

A horse is a horse—and sometimes part of a clinical team, too

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Inside an equine-facilitated psychotherapy session

Typically, an equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) session begins when a mental health professional (MHP) dually credentialed as an equine specialist in mental health and learning, together with a certified therapeutic riding instructor, assess the patient's emotional and physical status to determine what activities he or she will be able to engage in physically with the horse that day. The clinical scenario below describes a hypothetical EFP session.

The patient, Samantha, has a history of posttraumatic stress disorder, chronic fatigue and dysfunction syndrome, and bipolar disorder. When she started EFP about 10 years ago, she was suicidal.

Today is a good day because Samantha feels hopeful, motivated, self-directed, and energetic. Also, she reports her pain is tolerable. She “checks in” with Domino, a large draft horse she has worked with for many years, by grooming him. Domino was the first living being she was able to truly trust after experiencing a series of abusive relationships.

She smells, hugs, strokes, and leans on Domino. He relaxes by lowering his head, deepening his breathing, and half-closing his eyes. After she applies the tack—a bit, bridle, reins, and vaulting surcingle (which goes around Domino's girth and has large handles on top)—she mounts him for a bareback ride. She leads him on a trail ride to the paddock, where she directs him to do figure eights.

These days, the MHP and certified therapeutic riding instructor stay in the background—literally and figuratively—because Samatha is more in charge of her own life than she was just a few years ago. She picks up the reins and directs Domino independently; this action represents the self-directed state of her current life. Ten years ago, the MHP had to lead Samantha around on her horse.

Although Samantha still has multiple psychological and physical disorders, she's no longer suicidal. She now has friends and healthy relationships. Her ability to take charge with Domino mirrors her ability to take charge in other aspects of her life.