

The Trail Less Travelled - Equine Experiential Learning (EEL)

EEL is an approach that heavily involves the use of metaphor as a way to address current life challenges and elicit unconscious material that may be limiting a healthier emotional and psychological state of being. As well as leadership/individual/group development, it is also helpful in a variety of psychiatric disorders including but not limited to depression, anxiety, PTSD, eating disorders, behavioral dysregulation and impulse control disorders, relationship issues and chemical dependency issues.

It involves setting up ground activities that invite the individual, couple, family or group to look at their current styles of relating, communication (including verbal and nonverbal), problem solving and emotional regulation. It also allows for increased awareness and assessment for the individual of their current beliefs and attitudes.

The metaphors set up can be formal (those presented by the team to address a particular issue) or natural (those elicited in the course of the session from the client as part of the unfolding process). Metaphors work by allowing those involved to do a transderivational search to locate the area of meaning most resonant with their current psychological challenges and state of functioning. So the activities set up with the horses all become potential metaphors. The lead lines, halters, the horses, the different aspects of the obstacle set up all become potential metaphors to address the goals and psychological difficulties in the client's life.

The horses can become aspects of a client's emotional life (ex. freedom from depression/anxiety, frustration, lack of will power) or they can become significant people in their life (parents, spouse, and employer). The obstacle can be metaphors for challenges to abstinence for addicted individuals, difficulty complying with medical treatments or anxiety in social situations to name a few. While engaging in these metaphors while doing the activities the individual has the opportunity to learn about how they approach problems in their life and establish relationships. The benefit is they not only process the session but have the opportunity to look at what works and does not and try again. Some aspects of how the horses are metaphors for relationships include looking at whose needs are being met, problem ownership (whose problem is it), taking responsibility in recognizing how personal actions affect others and looking at beliefs regarding relationships.

The insights gained and skills learned in the arena/field can then be taken to other aspects of the individual's life outside the session. Potential benefits include building self confidence, self efficacy and empowerment, communication, trust, anxiety reduction and impulse modulation, addressing boundaries, assertiveness and practicing social skills. It is a problem solving model of change that utilises metaphor to look at expanding perceived limitations, allows behavioral practice and cognitive restructuring. While it is powerful approach to individual and group insight & development, it is also a joyful and non threatening way of learning and building relationships and a unique and exciting way to reward team members for their dedication.

(acknowledgements to Dr Joe Lancia)

Why Horses and not other animals?

Horses are social animals like us and they like to have fun and live joyfully. They are masters of being as well as nonverbal communication, and can easily assess and mirror our true feelings and intentions, even when we are not fully aware of them. Because they are preyed upon in nature, these sensitive, mindful creatures have maintained a highly developed ability to respond to their environment. Subtle changes and nuances that we may not be aware of can provoke behaviors in them that give us information about ourselves. These behaviors help us identify our own patterns that impact our lives, relationships and careers in a negative way or keep us from moving forward. Interactions with the horses are conducted on the ground, so no riding is involved and no horse skills are necessary. Sessions are either structured or unstructured, depending on clients wants/needs, yet the issues that arise are the ones that most need to be addressed (even if not the

original intended issue). You can't lie to a horse, unlike some people. They expose our holes and inconsistencies and are non judgemental, not caring about our status, income, hairstyle or skin colour. They only care that our messages are clear, consistent & congruent. 'How' you are is 'who' you are to a horse.

Guiding Principles of Equine Experiential Facilitation

1. Equine experiential learning consists of all of the following:
 - a) an experience with the horses;
 - b) client reflection on that experience; and
 - c) integration of the learning from that experience into other areas of the clients' life.
2. All people are personally responsible for creating their desired outcome.
3. Everyone has within them the resources necessary to meet their life's challenges; they only need to access them.
4. Growth is a natural and desired process which allows you to move to your highest potential.
5. In order for change to occur, clients must take action.
6. Powerful questions and the client's search for answers create change. It is the facilitator's job to ask those powerful questions.
7. Horses are partners and co-facilitators in equine experiential learning; they are not tools.
8. Equine experiential learning is based on the principle that how we do one thing is most likely how we do everything. The way in which clients interact and react with horses is very similar to the way they interact and react with others; including their peers, clients, teachers, family members, etc. This allows the learning with horses to generalise back to their day to day lives and other arenas.
9. Horses' reactions to client behavior, intention, intuition, awareness, emotions, and interactions provide a reflection of what is really going on both inside the individual and inside the group.
10. Because horses live in the present moment, they model this for humans, and reward them when humans join them in "present moment" communication, focus and interaction.
11. The energy that humans project to themselves and others has a profound impact on what they are able to achieve. Horses react to this energy, and provide highly useful feedback about it.
12. When clients are congruent, they are able to reach their goals more easily. Equine experiential facilitation allows them to easily identify incongruencies and practice strategies for becoming more congruent.
13. Horses and people are unique individuals and will respond and react in different ways in different situations and with different people/horses.
14. What shows up in the interactions with the horses is what needs to happen to increase the success of the coaching.
15. The equine experiential facilitator must be open to the outcome that the experiences with horses provide. This may mean setting aside the agenda the client initially presents as well as any agenda or expectations the facilitator may have for about the experience and what will be learned.
16. Experiential learning (kinesthetic learning) is more powerful and long-lasting than visual or auditory learning.
17. As a facilitator, I must ask my clients to stretch themselves outside their comfort zone in order to achieve real change.
18. Because people process learning at different rates and in different ways, it may take time and reflection for the learning from the equine experience to be fully integrated.
19. As an equine experiential facilitator, my focus is on the process that emerges. The "success" or "failure" performing the activity is only relevant as it relates to the process.

(adapted from Dr Linda Pucci coaching guidelines)