

HAHA QUARTERLY

HARNESSING THE POWER OF HORSES TO TRANSFORM THE HUMAN SPIRIT

HOW & WHY EQUINE PSYCHOTHERAPY WORKS

BY CHRIS MORAN, DIRECTOR

Sometimes people ask us if HAHA is just a program that teaches you how to ride a horse. We are so much more than that! Our therapeutic program offers the opportunity to change the way our clients' bodies and brains respond to the world. Our horses are so much more than just tools or large pets—they are our key partners in the therapeutic process.

In writing this article, I hope to explain a bit about how working with a horse enhances brain functions. To understand at the highest level, we must start with a few facts about the brain and how it develops and learns.



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First, your brain has over one billion neurons at birth. These vital microscopic super highways of information crisscross and meander throughout the brain, connecting all the various sections and lobes responsible for our day-to-day survival and learning. Some neurons we use more often than others.

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Image from "[Neuroplasticity and Rewiring the Brain](#)"

[Cont.] These neurons help us to repeat learned behaviors, create habits, and perform certain autonomic responses like eye blinking, heart beats, or breathing. Because the brain is built to learn, relearn, adapt, and overcome problems, we can change our minds, develop theories, and propose experiments. These actions are referred to as neuroplasticity.

Second, the brain can experience unwanted changes due to physical, emotional, or mental distress. If the distress occurs for a long enough time or the distressing event is significantly powerful enough, our brain neurology will be changed. For example, I have a well strengthened neuropathway that allows me to feel safe and confident in my everyday life, but one day, I experience a tremendously traumatic attack on my person. My neuropathways may become disrupted, even severed in extreme cases. The new “trauma” experience might be so powerful that my brain almost instantly creates a new neuropathway incorporating the trauma experience. Therefore, following the experience, while I was once a safe and confident person, I am now different—I feel different, I interact with people in a different manner, and nothing makes sense anymore. I might even feel as if I’m going crazy. This is how major depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, and many other mental illness categories develop: Over time, my brain creates new neuropathways incorporating the “new way” I am now. This is why many mental illnesses are so difficult to overcome. It’s not about a lack of will power or lack of effort to change yourself; it’s a physiological change in your brain.

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So what can we do to fix ourselves? This is where the therapeutic strategy of experiential therapy comes in. Essentially, this is learning by doing. By learning new skills, we develop new ways of thinking and new ways to use our body as a source of our healing. This is why physical exercise is important in reducing depression symptoms.

Experiential therapy is learning by doing.

Why work with horses? To fully grasp the importance of the horse in our work, we must appreciate the nature of the predator and prey relationship. Humans have the ability to be both predator and prey; however, the equine can only be prey. The equine’s only tactic for survival is to run away. Their instinct of when to run away depends on additional defenses, such as the ability to track sounds 360 degrees, to see 340 degrees around them, and to track movement in their left and right eyes separately. Their olfactory system is

sensitive. They can smell the subtle changes in the pheromones our brains dump into our blood stream based on our emotions. They are able to “read” the electromagnetic energy of living things. They can sense a **[Cont. on next page]**

[Cont.] predator's intentions before the predator acts. These gifts allow our horse partners to be biofeedback machines. They know what we are feeling before we can acknowledge it.

If our goal is to get the horse to interact with us, we are required to learn new ways of thinking and feeling about ourselves. When we are dysregulated, the equine interprets us as a threat. By learning techniques to be more self-aware and more mindful, we begin the process of creating new neuropathways. As we repeat the learning, we strengthen these new superhighways. As we learn more about ourselves and practice mindfulness, our equine partners trust us more. The skills that we develop learning to work successfully with our horse partner teach us valuable coping skills needed to regulate ourselves outside sessions, too.

So the next time someone asks you about our program, you can explain more about how and why it works.

COVID SAFETY AT HAHA

Despite the advent of COVID-19, we have still been able to remain open for therapy sessions. To ensure the safety of our staff and clients, we have the following safety precautions:

- **Clients who have any COVID-like symptoms are required to cancel their in-person session. We provide video or telephone sessions as needed.**
- **All HAHA staff check their temperature when they arrive at the barn. They must wear masks while at the barn.**
- **When clients arrive, therapists ask the COVID exposure questions. Clients must wear masks from the time they exit their vehicle to the end of the session, unless they have a medical exception.**
- **Everyone must wash their hands at the beginning and end of the session.**
- **All equipment is wiped down with antibacterial cleaner or washed with antibacterial soap.**
- **If staff are exposed to COVID without PPE, we will notify clients and quarantine.**
- **When it is too cold to be outside, all indoor therapy sessions will follow social distancing rules, a window in the office will be cracked to circulate air, and all surfaces will be cleaned after each session.**

You can help our COVID safety measures, especially with the coming winter, by donating cleaning supplies (see our [Amazon Wishlist](#)).





STAFF SPOTLIGHT: KIM MORAN

Kim Moran wears many different hats for HAHA. She is Director Chris Moran's wife, and she has helped him build the program from the ground up. She is the Chief Executive Officer and also serves in many key roles for the program, as you'll quickly find out.

What do you do as CEO and in your various roles for HAHA?

As CEO, I find myself doing many of the administrative tasks for the program. I manage the budget; I contact potential clients and schedule intake and therapy sessions; I contact and screen volunteers; and I help organize fundraising and contact potential donors.

One of my most important jobs is taking care of the horses. I feed them three times a day. I also care for the rest of the HAHA barn crew, including our four goats, three cats, and occasional chickens. It takes me about about 3 hours every day to get everyone fed and happy.

What do you do when you're not supporting HAHA?

I work as a physical therapist assistant at the University of Kansas Health System, providing physical therapy treatments in an outpatient clinic.

When I'm not helping HAHA or working, I enjoy cooking and having my four grandchildren over.

What's your favorite thing about HAHA?

The "lightbulb" moments are so special to see. From time to time, I get to see the client making a connection with their horse partner. It's so special to watch a client discover how to communicate with their horse and understand how their horse is communicating with them.

What's your future vision for HAHA?

In the immediate future, our focus is providing a safe place to offer therapy during the challenges of COVID. In the longer term, I look forward to growing Equus Bellator, our program for veterans and first responder. Both now and in the future, my goal is to ensure our horses are in the best possible physical and mental health.



HORSE SPOTLIGHT: JAZZ

Jazz is an Arabian in 20's who was donated to HAHA in 2019. Lisa Bruner has welcomed him into her herd. After getting good food, learning Parelli work, and being given choices and shown respect, Jazz has blossomed. Now he is very confident, happy, and not afraid to communicate what he wants. He is a left brain extrovert. You know you've found a good itchy spot when he wiggles his lips, and he loves scratches on the underside of his stifle.

GIVING TUESDAY 2020

This year, HAHA had to cancel our annual fundraisers due to COVID, making Giving Tuesday this year's primary fundraising campaign. We have a Facebook event set up, and we encourage you to donate via Facebook or PayPal--whether on Giving Tuesday or any day of your choice. Your donations are tax deductible, and we can provide you a receipt upon request.

Every donation, no matter how big or small, is a great help. This year, we're hoping to invest in mud control grid tiles. With the constant temperature changes in Kansas, we frequently deal with mud in the paddocks. These tiles will make it easier for the horses and staff to get in and out of the gates and for the horses to feed.

Together
we give.

SAVE THE DATE

Dec 1, 2020



GIVING
TUESDAY

BARN BREAK: DECEMBER 21-JANUARY 2