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“Healing Power of Horses”

by Brittany Schweik

(English 1101)

It's mid-morning at Normantown Trails Equestrian Center as I stand outside the barn with Arieahn Bennett and her horse, Savannah, as she grazes after her horseback riding lesson. The tiny mare stomps and swishes her long light brown tail at the flies that land on her. The chestnut colored horse shakes her head once, and her ears flop from side to side as she gives out a big loud blow from her two wide nostrils and continues to rip the grass up from the earth. The woman next to her also swats the flies away from her face as she stands, holding the lead line connecting her to her horse. Bennett is a small-framed woman with dark hair. She speaks vibrantly about eye-opening case studies that she has observed, and how her life seemed to be complete when she came to realize that using horses for therapy was something she was born to do. She continues to talk as she loses herself in conversation about what sparked her to her beloved career as a clinical psychologist and equine psychotherapist.

“Arieahn, you have two ears and one mouth. You should be listening twice as hard to the words that come out of your mouth,” she laughs. “My father used to say that to me all the time,” she adds as she flashes a warm, bright, white smile at me. Arieahn is from a family of traditional healers, and her father was a Native American healer for different tribes. This tradition that she was born into helped her decide from a very early stage in her life that she wanted to go into a healing profession. She had horses when she was growing up, and realized from constant observation and care that horses had taught her much about life. They had also helped her grow into the individual that she is today. She started going to school to earn her master's degree and Ph.D. as a clinical psychologist, but not long after completing her studies did she realize the healing power of horses for growth and therapy was something she wanted to try put into practice.

“I thought I had invented the idea of using horses for human therapy,” she says with a bashful laugh, “until one of my clients gave me a book of a mother-daughter team of psychologist that use of horses for therapeutic treatment.” After reading this book, Bennett put a little more effort into her search for more information about a community of holistic healers that had the same horse healing thoughts and ideas as she did. She came upon Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), a non-profit organization devoted to addressing the need for resources, education and professionalism in the field of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy.

When first observing a client for equine psychotherapy, there are many things the psychologist must look and ask for as the session goes on. Observations of level of comfort zone must be made along with the question of previous horse experience. They must note the body language of both horse and patient as well as the patient's level of awareness. Their physical and mental capabilities are taken into concern, as well as their brain functioning levels. Another thing they assess is cognitive and behavioral skills of the client and their awareness of the horses signals as to what's going on, and how the horse is reacting to the treatment process. Awareness is critical when it comes to the patient's overall session but for their well-being too. Horses, being prey animals, must always be aware of their surroundings in the wild to avoid ambush of a predatory animal, according to Bennett. Thus, horses are naturally reactive creatures so they respond to a client's physical and emotion signals they give off during the session.

“Horses help us live in the moment,” explains Bennett. “They help us learn to be more awake and conscious of our surroundings.”

With this said, Bennett admitted that when she is in her therapy sessions, she is mainly focused on the horse's reaction to a client's stimuli. Whether it be walking up to a horse, picking something up that may alert the horse, or even an object being thrown in the arena of the session are all things that the horse might react to. She watches the horse moment by moment with little distraction when it comes to the interaction between horse and patient. Instead of observing what happens when the client picks up a large whip from the arena, she watches the little signals that the animal is constantly giving off. The reactions vary from running, walking away, ears forward, snorting, etc. With these observations, Bennett can further assess treatment goals for the client and horse to work on over their twelve week therapy course.

One of the most common treatment goals in the equine therapy is problem solving. One task that a client may have is to put on and fasten a halter on the horse they are given for the session. This causes the person to try different methods to try and successfully putting on the halter with no help of the psychologist or horse specialist in the session. Another goal that is vital to the growth of the patient is an increase in their focus to their surroundings of a session. An example of this is when one of her client's was given a task. They were to try to walk a circle around Savannah, and see how big the circle could get without her walking away. The client, a boy, would start his circle and become easily distracted and walk away. This action would cause Savannah would turn the other direction, ignoring him. Savannah's reaction to his break of concentration is a clue to the client that he or she must focused in order for the horse not to want to move. The most fascinating thing about this interview was the stories that went along with it. Bennett gave me an inside look at some of the stories of a few of the patients she has had in the past.

Bennett mentioned highlights of stories where patient's had a hard time opening up in therapy, or would hide their emotions because they were embarrassed or scared to open up. One woman in therapy would try to walk up to Savannah to try to greet her and when the woman approached, Savannah would walk away. This attempt was made again with the assistance of Bennett and after a few more sessions the woman had finally made a break through and explained how she was feeling or what had been upsetting her and she started to cry. After the woman had started to cry, Savannah walked up to the client to stand next to her as the woman buried her face in the side of Savannah's neck to cry. The horse had went from sensing that this woman had something bottled up inside and gave her a cold shoulder. The minute the patient had an emotional release of frustration Savannah had given her a shoulder to cry on.

"Horses are mirrors to our lives," Bennett said. "People can fake their emotions, but you must (as a client) own up to your emotions to come to a break-through in your treatment."

According to Bennett, people are so accustomed to hiding their emotions with words or fake smiles to hide what's really going on underneath the surface. The powerful emotions that the patient is concealing to the outside world, is what the horses can sense in anyone, not just therapy patients, says Bennett. There was one incident where Savannah had looked almost too reactive towards the patient's actions and emotions to the point where her reactions could have affected everyone in the arena.

"She was running around like mad and kicking up sand in the arena," Bennett said. "I almost considered not using her anymore because it had seemed that she had become overly sensitive. It turns out that she was in fact sensing this patient's emotions and we had come to realize that this patient was severely, severely traumatized."

Not only can her knowledge of therapy grow by observing her cases, she has had the pleasure to work in a hospice program where the organization she is employed with take the horses to hospitals and have them interact with hospital residents.

One of Bennett's most powerful cases was when she was using a black and white paint horse named Blue. There was a hospice patient that had been wheelchair bound due to a stroke and could not speak. His wife had died, and he had been alone and unable to speak for years. He could still

comprehend language and would respond to questions with non-verbal cues. Blue had walked up to this patient and hung his head down low to where the man could reach out to him. The man was looking right into Blue's eyes, and to the therapy staff it looked like the man and the horse had been having some sort of personal moment. It was right then when the therapists saw a single tear fall from Blue's eye and run down his face. His other eye had been doing the same thing when the select few people witnessed what was happening in front of them. They had looked down at the patients face and the man had been crying as well. Bennett was moved as to what she was seeing. It is physically impossible for horses to "cry," but their eyes can water and tear up just like humans do. It is stories like this one with Blue and the man in the wheel chair that makes Bennett grateful for the horses she has been blessed with in her life.

Bennett admits that the one thing that motivates her to do this job is witnessing and the horses and clients and their amazing connections.

"Nothing is predictable," Bennett said. "You must be comfortable with who you are as a psychologist and as a person to do the therapy that I do. I feel very blessed and lucky to have horses in my life."

Her horse Savannah had been abandoned by her owner and sat in her stall at the barn for roughly three years or so before she had noticed that this horse had no one to love her. Bennett could sense something in Savannah that pushed her to personally buy her for her therapy program, and they have hit it off since then. Horses don't lie, or hold grudges, said Bennett. They are forgiving, and patient with the humans and other horses alike that they live with. Buying Savannah for the use of therapy, gave her a second chance at the life she was doomed to have if Bennett had not come along. By giving her that second chance, she is convinced that this horse will be giving every patient that commits to treatment a second chance at a happier life.