. There is certainly a place in the world for wonder about the many mysteries of life. While elements of the problematic statement above may at times be part of the process of working with horses, it does not mean that it will always occur like that or that the inferences about what is taking place are accurate. More tentative language that does not objectify or anthropomorphize the animals is prudent, since misinterpretations or pseudoscientific claims can set both client and horse up for disappointment or difficulty, as will be seen later in one of the case scenarios.

The complexity of trauma also requires addressing certain elements first before being able to progress to other things – a staged approach that has been promoted as best practice by trauma experts worldwide (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2005; Herman, 1992; ISSD, 2011; Levine, 2010; Perry, 2006; Shapiro & Maxfield, 2002, among others); other therapies may need to occur before considering bringing clients out to the horses as a next step. Finally, in keeping with the focus of this chapter, the horses' welfare may be at risk when bringing certain clients out before other pieces have had a chance to be addressed first through other means. Moreover, some horses are not well-suited for the work (or the work is not the right fit for them), or would need to be included in the process differently in accordance with their needs and capacity.

In short, horses are not a cure-all, and it is in both the clients' and the horses' best interest to be mindful of this fact when thoughtfully considering adding equine-assisted interventions to a treatment plan.

4. Renegotiation and Repair

“Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (Herman, 1992).

Interactions with horses can potentially offer an opportunity for corrective emotional, relational, and somatic experiences to take place, as much for the human as for the equine participants. According to Levine (2015), *“renegotiation is not about simply reliving a traumatic experience. It is, rather, the gradual and titrated revisiting of various sensory-motor elements comprising a particular trauma. Renegotiation occurs primarily by accessing procedural memories associated with the two dysregulated states of the autonomic nervous system (hyper/hypo-arousal) and then restoring and completing the associated active responses. As this progresses, the client moves toward an equilibrium, a relaxed alertness, and a here-and-now orientation.”* In other words, survival physiology shifts into sustainable physiology, which is more conducive to health, relationships, and well-being.

Renegotiation is not simply the idea of the humans and the horses having the capacity to work through fear thresholds and complete incomplete self-protective responses, however. Similar to limbic revision, there are different segments to an overall process. Relational renegotiation occurs first, through the process of coming to experience relationships differently; i.e., as attuned, responsive, and safe. Through presence and resonance, limbic remodeling and the repair of relational ruptures can take place for the client and ideally the horse as well. Through the safe haven of connection, insecure attachment patterns can shift to an earned secure dynamic. This, in turn, sets the conditions for psychophysiological renegotiation to take place; that is, experiencing a different outcome to a familiar situation or dilemma involving the body. For instance,

this might involve the biological completion of thwarted survival energy, releasing constriction, tolerating distress and goodness, and experiencing agency or triumph (Levine, 2010). This then leads to selfhood renegotiation, or experiencing oneself differently in a familiar situation. This can include increasing one's capacity or window of tolerance, experiencing a greater ability to mobilize boundaries, accessing a more integrated sense of self in the present moment, and restoring an embodied felt sense of "I can!"

Safeguarding the needs of the horses in EQUUSOMA™ involves a great deal of internal clarity and attunement on the part of the human facilitator(s), as well as skillfulness in tracking nervous system states, stress and calming signals, personality fragmentation, attachment dynamics, and re-enactments. Facilitators must exercise a multi-level awareness in monitoring:

- Their own activation, dysregulation, counter-transference, attachment patterns, window of tolerance, and unfinished business
- Those of their co-facilitator (if working as a team)
- Those of the client(s)
- Those of the horse(s)
- The dynamics playing out between any of the above (not just between client and horse, but also between co-facilitators, client and either co-facilitator, and horse and either co-facilitator)
- The overall collective "nervous system" of the group

This task becomes all the more complex the greater the number of clients and equines that are taking part. The more nervous systems are involved, the more present, focused, and attuned the facilitators must be to both what is explicit and what is implicit, to the obvious and to the undercurrents, in order to hold space in an effective way so that no "body" is dropped in the process. Emotional, relational, and somatic safety in equine-assisted trauma recovery, therefore, involves preventing or appropriately intervening in situations of co-dysregulation, overwhelm, projection, coercion,

exploitation, mis-attunement, and submission, among others. Such prevention or early intervention sets the conditions for something different (and potentially more productive) to happen for both client and horse.

5. Case Examples

Below are four hypothetical examples of equine-assisted interactions followed by a description of how those particular activities would unfold in EQUUSOMA™, considering the well-being and welfare of the animals involved.

Scenario 1

Re-enactment: A woman is about to make contact with a horse for the first time during an equine interaction program. The horse in question is standing on a lead rope held by a horse handler, while another facilitator interacts with the client. The facilitator invites the client to reach out and touch the horse. The woman does so, attempting to stroke the horse on the face. The horse's neck stiffens and it looks away at that moment, but the woman keeps reaching to try to pet the horse. The facilitator checks in with the client, who then proceeds to touch the horse on the neck and withers as the horse shifts its weight away from the client and continues to look away. The horse then starts to try to walk forward, away from the client, and the horse handler physically blocks the horse from doing so, maneuvering it back a few steps closer to the client.

Analysis: Arrivals and departures in relationship are important to attend to carefully, as rushing forward can result in valuable information being missed, such as cues that either horse or human are simply overriding discomfort in order to do what is expected. One of the goals of EQUUSOMA™ is to support embodiment and relational resonance, safety in connection, and opportunities for familiar situations to unfold differently, such as being able to mobilize a “no” or other healthy self-protective response that might have been thwarted in the past. If either horse or human have had to dismiss their own needs or impulses to please or appease another, doing so in the context of a therapeutic intervention simply reinforces a pattern of abuse.

Creating contact with a horse begins well before touching, and healthy touch and relationships involve reciprocity and consent. Touching another when the other is clearly showing signs of aversion and stress, or being made to tolerate an experience so the human client gets to do something novel, perpetuates the message that it is OK to use another for one's own benefit. Many horses are also uncomfortable with touch, and touch is used differently in horse culture than it is with humans, which does not appear to have been acknowledged in this vignette. What therapeutic value is this kind of interaction for the client and for the horse? What message does this reinforce?

Renegotiation and Repair: In EQUUSOMA™, initial contact with a horse would ideally take place at liberty, starting at a distance, to introduce the client to the dual awareness skills of interoception (noticing one's inner sensations and impulses) and exteroception (noticing others and surroundings). Pausing and micro-tracking what is happening in oneself and in the horse begins before approaching, since anticipatory activation is the first boundary to attend to that is often missed. Clients are often surprised at what they become aware of when they are invited to notice their internal response to the mere idea of approaching a horse; the mind might be excited and want to push forward (especially if the person is desperate to do whatever might support healing, or is driven to comply with what they think is expected), but the body might be communicating anxiety or dread. The client might also be surprised at the subtle things they might miss in the horse before an interaction occurs as well. Conversely, if the horse is used to mis-attunement from humans who disregard its stress or calming signals, experiencing a human waiting before approaching might be a sign that something could be different this time and generate curious engagement as opposed to avoidance or resignation.

In keeping with the principle of titration, clients would be invited to track until their nervous system felt settled or ready to take a step forward, approaching so long as the horse showed interest (such as an ear towards them, grazing in their direction, stepping in their direction, or watching), and pausing when the horse showed signs of disinterest, bracing, or aversion (or if the client noticed another wave of activation

from within). Should a client come into proximity with a willing horse, the same tracking would be encouraged in regard to physical contact. The client would observe what happens in the horse in response to a hand approaching different areas, course correcting responsively to the animal's cues, only touching if the horse communicates consent/assent through its body language. This is similar in principle to Barbara Rector's Con Su Permiso activity ("With Your Permission"). Breaking the activity down in this way allows both horse and human an opportunity to renegotiate the dance of connection, offering a corrective relational and somatic experience of attunement, choice, and repair ("being seen, feeling felt, and getting gotten"), as well as the possibility of agency in mobilizing self-protective responses.

A "no" from a horse is also not necessarily a hard no, of course; at times, it may be that the horse would like to be approached, touched, or otherwise handled, just not in the way that someone is attempting to do so at that moment. Adjusting how one enters into relationship and physical contact involves anything from shifting one's speed, intensity, body posture, proximity, the amount of pressure and presence in one's touch, where one touches, approaching and retreating to build confidence, and so on. Instead of forcing a horse to endure contact (remember that wild and feral horses only allow touch from other horses with whom they have a bond of affiliation, and that each horse has individual preferences around touch; Rees, 2018), it is encouraged to pause and address any internal dysregulation first. Any underlying activation can be sensed at a distance as well as through physical contact, which can trigger a neuroception of danger and unsafety and an impulse to move away. What conditions, both internal and external, would be conducive to creating a safe haven of connection and trust so that both horse and client feel a sense of curiosity and willingness to engage with one another?

Scenario 2

Re-enactment: Participants in a group workshop are informed that they will each be paired with a horse in a stall, and spend some quiet reflective time in the horse's presence, followed by journaling and a group debrief about their experience. After

each participant is assigned a stall, they enter. They are not informed that the stall doors will be latched after they entered, which occurs shortly thereafter, with the facilitators moving a distance away. In response to hearing the doors latch, a number of participants experience anxiety and a sense of feeling trapped. One participant has a panic attack, and at least one horse appears to go into a shutdown state given the lack of ability to move away. Some of the horses are known to have anxiety or to be nervous around humans, but the facilitators pair those horses with participants they know have more horse experience. These participants experience discomfort just the same, in spite of the facilitators' assumption that they would be OK.

Analysis: This scenario is tricky on a number of levels, for both the participants and the horses involved. While the facilitators know their horses, not disclosing important details about the activity removes the ability of the participants to give their informed consent about taking part. Having unfamiliar humans enter stalls also prevents the horses from having choice about the interaction. Being confined removes the ability of both horse and human to create the amount of distance they would want or need in order to feel comfortable. The sense of feeling trapped and unable to enact a flight response can increase nervous system activation in the horse, human, or both. This creates the potential for (at the very worst) flooding, helplessness and panic, or (at the very least) discomfort and a sense of having to shut down or override to muscle through the activity. Survival energy and warning signs from the body, reptilian brain, and limbic system will invariably hijack good intentions from the neocortex. Whatever therapeutic value might be obtained from the exercise risks being overshadowed by the lack of choice and thwarted ability to escape. This is not to say that many of the horses and humans will not have a positive or neutral experience, only that the risks involved make the setup of the activity questionable.

Furthermore, while the human participants certainly could call for assistance, many trauma survivors have learned not to challenge authority, to express their needs, or to do anything to rock the boat, to prevent harm, ridicule, criticism, rejection, or disappointment. Many horses have also learned to submit in the face of similar

conditions. Finally, being left alone to face intense activation without support or protection is a common theme for traumatized people and horses. Not having an attuned facilitator attending to the nuances of each horse-human pairing creates a repetition of a familiar scenario of distress not being seen or validated by a human in a position of authority. Developmentally, agency in acting on one's needs requires first that those needs be acknowledged, recognized, and responded to by another so that they are internalized as valid.

Renegotiation and Repair: If an activity requires horses to be in stalls, ideally participants will have a chance to build a relationship with the assigned horses at liberty before entering into a smaller space with one another, after trust, proximity, and permission have been negotiated. If this is not possible, or if this is the first interaction, participants would be encouraged to track the horse's body language and their own internal sensations and activation in response to the idea of entering the stall. Participants would be allowed the choice not to enter and to stay on the outside, should they or the horse show signs of discomfort or "no" to being in close quarters, entering only if it is a "yes" for both (proceeding in the same way as if the interaction were occurring at liberty at a greater distance). Titrating in this way breaks down the experience into important components of entering into relationship to support their renegotiation, as opposed to reliving familiar dynamics. Finally, stall doors would not be latched; an ideal situation would involve stall doors closed or left with a small gap (or the entrance blocked only by a door chain), with a facilitator close by monitoring and tracking the client and horse's nervous system states to ensure the experience does not exceed either's thresholds, checking in as necessary.

Scenario 3

Re-enactment: An equine professional enters a paddock with the members of a couple who are attending a joint session, in order to select a horse to take part in the day's planned activity. The equine professional discusses with the clients the importance of allowing the horse the ability to voice whether or not it wants to take part. The horse in question selected by the equine professional shows disinterest in engaging with

either the members of the couple or the equine professional. In spite of the horse not wanting to engage, the equine professional encourages the couple to continue trying to connect with the animal at liberty, stating that, because the activity is taking place off line, the horse clearly has choice in the matter. Eventually, the animal relents, stops moving away, and allows the couple to approach, halter it, and lead it out of the paddock to the arena.

In debriefing the interaction later with a therapist, the person shares that she did not feel comfortable continuing to pressure the animal. She is reminded of a time she was pressured by someone to engage, who disregarded her “no” and kept wearing her down to the point where it was easier simply to comply than to keep trying to set a boundary. It felt like covert predation, being pursued by a wolf in sheep’s clothing who would not take her no for an answer. She reports that she felt powerless to voice her experience in the moment to the equine professional, who continued to encourage them to do what felt like the same thing that someone had done to her.

Analysis: The same principles that were outlined in the earlier examples also apply here. The importance of recognizing nervous system states and activation taking place for the humans and the animal in this interaction would be crucial to preventing this scenario from feeling like an inadvertent repeat of power and control dynamics. “Going along with” cannot and should not be equated with “consent”. That said, trauma can involve the kindling of survival responses in the face of anything that feels remotely similar to past traumatic experiences, even if said experiences are fundamentally different in some way. Faulty neuroception of safety, danger and life threat is common as a result (Kain & Terrell, 2018; Porges, 2017), resulting in false positives (hyper-vigilance when the conditions are safe) or false negatives (hypo-vigilance when the conditions are unsafe). In other words, something that is not harmful (a stick) is perceived as a snake, and something that is harmful (a snake) is perceived as a stick. This means that there is a possibility that the horse was not experiencing coercion and submitting, but choosing to cooperate with the request from a place of calm connection, in which case helping the client to carefully uncouple and differentiate the two experiences will be important.

Renegotiation and Repair: Facilitators should be prepared to shift gears and to adjust the goals for sessions based on what comes up for the clients and horses in the moment. Tossing the original plan and rolling with what is playing out is the hallmark of facilitating experiential learning and effective therapeutic interventions. Being attached to the original exercise, especially if it requires the participation of a particular horse, prevents a rich learning opportunity for the humans to connect with their felt sense experience, to voice what they were noticing in themselves and the horse, and to adjust accordingly from a place of congruence. By not proceeding in this way, a potential re-enactment of coercion occurred that was triggering for one of the clients and may have eroded the horse's trust in humans as able to read accurately and to respond to its needs. Learned helplessness can ensue for clients and animals who relive such mis-attuned dynamics on a repeated basis.

This is not to say that doing things that we do not like is not part of life sometimes. Both humans and horses have to tolerate discomfort occasionally, even in situations that are in their best interest (like medical procedures and certain work duties). We do ourselves and our animals a disservice by not helping them grow their window of tolerance for what is uncomfortable. Backing off and not sticking to the plan can at times reinforce fear or the wrong behaviour, resulting in a narrower window of tolerance, as well as increased avoidance and resistance as phobic reactions (as can doing too much and getting overwhelmed, a reminder that both avoiding and flooding are equally problematic). However, this would be a different intention altogether from the original activity, and should be disclosed as such up front so the goal is clear. The difference between calm and dissociation can be subtle, as can the difference between complying and consent. Inviting curiosity about the story the bodies are telling in response to an activity (as opposed to doing an activity instrumentally for its own sake) helps bring awareness to the current beneath the surface that is deserving of attention. For clients to be invited to recognize what is coming up for them and for a horse offers permission to act in ways that feel more congruent to both, allowing each to experience safety in connection.

As with the first example, sometimes it is not so much that the horse is voicing a hard “no”, and more that the humans need to re-evaluate what is happening for them that may be contributing to the horse moving away, avoiding, or resisting. Shifting gears, pausing to regulate, tracking internal activation until settled, and making other adjustments that support a sense of safety and co-regulation may result in a different outcome. Persistence is not inherently coercion, especially if something is different each time (or, in other words, if the persistence does not feel predatory or abusive). Ultimately, however, if a horse really truly does not want to participate, in EQUUSOMA™ this is respected and considered “grist for the mill”. It may be that this is speaking to a greater pattern for a client or couple (especially if it happens over and over again with other horses and people as well), or that it may take more time for a particular client to learn to regulate and attune to build connection and willingness with a given horse.

Scenario 4

Re-enactment: A client reaches out to an equine-assisted therapy/learning program for help working through grief and traumatic loss. The client read a number of articles touting the effectiveness of interacting with horses, and was drawn to the idea that horses offer co-regulation and unconditional, non-judgmental support. Given her history of being alone in facing overwhelming pain and big feelings, she eagerly makes her way to the farm for a first session, only to find that the horses move away from her when she’s feeling at her most vulnerable and emotional. The facilitator fetches a lead rope and has one of the horses stand still so the client can experience some horse time while she’s feeling upset.

Having heard such wonderful stories of horses healing people’s emotional pain, horses allegedly choosing to approach, stand with, or lie down near people because they can apparently sense the humans’ needs, this client feels disillusioned and reinforced in her shame, rejection, worthlessness, and abandonment when the horses don’t offer to her what they apparently offer to others. The fact that the facilitator has to make the horse stay and be with her only exacerbates her pain. This plunges her into the

depths of her trauma, a re-enactment of her childhood belief that clearly she isn't good enough and her needs are not important, because if she was and they were, others would willingly love and support her of their own volition. She is devastated that no one, not even the horses, want anything to do with her. She leaves and does not return or respond to the facilitator's attempts at contacting her.

Analysis: Some will say that the horse walking away would be grist for the mill to work through therapeutically. I agree that this might be true in some cases, provided it does not take a client well out of their window of tolerance, plunging them into the deepest depths of their trauma. Facing such intense reliving of a traumatic dynamic without the proper titration, safety and resources in place can be destabilizing and lead to more harm than good. That kind of rejection is a lot of activation to try to renegotiate and integrate in a first session before the proper foundation is in place. It may be too much for the nervous system to process, especially if there is early trauma around being abandoned in one's distress in infancy or as a toddler. If the facilitator does not understand what is playing out and how to intervene effectively, there is even more risk of the client floundering without support – repeatedly reliving the triggering dynamic and posing even more risk of flooding, regression, and shut down. If the client has a history of self-harm, addictions, suicidality, or acting out behaviors, these have the potential of being utilized in an attempt to cope.

The welfare of the horse in this situation is also in question. By being made to tolerate the client's activation without the possibility of creating the kind of distance it would need to feel comfortable, the horse may resort to dissociation to tune out and get through the experience. This may reinforce the message that its needs are not important and that it can expect that humans will continually mis-attune (and are therefore not trustworthy). Over time, the horse may become dull or unresponsive – which is counter-productive if the goal is developing a relationship based on mutual respect and presence in connection. Now, occasionally tuning out to tolerate something is not necessarily damaging; we all do this from time to time in our daily lives. The frequency of this occurring (especially in combination with terror or distress and the inability to

escape) is what sets the conditions for trauma to be repeated (Levine, 2010). And, of course, making the animal do something when it is evident it does not want to do so can have a disastrous effect on the client as well. Beyond feeling like rubbing salt in an already gaping wound (adding insult to injury), it demonstrates that the facilitator is willing to compromise the horse's welfare, which erodes the client's trust that the facilitator can protect others from harm in the therapeutic process.

Renegotiation and Repair: This situation could have been prevented by setting a more realistic expectation about what can unfold in sessions prior to the client coming. Mindfully reviewing one's marketing materials, website descriptions, promotional videos, intake forms, and other resources is recommended to identify and edit potentially misleading clichés, catchy or gimmicky expressions, or embellished descriptions of services that promise or claim to produce particular outcomes.

Determining a client's goals for the session and what draws them to the program during the intake process can bring idealistic or distorted beliefs about what horses can provide to light to be addressed ahead of time. My preference is always to meet with clients in a neutral place to do an intake and thorough assessment beforehand, in order to be mindful of presenting issues when planning, framing, and facilitating interactions with the horses. Although watching a client interact with the horses can in and of itself be "diagnostic" and useful as part of the process, not having enough information up front before beginning can set up potentially retraumatizing situations that could have been avoided. At the very least, if enough crucial background information is not possible to obtain ahead of time, then proceeding with greater caution is advised. This might include offering some psychoeducation about horses and a realistic view of the different things that can unfold, to help set the parameters of experience (we need a good brake system in place before applying the gas). Recognizing the client's activation and degree of emotional charge, slowing down the process to prevent or reduce flooding, inviting the client to observe the herd and nature at a distance to start (such as further away in a pasture, or over a fence), and lending attuned support to what is coming up for the client in that moment and tracking activation until the

person is more settled, are also possibilities. Gently drawing attention to the urgency to rush forward to be with horses while in heightened distress can help bring the client's internal adult witness online to recognize a familiar pattern playing out, which could help the client be curious about working through it in a way that wouldn't necessarily result in a repeat of past rejection or abandonment. And, of course, restraining an unwilling, activated, submissive, or dissociated horse to keep it near the client while the client experiences strong emotions is of benefit to no one.

Holding a wide view of the different moving parts (and potential for harmful re-enactments) in this way helps to tighten the "container" of the experience and increase safety and security for all involved. While offering choice is important in trauma recovery, choices that lead to a repeat of past harmful dynamics can have a negative impact on the nervous system, especially if these lead to a dysregulating repeat of hyper-arousal (flooding) and hypo-arousal (shutdown) for either human or horse. The facilitator's ability to know when to step in with structure and direction, and when to step back and go with the flow is crucial.

6. One Health

In 2007, the American Veterinary Medical Association founded the One Health Initiative Task Force. This group recognized that *"the convergence of people, animals, and our environment has created a new dynamic in which the health of each group is inextricably interconnected"* (King et al., 2008). The focus of the One Health Initiative primarily looked at how human and animal physical health are linked, within the realms of zoonotic diseases, public health, food animal production, and biomedical research. However, the concept of One Health can also be extended to the horse-human relationship, whether it be between a horse and their owner or rider; a horse, its human and a coach or trainer; an equine health professional and a horse; and in the context of equine-assisted interventions .

As shown in these case examples, horse-human activities that prioritize the wellness of one over the other are ultimately detrimental to both; if the activities do not consider the health and well-being of two- and four-legged participants alike, the overall therapeutic benefit of said activities becomes compromised. The idea of One Health aligns with the concepts espoused by EQUUSOMA™, given its foundation on mammalian models of nervous system responses and attachment, and on its emphasis of applying principles of trauma-informed care to all beings involved as much as reasonably possible. In equine-assisted trauma recovery, healing does not have to be an “either or” experience. Ideally, it will be a win-win.

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

African proverb

About the Author

Sarah Schlote, MA, RP, CCC, SEP is a Registered Psychotherapist, Canadian Certified Counsellor and Somatic Experiencing Practitioner in Guelph, Ontario, Canada. An experienced trauma therapist, speaker and published author, she has also undertaken training in EMDR (for humans and other animals), Brainspotting, Touch Skills Training for Trauma Therapists, Somatic Resilience and Regulation Training for Early Developmental Trauma (relational rupture and repair), Structural Dissociation Theory (parts work), Equine-Facilitated Wellness, Trauma-Focused Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy, and Body Memory Recall, among other approaches. With horses, her work focuses on integrating mammalian psychophysiology, interspecies comparative neuroscience, ethology, learning theory, attachment theory, polyvagal theory, and equitation science. An instructor in the Trauma Certificate Program at Wilfrid Laurier University, she offers podcasts, webinars, workshops and trainings internationally on trauma-informed care, trauma treatment, EQUUSOMA™ horse-human trauma recovery, and trauma-informed horsemanship. For more information: www.sarahschlote.com and www.equusoma.com

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