

Healing with horses

OT Naomi Sharp talks to Tracey Samuels about setting up an equine assisted therapy venture

In 2011, occupational therapy independent practitioner Naomi Sharp set up Spirit Of the Phoenix, to create an opportunity for individuals with physical, mental or emotional disabilities to spend time with horses in a therapeutic environment.

Operating on a 17-acre farm, with stables and a classroom, the service aims to enable individuals to improve their life and social skills, increase their emotional stability, and improve occupational function and confidence through one-to-one or group sessions of equine assisted therapy, equine assisted learning/horsemanship or horseback therapy.

'Every day, clients come and spend time with the two therapy horses, Mac and Red, or to spend time out with the herd,' Naomi explains. 'Individuals are with the horses for either one or two hours, and they gain wonderful memories of their time at the farm, when they were successful in learning to apply new skills, which they can then transfer to other areas of their life.'

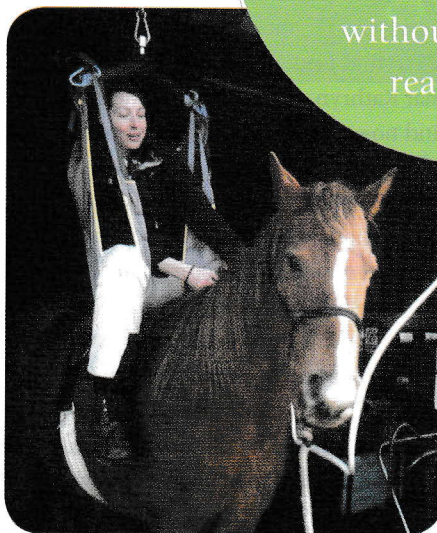
Of using horses as therapy, she adds: 'Horses are creatures that bring something very special to each session. They are non-judgmental and sponges for affection. They ask for an assertive and effective leader when around them, and in return, individuals gain the horse's willingness to be able to carry out the activities that are desired. With this, the individual can then create an everlasting friendship with the horse.'

Naomi says that horses are able to help heal 'the main three parts of a human' – physical, mental and emotional. 'When around the horses, these three areas are always improving, sometimes without you even realising it,' she asserts.

Focusing on how horses can help heal a person physically, Naomi explains that horseback therapy uses the movement of the horse to improve human function. 'The reason it is so successful is due to the horse providing a platform to build on an individual's functional ability,' she says.

'In addition, it creates opportunities for active problem solving.

People are much more motivated to participate due to the environment and each session being unique, because of the natural variability.



'The horse provides a platform for repetitive and rhythmic movement. Its walking pattern is very similar to that of a human, and while someone is sitting on the horse's back, similar muscles and neurons are stimulated as if that person was actually walking themselves.

'The horse helps people to improve the sensory, muscle, skeletal, nervous and circulatory systems, as well as motor learning. When individuals are involved with the horse they may not realise all the areas that are being improved, as their attention is focused on riding.

'The horse provides meaning and consistency to the activities, as well as giving the opportunity for the therapist to be able to grade activities as the individual progresses.'

With regard to a person's mental health, Naomi says that when looking at the management of horses, there needs to be an understanding of self-care,

feeding, learning and other activities that are similar to the activities of daily living.

'Horsemanship is a great avenue to be able to accomplish an individual's goals, as a horse's innate sensitivity can be used to highlight the importance of thoughts. As horses are able to feel a fly land on their

back, when working in harmony with their client, they can also pick up on an individual's intention.

'This means that the client has to be clear in their mind about what it is that they want to achieve with the horse. This clarity and decision-making can then transfer to other areas of the individual's life, providing an opportunity to increase an individual's level of independence.'

Naomi maintains that, through teaching activities with the horse, the client is also teaching themselves about relationships, communication, speaking, listening and body language, and accept making mistakes, as they understand it's just part of the learning process.'

'They learn about having boundaries and how to problem-solve,' she says. 'In return, they are able to co-create with the horse and their imagination soars as the individual discovers what is needed to be able to see themselves and the horse with a positive identity.'

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On to 'emotional healing' and Naomi says: 'When around the horses, an individual needs to be able to control their emotions. Feeling sorry for the horse or getting angry with them will not create a harmonious relationship, as the horse asks for an effective leader.'

'There is an emotional scale, and being aware of the position on the scale is important, as is seeking to increase happiness in order to move up the scale.'

'As horses are living creatures they bring their own personality and questions to the sessions. They may ask: "Do you mean it?" Or, when being asked to walk: "Can I just stand here for longer?"'

'This helps develop the individual's leadership skills... they learn persistence until the horse finds the right answer and praise can then be lavished on the horse.'

Naomi says that, from this, people are 'able to notice that the solution is not always found where the problem lies'. She says: 'A step back is sometimes needed in order to gain a new perspective on the obstacle they have come across; they may need to have several attempts until they find the correct answer.'

Other positive aspects of this kind of therapy are related to carrying out activities in a 'natural environment', she believes. 'Learning out in a large grass field, surrounded by oak forest, provides people with the opportunity to relax and let go of any tension or frustration,' she says.

'When relaxed, there is more opportunity to learn new skills and practise functional tasks.'

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In addition, the life skills learned at the farm are easily transferable, she stresses, as they are similar to the experiences of everyday life, for example opening a gate, walking to the field, using steps, or even using a hosepipe to bathe the horses.

'The outside environment helps to improve an individual's motivation and people are able to monitor how the seasons, and themselves, progress. The farm also has all the sensory benefits of nature, helping the senses to re-balance. Instead of hearing the passing traffic or seeing concrete, there are birds in the trees, horses munching on grass and daisies springing up in the fields.'

Working with disabled people and the horses has also helped Naomi to evolve her own understanding of what disability means. 'My definition of disability

would be "uniqueness". A person with a disability poses qualities that are individual to them. Yet we are all individuals, so we are all unique, hence there is no difference between able bodied and disabled, there is only an individual before us.'

It is clear that Naomi passionately believes in the healing power of horses, and that they bring variety to each session.

'As part of a team they are able to co-create more self-confidence in an individual and improve an individual's ability to interact with others, while asking them to take responsibility for themselves and their actions,' she concludes.

'An individual is able to feel unconditional love, trust and respect from the horse and gain successful experiences in their ability to be confident in their own decision-making.'

'Horses are able to help individuals discover all their positive attributes, which then provides an environment where they are able to establish an identity that is not based around their disability, but around their ability, as that is all that the horse can see.'

'They see all the good things that we all possess and help us to celebrate what makes us unique.'

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