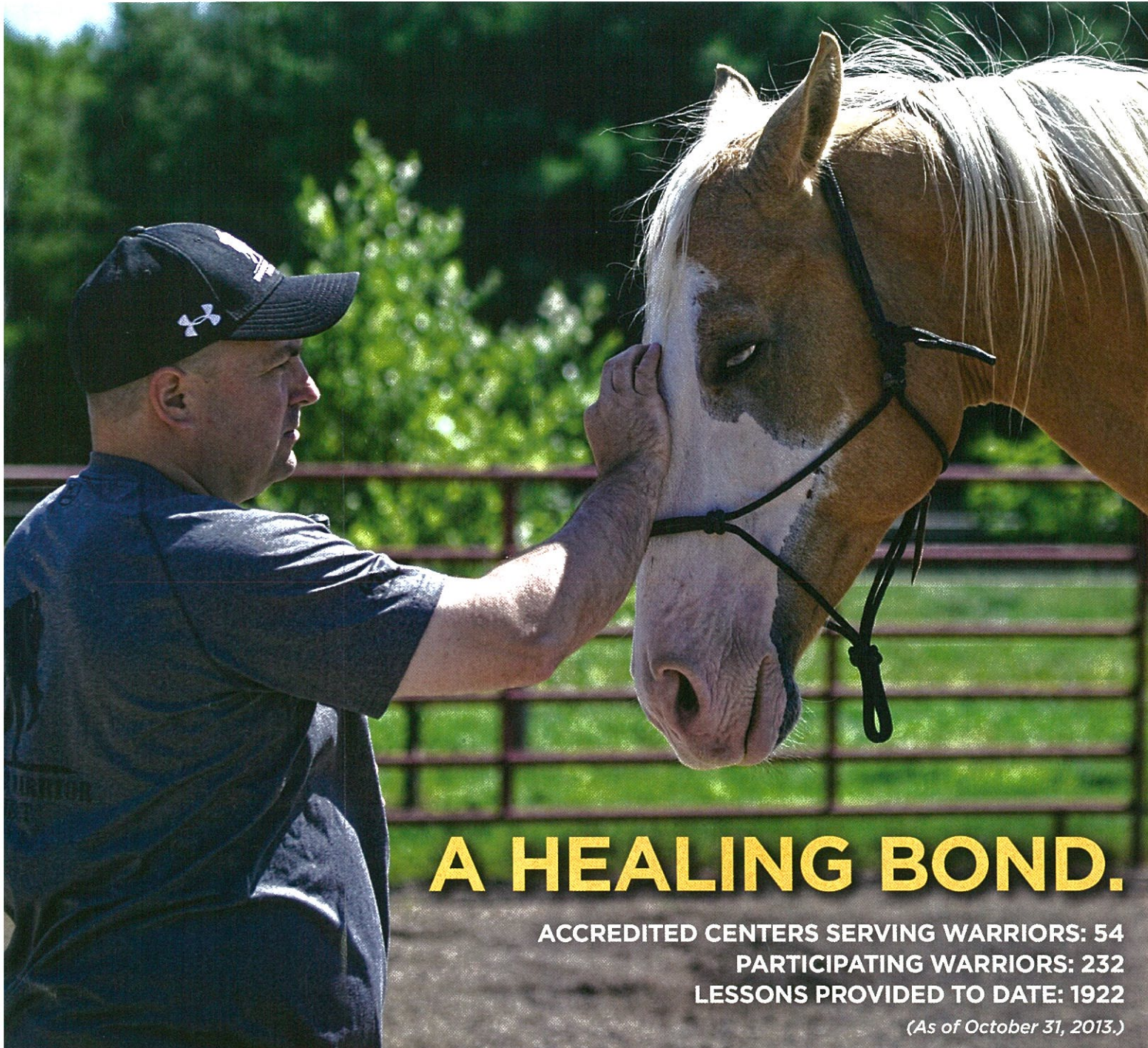


Thinking OUTSIDE the Saddle

By Sandra Wise

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF SANDRA WISE

There are many ways to bring a horse and a human together in mutually beneficial activities that add to the quality of life for both parties involved. Most PATH Intl. Certified Professionals are familiar with the physiological and psychological benefits of therapeutic riding, interactive vaulting and therapeutic driving for individuals with special needs. These forms of interaction, however, all require some form of restraint for the horse, such as a bridle, halter or harness, and thus limit full range of visual and spatial engagement for both horse and human. As a result, many equine traits such as reactivity and novelty-seeking behavior, which add to their effectiveness as facilitators in working with individuals with mental health challenges, go untapped.



A HEALING BOND.

ACCREDITED CENTERS SERVING WARRIORS: 54
PARTICIPATING WARRIORS: 232
LESSONS PROVIDED TO DATE: 1922

(As of October 31, 2013.)

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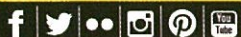
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By “thinking outside the saddle,” experiences can be customized for this population that make full use of the equine’s facilitative role.

◀ A participant practices setting healthy boundaries under the watchful eye of an Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning (ESMHL).

By “thinking outside the saddle,” experiences can be customized for this population that make full use of the equine’s facilitative role. Just as occupational and physical therapists work with PATH Intl. Certified Professionals to devise specific exercises for individuals with physical challenges, licensed mental health professionals such as clinical psychologists who practice equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) can design unmounted exercises that more specifically target mental and emotional processes. Specific training techniques can also better prepare horses for working in unmounted activities.

The maladaptive behaviors, thoughts and emotions that psychologists address are commonly revealed in social contexts. They may manifest as emotional

dysregulation, thinking errors, poor decision-making, ineffective communication and/or problems relating to others. Equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT) that focus on these areas of functioning can maximize opportunities for participants to:

- explore their interactional style,
- look at their communication skills,
- examine their decision-making abilities and
- gain insight into their characteristic patterns of relating to others and to the world.

This therapeutic focus on communication, reading social cues, cognitive engagement, problem-solving and interpersonal—or should we say interspecies—feedback



▲ A teenager explores painful childhood experiences by relating to an orphaned colt.

loops can best be facilitated (1) if the horse can move freely while interacting with participants on the ground, and (2) if the horse has not been trained to ride. When a horse is able to interact freely with participants, these unmounted activities can have two main advantages over riding, driving or vaulting: (1) maximum visibility and availability of interactional cues and (2) an increased opportunity for behavioral variety.

Visibility

It is vitally important that participants be able to see the horse so they can receive all the feedback the horse is providing. Being on the ground facilitates this goal, as does having full view of the horse's eyes, especially when considered from the horse's perspective. As the primary provider of feedback, the horse must be able to see the participant. To maximize visual capacities, a horse needs to turn or tilt the head when needed, switching between monocular and binocular vision. If his head is restricted, the ability to focus is limited, and the horse could become distracted and miss vital information from the participant.

In addition to ensuring full visual capacity, unmounted activities also allow for more interactional cues, thus providing both parties greater opportunity to read intentionality in the other. These visual opportunities emphasize the bi-directional and multi-modal aspects of communication that are often a challenge for individuals with mental health issues. The ability to practice the subtle dance of communication that involves nonverbal behavior, such as eye contact, stance, gestures, voice inflection and tone and touch, may not be as available during mounted activities.

Persons on the autism spectrum particularly have difficulty with perspective-taking, which is involved in reading intentionality in others and in experiencing empathy. By ensuring maximum exposure to interactional cues between horse and participant, unmounted activities can better target issues in understanding and expressing body language.

Variety of Behaviors

In addition, horses at liberty—especially those that are not overly trained—freely offer up a greater variety of behaviors. Behavioral variety gives EFP practitioners more to work with in terms of available stimuli to which the participant may respond. Many EFP practitioners work from theoretical models that employ metaphors as a method of indirectly approaching uncomfortable psychological issues. Consequently, the greater number of behaviors the horse displays, the greater the probability the horse will eventually do something that has special meaning for the participant. Ideally, if the horse wishes to leave, roll, flop down in the stream or take off after a cow that shares the pasture, he should be allowed to do so as long as all involved are out of harm's way. Any one of these activities could hold personal meaning for the participant who is engaged with the horse, and if the horse is being ridden, many of these free choices are, of course, not available. The practitioner who is able to “cast a wide net” in terms of potential metaphors or meaningful stimuli for the participant to interpret can get to the core psychological issues in a more timely manner.

Reactivity and Novelty-Seeking

Most PATH Intl. Certified Professionals would agree

that horses ridden by participants should be as close to bomb-proof as possible, but if horses are not going to react to potentially frightening situations and stimuli, they are not going to react “in the rough” to subtleties of human behavior. Certainly, it is important to train horses to have manners so that participants can safely interact with them, particularly in more confined spaces. However, “taking the horse out of the horse” is counterproductive in terms of working with the exquisite equine qualities, such as reactivity, that make them so effective in giving accurate, authentic and immediate feedback to participants. Unfortunately, perfectly finished horses are often limited in their ability to react to these subtleties and thus are less “honest” in their feedback. This is where horses that have not been trained for riding often excel in two important areas: (1) reactivity and (2) motivation for behavioral variety, i.e., novelty-seeking behavior.

Since EFP practitioners need a variety of avenues through which to identify and work with a participant’s specific problems, it is helpful to have an equine partner with a high capacity and impetus for novelty-seeking behavior, one with the freedom to think and act on its own. Ideally, the horse should be both a stimulus for, and a response to, the participant. This back-and-forth pattern most closely echoes the natural reciprocity and flow of human interactions.

Imagine a severely depressed participant who has little psychological or physical energy working with an animal that has been trained by traditional methods to stand quietly. This individual may be better served by a horse with higher levels of motivation that will not only respond to the participant’s actions but will also initiate action to which the participant can respond. Some equines, even highly trained ones, naturally display more of this type of engagement due to their personality, and this can be improved with training.

Operant conditioning, a form of learning that increases the probability that the animal will offer a variety of behaviors, can lead even more highly trained horses to exhibit increased levels of motivation to interact. Basically, this training deals with the modification of voluntary behavior (operants) through the application of reinforcement. An item of behavior that is initially spontaneous is reinforced by the trainer, which increases the probability of the behavior happening again. These behaviors can then be shaped and modified for various purposes, such as fetching items, mounting pedestals, pushing balls, etc. What is most important is that the horse trained with operant principles is motivated to offer a variety of behaviors on its own, since the horse comes to learn that some of them may bring him a reward.

Unmounted Exercises for EFP/EFL

Common unmounted activities for on-the-ground EFP sessions include:

- obstacle courses with horses at liberty to explore non-verbal communication and problem-solving skills
- choosing a particular horse from a loose herd or having a horse choose or not choose a participant to highlight personality differences and abandonment/attachment issues
- grooming and caring for a specific horse to address bonding, attachment and nurturance needs
- traditional groundwork with a haltered or at-liberty horse to target assertiveness/passivity issues

An experienced psychotherapist accompanied by a PATH Intl. Certified Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning can simply conduct a relatively traditional psychotherapy session with a participant while walking in a pasture of at-liberty horses, drawing attention to the horses’ engagement tactics/behaviors and relating them to the content of the session. If properly coached, participants can gain great insight into their own problems as they engage a horse in a round pen, since the participant’s interactions with the horse simply mimic the problematic engagement style used in his or her world outside the session.

The following exercises target specific skills found to be less developed in some individuals with psychological problems related to (1) executive function, (2) social thinking, (3) boundaries and (4) synchrony. Although the horse may be haltered in some of these exercises, equines play an integral part in promoting skill development that improves overall mental and emotional health.

General Executive Functioning Exercises

Executive functions are a set of cognitive skills that control and regulate other behaviors and abilities. They are necessary for goal-directed behavior. They allow us to initiate and stop actions, monitor and change behavior, anticipate outcomes and plan future behavior in novel situations. Executive functions include the ability to focus, hold and work with information, reason, filter distractions, organize, strategize and remain flexible. These skills are coordinated in the brain’s frontal lobe and are often challenging for individuals with conditions such as autism, dementia, traumatic brain injury or obsessive compulsive disorder.

- Activities that force the participant to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty exercise executive functioning skills. Objects (barrels, PVC pipes, tarps) are arranged in different configurations on both the right and the left side of a gate, behind which is placed an at-liberty horse. The participant predicts which direction the horse will go when released through the gate by attempting to read intentionality and make decisions with limited information.

- Many prefrontal cortex neurons are sensitive to an association of a stimulus with a context. Participants lead their horses around a pasture/arena with marked areas designated as “France” and “America.” If a large blue card is displayed, it means lead with the right hand if in France, but lead with the left hand in America. If a yellow card is displayed, it means to make small circles to the left in proceeding through France but to the right through America. Participants move around the arena abiding by the ever-changing context-dependent criteria signaled by the cards.
- Activities that involve detecting errors target executive functioning skills. After studying a complex scene containing various people, horses and items randomly placed in an arena/pasture, the participant’s view is blocked as aspects of the scene are altered. The participant must identify what has changed—an incorrectly placed halter, mane combed onto the opposite side, etc.

▽ Working Memory Exercises

These activities tap into three specific domains of executive functioning: working memory, response inhibition and task-switching. Working memory enables one to hold and manipulate information in short-term memory in the service of a specific goal. Targeting this cognitive task appears to improve the capacity to think logically and solve problems in novel situations after training, notably for those with ADHD.

- Seven or more barrels are labeled with numbers and placed randomly around an arena/pasture. The participant must memorize the order of a set of numbers (corresponding to labeled barrels) and is then required to lead the horse around the designated barrels in backwards order. Depending on the level of impairment, begin with two numbers and work up to seven.
- Up to nine horse/handler pairs stand in random placement in full view of the participant. Some of the handlers raise then quickly lower their hands in a predetermined order that the participant is asked to note. The participant is then asked to replicate this exact sequence by physically walking with his horse to each pair in the order of hand-raising observed. Start with two and continue until performance begins to deteriorate.
- Up to seven horse/handler pairs stand in a row in an arena/pasture. A designated participant is required to memorize aspects of the visual stimuli (order of pairs, which handler belongs with which horse, order of horses or handlers, etc.). The participant turns away while the scene is changed, then returns all horses and handlers to their original positions.

▽ Impulse Control Exercises

Response inhibition enables one to curb inappropriate speech or behavior, thus requiring the overcoming of strong habitual responses.

- Participants are lined up on one end of an arena/pasture, poised to race to the other end with a horse on lead. A staff member stands at the finish line, holding up colored cards or flags according to the following criteria: All colors (at least 10) except one signify “go.” One specified color signifies “no-go.” The no-go card is randomly shown only about 10% of the time. If a participant does not stop when the no-go card appears, he or she is penalized (goes back a number of steps). The no-go color is changed each round.

▽ Task/Focus Switching Exercises

These exercises enable a person to redirect attention quickly between tasks usually by alternating instruction sets. The ability to keep track of several ideas, concepts or categories is practiced. Both exercises are more effective with a large number of horses.

- At-liberty horses are labeled with either a number or a letter on their sides. Accompanied by a Certified ESMHL or trained staff member, participants are required to move among the horses in ascending order of numbers and letters, switching criteria back and forth between numbers and letters (1, A, 2, B, 3, C, etc.). To make it easier have handlers stand in random locations with haltered horses.
- Participants are initially asked to sort horses by a single dimension (such as color) and are subsequently required to alter their strategy to sort horses based on a second dimension (such as size).

Social Thinking Exercises

The term social thinking describes how humans take in thoughts, emotions and intentions of the people with whom they interact. Many individuals with psychological challenges, particularly those on the autism spectrum, do not intuitively learn these nuances of social interaction and find it difficult to acquire necessary information to appropriately respond to others. To address such deficits, opportunities to practice social information processing and to receive feedback about how their own behaviors are being perceived should be provided.

- Any exercise focusing on reading a horse’s intentionality and attempting to look at the situation from the horse’s perspective.
- Any activity in which a horse can freely respond to the behavior of participants provides the therapist with an opportunity to interpret the horse’s reaction,

mutually responsive relationship. The more precise its form, the more synchrony is produced. Training a horse through operant conditioning to stand in one spot and continuously roll a ball back and forth to a participant creates such a turn-taking scenario.

- Teaching a horse to bow when someone in front of him bows replicates this dance if continued for a number of repetitions. These activities generate responsiveness, reciprocity, engagement, mutual focus and even shared affect during interactions.

While some of these exercises appear to relegate the equine to a more indirect role in the therapy session, this does not diminish the horse's importance in the overall therapeutic process. For example, in the first working memory activity, the horse can actually play a pivotal role by representing the participant's personal responsibilities, which are ever present and may require attention from time to time as other goals are pursued. Similarly, leading a horse while trying to accomplish mental tasks, such as searching for objects hidden in a dense forest area, gives the horse the opportunity to serve as a distraction for participants working on attention skills. No matter how large or small the equine's role, how direct or indirect the service provided, the horse remains the cornerstone of any EFP session.

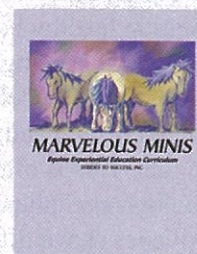
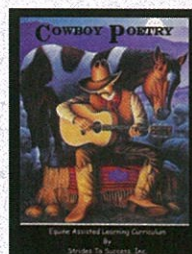
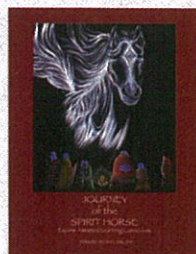
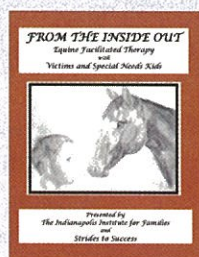
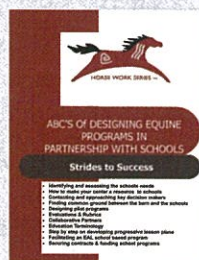
Dr. Sandra Wise is a licensed psychologist, university adjunct professor and horse trainer with an extensive background treating various mental health populations, including troubled youth, individuals with autism, couples, families and trauma patients. She partners with equines for on-the-ground-only EFP work at Eye of a Horse, located on a 4,700-acre wildlife preserve in Central Florida (videos at www.eyeofahorse.com). She can be reached at drwise@drsandrwise.com.

Education

Horse Work™ is a perfect match for school systems. *The ABC's of Designing School Programs* is the first volume in a series of "how to" books that will grow and contribute to the sustainability of your equine business. The ABC's of Designing School Programs is a step by step process that includes all of the techniques and materials you will need in order to develop contracts with school systems. Even in these tough economic times, the schools do have funding that can support your programs if you can help them understand how your program can be attached to appropriate funding sources and needs. This is a proven process that many centers have utilized to develop sustainable income.

Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy

Treating children who have experienced abuse, neglect, family violence and/or have emotional, social, behavioral disorders is a long, long journey. To be allowed inside a child's reality is a privilege that deserves the highest regard and respect. It is the only place where you will discover how they perceive and how they survive. *From the Inside Out* was developed to enhance redevelopment and recovery through the honest and untainted reflections from the horses. *From the Inside Out* is a process-based program. The treatment plans are based on Erikson's Theory and the Search Institutes 40 Developmental Assets. Each treatment plan contains session goals, a supporting equine activity, process questions, observations, assessments and a section from the horses' point of view.



Equine-Facilitated Learning Resources

Cowboy Poetry, *Journey of the Spirit Horse* and *Marvelous Minis* were all created after seeing a lack of resources for equine programs that desire to partner with educational institutes. Disengaged learners are struggling to succeed because they do not respond to the traditional approaches used in most school systems. This student population can include special needs, at-risk, emotionally challenged, gifted and students that are struggling academically or socially. Students benefit from a variety of learning styles, particularly when they can learn by doing and receive instant feedback on the why and how of a lesson. The Strides Learning Model is interactive and wraps around academic standards, developmental assets and character education skills. These components make learning fun and successful. The curriculum is utilized to create an excitement about learning and therefore can engage even the most challenging of students.

To order or to find out the workshop schedules:

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which enables participants to better understand how they are being perceived. Have the participant present novel objects to the horse, utilizing different approaches by slowly walking up to the horse with the object in full view versus approaching in a boisterous manner.

Boundaries

Setting healthy boundaries involves using both physical spacing and verbal and non-verbal communication to define one's self in relation to others while identifying and respecting one's needs, feelings and rights. This is often problematic for those with psychological challenges. Individuals who struggle with assertiveness have difficulty clearly setting boundaries and may instead express their needs indirectly through manipulation, feelings of resentment, etc.

- Participants are given eight-foot-long lightweight sticks and join at-liberty horses in a large pasture/arena. The assignment is to never allow the horses to come closer than the length of the stick. The stick is a metaphor for firm boundaries. Each participant is paired with a trained assistant but understands it is his or her responsibility to maintain the boundary. The participants quickly learn that they must be consistent in using their sticks to gently keep the curious horses at bay. The participants observe that the horses will eventually begin respecting the firm eight-foot distance without use of the stick. Participants then work with trained horses on long lunge-lines in a round pen to experience flexible boundaries, requiring the horse to circle the maximum distance away and learning to draw the horse in at the participant's discretion. Finally, the participants work with a highly

▲ **An experienced psychotherapist accompanied by a certified ESMHL working with a participant while walking in a pasture of at-liberty horses can draw attention to a horse's engagement tactics/behaviors and relate them to the content of the session.**

trained horse that will free-lunge and turn and face the handler when signaled. The equine specialist remains by the side of the participant as he or she learns the skills.

- Participants leading horses on a nature walk are instructed to (1) keep the horse at a predetermined distance behind them, and (2) not allow the horse to eat grass. Participants choose the desired distance (usually two to five feet) and monitor those boundaries, using awareness skills and consistency. Participants learn that if they clearly and consistently communicate the boundaries, whether spatial or behavioral, the horse will come to respect them. The equine specialist can coach participants in traditional horse training methods: reading intentionality (catching undesirable behaviors early) and consistently applying corrective measures (e.g., quick pull on the lead rope when detecting an intention to eat grass).

Synchrony

Synchrony is indicative of emotional involvement and demonstrates acknowledgment of the value of another individual. Reciprocating exchanges or rhythmic motions are used as a therapeutic method to improve body awareness, self-regulation and social interplay. These exercises sensitize individuals to the emotional resonance and empathy underlying human relationships.

- Any turn-taking activity between a human and a horse can become a coordinated dance or dialogue, creating a