



Horse Time from Home: Pandemic Ideas for Clients and Facilitators

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Veronica Lac of the [HERD Institute](#) and I have been having a conversation about ways to adapt our horse-related service offerings (in the context of equine-facilitated psychotherapy/learning/etc.) in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many of us who offer in-office therapy/coaching have shifted to providing sessions over video call (Telehealth) for those clients who wish to continue to receive support during this challenging time. However, what to do about horse-related sessions at the farm?

In my case, we will be postponing farm sessions for now until we are able to resume in person. There is simply no equivalent replacement for live interaction with the horses. Should clients be interested in some of these options below, however, we will evaluate on a case-by-case basis to see what is appropriate and relevant to their needs and goals.

However, we wanted to share a few of the creative options that we have come up with to help maintain a sense of social connection with the herd in spite of the physical isolation, for clients who are interested in and for whom it would be appropriate to be going this route.

Not all clients are amenable to Telehealth sessions, of course, horse-related or not. In some cases, clients may opt to wait until they are able to return for in-person appointments. As always, allowing choice is crucial. What is in the best interest of the client, their needs, stability, comfort, preferences, goals, and capacity?

ETHICS AND SCOPE OF PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS:

It goes without saying: abide by your scope of practice as you explore the options below. Know your limit and play within it. Not all suggestions below will be appropriate for all clients or facilitators, especially in a virtual format by video where there is less ability to intervene in crisis situations.

If you are not familiar with working within a particular model or approach (e.g., mindfulness, Somatic Experiencing® or other body-oriented techniques, parts work, etc.), then please proceed with caution and obtain supervision or consultation before attempting anything new with clients. If you are going to head down a particular path, you need to know what to do should issues arise along the way; if not, then do not head down that path 😊

The same goes for offering virtual support services by phone or video. eCounselling or Telehealth is also its own scope of practice. Offering group workshops by video format also poses its own ethical and practice challenges. Here is a list of guidelines to support you if you are new to providing services remotely. While the focus of these resources is on counselling, psychotherapy, and psychology, the principles are relevant to anyone offering services remotely during this time:

- [Guidelines for Use of Technology in Counselling and Psychotherapy – CCPA](#)
- [Draft Ethical Guidelines – Providing Psychological Services via Electronic Media –](#)
- [Electronic Practice Guidelines – CRPO](#)
- [Guidelines for the Practice of Telepsychology – APA](#)
- [Cybercounselling Training Webinars](#)
- [Courses on Tele-Mental Health and Digital Ethics – The Zur Institute](#)

Finally, remember that a trauma-informed perspective is important. The tri-phasic model of trauma recovery (Herman, 1992) is worth considering here, even if you are not providing therapy. Depending on your client's stability, needs, goals, consider which of the activity options described below would be the best fit within the "phase" of work you happen to be in with any given person. The activities below can support containment and regulation, or they can open up new avenues of deeper exploration. Be intentional with your choices.

- Safety and Stabilization
- Trauma / Processing Work
- Post-Traumatic Growth

RESOURCING

Transitional Object / Sensory

- Record a video or audio track of the horses (or of the client's favourite horse) grazing / breathing to send them. Could also do this with the soundscape of the farm itself (not just horse-specific).
- Take an updated photo of the herd or the client's favourite horse to send them. If the client has a favourite spot on the property, such as where sessions are held, or a place they go to practice mindfulness (like a sit spot), etc., could photograph that as well (with or without a horse in the photo).
- Rub a bandana or another piece of fabric on their favourite horse or any horse (with the horse's willingness/consent, of course!) to capture their scent, and mail it to them.
 - Alternately, I know the smell of manure can be quite soothing/grounding for a number of people, but I don't know a good way to capture that scent without contaminating the bandana. Would there be a market for scratch n sniff? 🤔
- Same could be done with tail hair clippings (could make a braid and bead it before sending).
- Do a virtual session with your client where you are both on the phone and taking walks out in nature in two different locations at the same time. This won't provide the horse component, but would encourage both of you to get outdoors in nature to reconnect with the environment and its rhythms in spite of the physical distancing.

Visualization / Art / Writing

- Imagining/recalling a moment from their time with the horses (or their favourite horse) that brings them a sense of peace/calm, joy, triumph, aliveness, etc. Could do the same by pulling up a photo you took of the client with a particular horse if visualization is challenging.
- Drawing, painting or creating a collage that represents either a particular moment with the horse(s), how they feel when they are at the farm, or depicting a specific memory with the horses that is a resource for them.
- Writing a letter to a particular horse (to say hello, to share about something challenging, to share a success, etc.). If client is a child, could write a supportive therapeutic letter in return on the horse's behalf and mail it to them (with a tail clipping or scent bandana).

VIRTUAL CONTACT

- Recording herd interactions and sending the video(s) to the client to observe and debrief together.
- Live-streaming individual sessions with you at the farm with the herd or a particular horse and the client at home.
 - E.g., Mindfulness practice, with the client breathing as the horse is breathing on the screen. This can be done with pre-recorded video as well.
 - One creative option would be to sign up for the [21 Days to Connection: The Chair Challenge](#) put out by Carolyn Resnick and use the activities in live-streamed sessions with clients while you are with the horses (or, to buddy up with a friend who does have horses to do this together through live-stream).
- If you've video recorded moments of the client and the horse(s) during sessions previously, reviewing those in the context of a virtual session could provide opportunity either for recall of a positive resource or to revisit a moment that was difficult and continue to process it together.
- Organize a virtual group art workshop on Zoom (or another platform that allows for video calls with multiple participants). Send the participants a list of the art supplies they'll need ahead of time. As facilitator, record a live-stream of the horses and invite the participants to explore what comes up for them in relation to the horses in real time, and to convey their experience through the art materials.
 - E.g., This could be done in relation to a particular theme (like isolation, grief/loss, fear, etc.), with the horses and art as sensory resources in the midst of the activation. Or the focus of the workshop could also be on connecting to pleasure / community. Or both!
- Organize a virtual group mindfulness workshop on Zoom with you live-streaming time with the horses.

SPECIFIC ACTIVITY EXAMPLES

- **Neuroception Activity – Self:** Invite the client to visualize the route they take to get to the farm: What they pass on the way there, the driveway, where they park, and the different indoor and outdoor areas of the property, etc. Then have them visualize the experience in reverse as they leave. What is their nervous system's experience of this process? What happens in their body along the way? This activity can help clients with recognizing signs of safety, danger, and life threat in their body; developing greater ability to distinguish between interoception (internal awareness) and exteroception (external awareness); offer opportunities to identify and track through activation associated with different places or with arriving/departing (as done in Somatic Experiencing, attachment-oriented therapies, etc.); identifying changes to make to the physical environment to make it "feel" safer; practicing regulation skills at different points in that process, etc. **Adapted from Deb Dana's "The Path to Therapy" activity from [The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy](#).*
- **Neuroception Activity – Other:** Invite the client to do the same thing as above, only imagining it from the horses' perspective. What do they notice? The potential benefits are the same as above, but also allow for the development of attunement, empathy, and intersubjectivity (awareness of self and other in relationships).
- **Parts Work Activity – The Inner Herd:** If introducing or working with a client's internal "parts" system (e.g., inner child work, ego state therapy, structural dissociation theory, Internal Family Systems, etc.), could use video footage or live-streaming of the herd and its dynamics as a way to introduce the idea of an inner parts system ("inner herd"). The herd observation can help a client identify what parts they are aware of inside themselves (i.e., protector parts, emotional parts /

exiles representing painful feelings or unmet needs, etc.) and their roles / functions / interrelationships (similar to a horse herd). **I elaborate on this idea, an equine adaptation of the Meeting Place strategy used in many parts work models, in chapter 2 of [Equine-Assisted Mental Health for Healing Trauma](#)*

- **Parts Work Activity – Resourcing a Part:** If there's a part within the client's inner system that is having a particularly difficult time, is in need of reassurance, support, protection, etc., invite the client to check in with that part about what it would need to feel calmer, safer, reassured, etc. While bringing in the adult Self or core Self (whichever language you prefer) as a resource is the ultimate goal, sometimes certain parts may have difficulty connecting with the Self. Or there may be times where the Self will be busy interacting with another part, and a different part would benefit from a resource and calm place to go while the Self, the therapist, and the other part are doing some work. Imagining one of the horses as a resource for this part or a group of parts (picturing a safe/calm place with that part and its favourite horse in it, or surrounded by the herd for protection, and so on), or doing an art exercise depicting the horse/herd as a resource for a specific part can be very helpful in situations like these. Alternately, you could do a before and after visualization or art activity: imagining/drawing the parts system in relation to a current concern, and then imagining it after adding in the horse/herd as a resource. What is different as a result?
- **Mobilizing a Boundary Activity:** When inviting a client to connect with the impulse in their body around setting a boundary with a particular person (as done in Somatic Experiencing), invite them to imagine how they used their body and intensity with the horses or a particular horse to communicate a need for physical space (connecting with a resource in the face of doing something scary with a human). What happens inside as they remember that moment?
 - Provided, of course, that they were successful in doing so with the horse(s) and that this instilled as sense of confidence in being able to create distance while also maintaining connection, lest it bring up an experience of collapse / defeat. In which case, scale back and titrate into what wants to happen in their body as they imagine a horse approaching them (instead of the person they are needing to set a boundary with) and then track the sensations, emotions, thoughts, movement impulses, etc. associated with the anticipation of that imagined scenario with a horse. This may help grow the client's window of tolerance in a titrated way (a number of steps removed from the real thing, with either a horse or with a human). What happens if they imagine doing it successfully (i.e., create distance while maintaining connection, if that's what they're aiming for)? What changes inside?
 - Alternately, could they imagine mobilizing the boundary with that individual while visualizing their favourite horse with them as a resource?

DEEPENING THESE EXPERIENCES

How each of these ideas looks in practice will depend on your current approaches, scope of practice, and client goals. The following are a few examples of exploratory questions about virtual horse time from different perspectives:

BODY ORIENTED QUESTIONS

- What do you notice in your body as you recall that moment with the horse / smell the bandana / touch the tail hair / hear them chewing, etc.?
- Does that sensation have a shape? A colour? A temperature? A texture? (explore [sensation language](#))
- Does it move or shift in some way as you pay attention to it?
- What else do you notice inside as you pay attention?

- Are there any emotions? Thoughts? Beliefs? Words? Images? Sensory details? Movements that your body wants to make?
- If you place a hand on X part of your body, and imagine your other hand stroking the horse (you could even reach your hand out as if you were stroking it), what happens inside as you shift your attention between both hands?

RELATIONAL QUESTIONS

To avoid the presence of the horses being limited to that of a projective device or metaphor, encourage exploration of the inter-relationship of the client and horse/herd, even if in virtual format. Explore the back-and-forth (dyadic “pinging”) between them when the session is live-streamed. While it is unclear to what degree horses can interact in meaningful ways to a live-stream of a human via video, some studies have shown that horses can [recognize and respond to photographs of peoples’ faces showing particular emotions](#), and then [respond accordingly when they see that individual in person at a later time](#). Even if the client is observing videos of horses recorded at an earlier point in time, bringing their awareness to the horses as “other” and their response to them is still valuable.

- As you are watching the horses breathe right now, what is happening for you inside? As you notice that, what happens for them? (last part if in real time)
- I noticed that as you were saying / doing XYZ, that the horse beside me began to exhale more deeply. What happens inside for you as you notice the horse’s response?
- As this horse walks away from us, what do you notice in its posture, gait and speed? What happened for you just before it began to walk away? What is happening inside for you now? (sensations, thoughts, memories, beliefs, emotions, impulses, movements, etc.)
- For clients with a complex parts system: Have all of your parts had a chance to see the horses? How might it be to allow those parts a chance to look at the horses? What do they like about them? What’s different for them? (does a particular part have interest in a particular horse in the video? If the video is being live-streamed in real time, what happens for the horse as the client’s various parts come into awareness?)

LIFE SKILLS QUESTIONS

- How might you use this resource to help you when you are feeling XYZ?
- Let’s walk through the situation that is going to happen tomorrow, and practice using the resource to help you ground yourself and feel more connected when you start to notice anxiety?
- How might you draw on that memory of feeling (calm, connected, alive, joyful, triumphant, confident, etc.) the next time you’re noticing yourself feeling anxious/sad/upset/lonely/etc.?
- See if you can practice mindful horse breathing using the video of the horse at least once a day until next session.

What other creative examples or ideas can you come up with during this time of reflection and reconnection with what’s important, even if indirectly?