

More Than Magic

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Note: Clients names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

I have been involved in some discussions on the "magic" of horses. The magic meaning the ability of horses to heal people. Even further, the concept that it doesn't matter what you do with horses, being around horses in and of themselves changes lives for the better. I've heard so many times, "If it wasn't for my horse, I don't know how I could deal with the stresses of my life."

I agree there is a magic about horses, however I disagree that just hanging around horses creates effective EAP sessions or necessarily makes positive changes in people's lives.

The majority of our clients will have no horse experience. The majority will also leave treatment and never have the opportunity to be around horses again. If a client will have the opportunity to continue working with horses, it's a wonderful bonus. However, as a treatment intervention focused on long-term life skills, there needs to be more growth and learning than "I feel happy and good when I'm with horses."

The skills of the human facilitators absolutely determines the effectiveness the horses will make in clients' overall lives. The horses assist, but they do not facilitate.

We've had several EAP sessions lately which magnified the importance of the facilitators' skills of processing. The processing made the difference between a "that's nice" or even disastrous session and an intense/meaningful session.

One example. We asked a 12-year-old male client to go catch and halter a horse. His immediate response was a whining "I can't...it's impossible!" He walked out there and as soon as the horse took a step toward him, the client turned and ran crying, "The horse hates me...he's trying to hurt me." We asked the client what about the horse told him the horse hated him. When he replied that the horse stepped toward him, we asked him if that behavior could mean anything else? We asked him to compare the situation to how humans approach each other when they want to meet and do something.

The client then walked up to the horse and after a period of fiddling with the halter cried, "I can't" and started crying. He then said, "I'm going home." He threw down the halter and started walking toward the gate.

Pause for a moment here and think about this situation. How would you handle this? What will you do when a client starts heading toward the gate to leave?

Some may say we should be more helpful - show the client how to do it. He's fragile, he needs help!

Let's look at the presenting treatment issues. From the description above, it's pretty obvious this kid is a classic "victim." The client was kicked out of school for the remainder of the year for repeated disrespectful behavior toward teachers. He has no friends, no self-esteem. From a brief conversation with his parents, it is apparent they rescue him.

From watching the client in this brief encounter, it was clear he plays the victim game to get others to do challenging things for him. When that doesn't work, he either gives up/leaves or gets aggressive (as what happened at school).

If we were to jump in and show him how to do it or directly help him, we would then only be reinforcing the issues that brought him into treatment in the first place. It may keep him "happy" in the session with the horses, but how is that going to help his life? Is our goal for the client to have a positive and happy experience with horses, or to help him learn to deal with problems in his life in more functional ways?

About him walking out of the arena, what would you do? We could run after him and get in his stop position, then try to persuade him to come back. However, what happens when you chase after a horse? They run away! Same thing with people, so not a good idea to chase after him.

In this situation, Greg and I stood calmly while Greg yelled out, "Johnny, before you leave, please pick up your halter so it's not lying in the dirt getting dirty."

The client, almost at the gate, turned around, stomped back, and picked up the halter and handed it to Greg. Greg kept his hands in his pockets and said, "Johnny, I'm not taking the halter, it's your responsibility to take care of it."

Johnny replied, "It's not mine, it's yours." We both replied with a shrug and a look of "you're responsible." Johnny responded with a "fine." But, before he started to walk away with the halter, Greg said, "Hold on a minute, Johnny. What do you think Jake is feeling right now as you are walking away?" (Jake, the horse he was trying to halter, is standing right next to us).

Johnny: "I don't know."

Greg: "Well, has Jake been standing patiently while you tried to halter him?"

Johnny agreed.

Lynn: "Johnny, how would you feel if you were working hard to be respectful and nice to someone, and he responded by turning his back on you and walking away?"

Johnny: "Not good."

Greg: "You were working on haltering him. What were some things that didn't work or did work?"

The client moved back into working on the activity and learning problem-solving skills as we would interject such questions as "What do you need to be successful?...What can you do differently?"

After a few more patterns of similar "tantrums," the client ended the session being successful in haltering the horse.

Did the "magic" of horses help in this situation? Yes, it did. However, it was the facilitators pro-actively using that "magic" which worked to re-engage the client. It was not the magic alone.

Deep inside, every client wants a successful relationship with that horse. We have always been successful using that and re-focusing the client on how his or her behaviors are affecting the horse. This is part of the magic, the clients generally don't care how their behaviors affect us or other people, but they do care how it affects the horses!

We have had four sessions with this client so far. Every session, the client has gone through this same scenario, but each time with less intensity. He's beginning to catch himself and when he says, "I can't" or "I don't know," we can say "How many times have we heard that?" and he continues on. He is beginning to look people in the eyes and stand taller. There is definitely a ways to go, and our next steps involve working with his parents.

As I look back on the sessions with this particular client, I am amazed at the key moments where the sessions could have gone in several different directions, positive or negative. The direction the sessions took, and the impact on the client's treatment issues, resulted from the skills of the facilitators.

This field is a profession. The magic of horses plays a part, but it is the skills, education, character, and experience of the facilitators that determines the impact that magic will have on a person's life.