



Equine Therapy for Young Persons

Many children and young people will find that caring for and riding horses benefits their mental well-being, and this quality time with horses can often be sourced through your local riding school. However, more specialist mental health support may be needed at times.

If you are worried about your child's mental health, it is always best to contact your GP first. They can help you to think about the type of support that is best for your child. There are many therapies available through the NHS; Equine Assisted Therapy can often be utilised in addition to these. Where appropriate, equine practitioners will work as part of a team alongside other professionals, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and school staff, to support your child.



If your child struggles to engage with traditional mental health support (which is normal; there are many young people who find clinical settings overwhelming or intimidating), you might start to look at Equine Assisted Therapy as an alternative. If your child has interests around animals or the outdoors, this is often a good indicator that Equine Assisted Therapy will be helpful.

Equine Assisted Therapy, Equine Assisted Intervention, or Equine Assisted Learning can be a really positive experience for children and young people who are struggling with a variety of different challenges. This might be a diagnosed mental health condition such as depression or anxiety, learning difficulties, issues with school and attendance, or a difficult time at home such as bereavement or divorce. There is also particularly strong evidence for the effectiveness of these fields when the child has additional needs such as Autism or ADHD. There are a wide range of issues that can be eased by spending time with horses, and this is really one of the strengths of this type of therapy. It is inclusive and should be flexible to suit the needs of the child. However, there are many types of equine assisted support and it is important to choose the right one for your family circumstances. Practitioner expertise and services offered may vary between centres, so do some research and do not be afraid to ask lots of questions. All centres should be licensed and insured, and they should be able to show you these documents. You can also ask to take your child for a look round, to see if it is somewhere they will feel safe and comfortable.

10 Facts on Equines and Mental Health

1. A Listening Ear

It is common to find it hard to talk to our friends or family if we are struggling with our mental health. We might find it hard to trust those around us, or we might worry that we will be judged for what we think or feel. For this reason, horses can be much better listeners than people! We can talk to them about anything, knowing that they offer a safe and non-judgmental space for us to share our thoughts and emotions.

2. Movement

When we feel low or anxious, our activity levels tend to drop. This is because our body senses that we are not feeling 100% and tries to conserve energy - just like when we are physically ill. Exercise is one of the best things we can do for our mental health. Riding, or caring for, horses involves physical activity that can release hormones that help our mood to improve (even just brushing them!). This also brings increased awareness of our body and can build our fitness levels.



3. Being Outdoors

When we are struggling emotionally, we tend to stay indoors. This can feel like the safest place to be, as we do not have to face the challenges of being out in the world. But this is not always helpful, because we need natural light, fresh air, and all the sensations of the outdoors to help us feel our best, and cope with the challenges we are facing. Horses can give us a great reason to get outdoors and be in nature, no matter what the weather!

4. Emotional Awareness

Emotional awareness involves identifying what emotion we are feeling at any given time. If we have little emotional awareness, we may struggle to express what we are feeling and why. Spending time with horses can give us the time we need to process our inner experiences in a calm way. Horses are also very good at giving us feedback; they sense how we're feeling and react accordingly. When we understand how to read horses' behaviour, it helps us to understand ourselves as well. For example, if a horse that is usually relaxed has become spooky, we might ask ourselves whether we are feeling particularly worried something in our lives.

5. Communication

One of the key skills that horses can teach us is how to communicate. We spend a lot of time talking in our day to day lives, but horses make us concentrate on other forms of communication such as energy levels and body language. To effectively communicate with a horse, we must tune in to our own behaviour, and be able to change this, to influence the horse.

6. Motivation

Spending time with horses can be a highlight of the week for lots of people, both children and adults. It may be the thing we look forward to the most and can help us to get through difficult situations knowing that we have this time coming up. This helps to kickstart our motivation, making it easier to do other tasks that we would usually find hard.

7. Confidence & Self-esteem

We grow our self-esteem through developing confidence in our own abilities, and this is linked closely to our overall mental well-being. When we learn how to interact with horses, we are challenging ourselves to learn new skills, often exceeding our own expectations and gaining a sense of achievement. We may come to see ourselves as competent and successful, which helps us to feel good.

8. Living in the moment

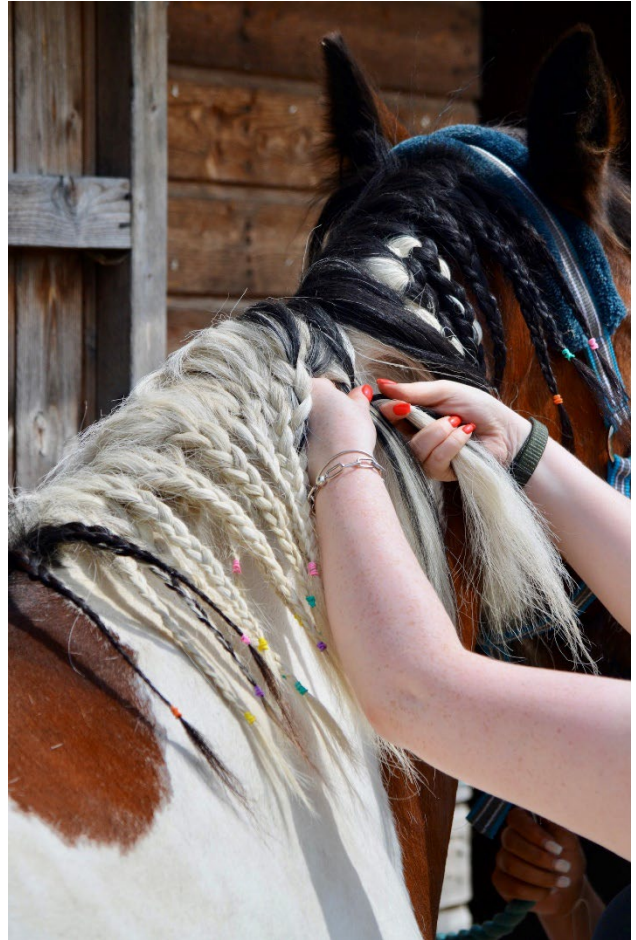
When our mental health is poor, we might begin to worry about the future or dwell on things that have happened in the past. A well-recognised strategy to help with this is to keep our attention focused on the present moment (sometimes called mindfulness). Horses are experts at being in the here-and-now, and spending time with them can teach us to focus on what is happening right now.

9. Soothing

Soothing is a very useful strategy when we're feeling worked up or distressed, it helps us to calm our emotions and come back to a manageable level of emotion. Many of the activities we do with horses have this soothing effect, but grooming is particularly useful in these circumstances. When we are brushing a horse, we are using our senses (particularly touch, sight and smell), and the calm, repetitive movement helps our mind to settle down.

10. Relationships

For those of us who struggle to make relationships with others, interacting with horses can be an opportunity to experience a more meaningful connection. The horse-human relationship is very unique; it requires a huge amount of trust and non-verbal communication from both sides. For us to build this relationship takes patience, acceptance and understanding, which are all helpful skills we can also use in other areas of life.



Acknowledgement

This Fact Sheet was prepared by Emily Walters who is the Founder and Director of the Hope Meadows Equine Assisted Therapy CIC (<https://www.hopemeadows.co.uk/>). Emily holds BSc (Hons) Psychology with Clinical Psychology, MSc Sport and Exercise Psychology, together with additional qualifications in specific therapy approaches. Emily believes strongly in the benefits that horses can bring to those struggling with their mental health and this is reflected in the work she does at Hope Meadows. Emily has put together an amazing 2 and 4-legged team at Hope Meadows.

