
Self-Led Horsemanship™

The Engaged HORSE

The dynamic of intersubjectivity is a foundational relational piece of the horse and human's connection. The power of being seen and acknowledged within the intricate dance of attachment and detachment (NL) and disconnection are the beginnings of vulnerability and engagement.

The present moment is of the utmost importance when establishing communication between two beings who speak different languages. Relational trauma results in changes in the brain and body, and a disorientation of sorts when the past infiltrates the present which leads to confusion within the relationship. This is why the context within the immediacy of the interaction is vital for mutual understanding.

You may notice that clients can get tangled up in a web of projection, transference and re-enactments within their relationships. These are all unconscious parts-led processes aimed at relieving distress, anxiety and fear within the person. To summarize and define these concepts: *projection* is a process in which a person has unwanted characteristics that they displace onto others instead of seeing it within themselves. *Transference* is a phenomenon when a person expresses feelings towards another based upon the feelings or thoughts of someone in their past. *Re-enactments* are a process of acting out a past event, experience or relationship and associating their original emotions or beliefs in the present.

Clients often seek professional support due to unfulfilling relationships and not understanding the reasons for feeling "stuck". These patterns are almost impossible to change without awareness, insight and corrective experiences. Unfortunately, clients often get the opposite of what they really want in relationships due to their mis-attuned interactional patterns. Protective parts work tirelessly to prevent a recurrence of pain caused from relationship ruptures without repair, but despite their best efforts, they may unknowingly create the conditions to re-experience exactly what they are desperately trying to avoid.

These mis-attuned interactional patterns can be explained by conceptualizing the parts that become activated within relationships. Trauma burdens are held by exiles and are protected by managers and firefighters, who may carry their own burdens. In IFS, the manager's motto is "never again" and the firefighter's motto is "when all else fails". Exiles have their own motto of "don't forget". These mottos find expression in our client's reactions (for example, fear of abandonment and/or fear of closeness and vulnerability) to connection and detachment in relationships.

The client's relationship with the horse will also elicit these interactional patterns and get responses which may reflect those they have received in other relationships. It is critical that those who work with horses realize that they are not "mirrors" or a blank canvas to project upon. As clinicians we must be able to identify when a client's parts maneuvers them into patterns that no longer serve them. The Natural Lifemanship Institute (NL) states that "horse issues are clinical issues". Relationship Logic Principles (NL) maintain that "one cannot heal at the expense of another" and "if it's not good for one, eventually it will not be good for either". Since younger activated parts do not have the experience or knowledge to understand the effect their limited interpersonal repertoire has on their relationships, they will need support and Self-scaffolding in building relational consciousness.



Horses engaged in IFS psychotherapy help to provide a container for intrapersonal and interpersonal exploration. The Self has tremendous capacity for healing and post traumatic growth. The Horse's Self is a healing agent and "hope merchant" to facilitate "do-overs" and serve as an engaged witness to clients' experiences and pain.

Humans, like equines, need social engagement and connection. Our bodies and brains need attunement and acknowledgement of presence. Horses provide the opportunity for clients to work with their parts and gain immediate feedback of when they are parts-led or Self-led. Engagement with horses provide corrective relational experiences and "disconfirming knowledge" (Coherence Therapy) that challenges old belief systems. Relational consciousness means that we become attuned to another in a way that begets a spiritual awareness of not being alone. For some clients, the engaged presence of a horse may be the first time they have ever felt or been truly seen.

Many learners ask what kinds of horses make good therapy horses. The answer depends on who you ask and the background of that individual. Since I am a psychotherapist first and an equine professional second my answer may be different than others with multiple decades of horse experience. I knew very little about horses when I met Casper and I made the naïve assumption that every horse was like him. When I met him, he was around 17 years old and was trained in the English hunter discipline. At that time, he was serving as a lesson horse at an eventing barn. He was steady, forgiving, graceful, and very “wise”.

At that time, I was working as an equine-assisted psychotherapist and had never ridden a horse. I decided to take lessons to learn more about horses. The first lesson I took was on a horse named Steve. Steve was known at the barn as the “been there, done that, old bombproof horse”. He was slow and not very responsive, and seemed tired of his job. I felt bad for him, so I asked to ride another horse for my next lesson. The trainer said that she had another horse available at my lesson time, so we decided I would meet that horse next session.

The following week when I walked into the barn, I stopped and held my breath when I saw a large white horse standing in the cross-ties. I asked who this was, and the groom replied, “oh, this is Casper, he is a nice horse”. I slowly walked closer to him, but his eyes were glazed over and had a haunting emptiness. He blinked and looked at me when I moved towards him with the intention to introduce myself. His animation was delicate and ethereal. My heart opened to swallow his acknowledgement. I had never been looked upon by such an incredible being. There was something about him that was familiar, but at the same time, completely unrecognizable.

I brought him into the arena and he went right to the four-stepped mounting block. I hesitated before I climbed on. He turned and looked at me as if to say “it’s okay, I’m ready”. We walked around the arena and I relaxed to let him carry me. When I rode Steve, I was more in my head thinking “I have no idea what I’m doing and this is a little uncomfortable”, than in my body. Riding with Casper was a completely different somatic experience. I felt that I had found a home that I never knew existed. He responded to my body and knew I was there. After I dismounted, I thanked him for carrying me and giving me grace for my lack of riding knowledge. We walked together back into the aisle where the groom took off his tack. I told him I would be back next week.



Our weekly lessons began with me calling to him from outside of the pasture, and him walking right to me to put on his halter. They ended with an evening grazing session. I found myself missing his company during the week. Our weekly togetherness increased to three times a week once I was hired to teach clinical psychology at a nearby university. I took every opportunity to spend time with him. He took care of me while riding and was affectionate on the ground. One Thursday evening, about two months after we met, I noticed the owner of the barn watching me call to him and him responding and walking across the pasture to greet me. She said “you certainly have a connection with him, I haven’t seen him that happy in a long time”.



She explained that Casper’s person had died nine months before I met him and that she kept him at the farm because he was such a nice horse and anyone could ride him. She relayed that he especially liked working the kids’ camps. It made me smile that he worked with children, but I was also saddened that he had lost his person. Grief and I were well acquainted as I have experienced profound losses. She asked if I wanted to buy him. For a dollar. I gave her 4 quarters, wrapped my arms around Casper, and wept as he placed his head over mine. For I knew in my heart that had not just bought a horse, but I invested in a relationship in which I felt safe, understood and unconditionally loved.

As a new “horse person” I did not know what to expect. At first, I had a very difficult time asking him for what I needed, although I didn’t really know what I needed. I made requests of him in the way I felt most comfortable, which was just asking, not telling. When I held up his bridle and asked if I could put it on, he made the choice to say yes by putting his head down and letting me guide the bit in while staying soft and present. At the beginning I had no idea what I was doing, but he was a great teacher extended a lot of patience. Over the next few years, our secure attachment grew and our connected communication helped him transition from a riding horse to a therapeutic partner.

After acquiring another horse, Rocky, I realized what made my relationship with Casper so unique. It truly felt like he could read my mind, and to be honest, our relationship was almost effortless. He was very different from Casper, as I wrote about in Chapter 8 of the book “Integrating Horses into Healing”. Rocky came from a hoarding situation and was dropped off and abandoned at the facility where Casper was being boarded. Casper and Rocky bonded immediately upon his arrival. Since his new owners abandoned him, I took ownership of him after three-months. During this time, we worked on building trust and safety in our relationship.

The relationship with Rocky was not as easy and it led me to start thinking about horses’ attachment styles and to reflect on my own. I realized that my attachment “style” shifted depending upon who I was in relationship with. Dr. Frank Anderson discusses attachment

styles in his book “Transforming Trauma”. He explains that parts can have differing attachment styles from other parts. Client’s different attachment styles may become more evident and emerge as they begin to establish a relationship with the horse by making requests. It is vital that facilitators maintain a level of curiosity should they notice a shifting of attachment styles and not perceive it as mere incongruency.

It is my belief that horses can have very specific attachment strategies which have been shaped by past experiences. These strategies become evident within their regulated and dysregulated states. Part of the EP’s role is attuning to the states of the horse and increase the connection if the horse becomes dysregulated. Assisting the client to notice the states of the horse and support the horse’s regulation increases Self-Energy within the client. This is a ripe therapeutic opportunity to notice the horse’s response to the client’s Self and the subsequent shifts within the horse.

It is imperative to be aware of the horse’s regulation and dysregulation signals and patterns. The table included below highlights some observable signs of these patterns and is not meant to be an exhaustive list.

Dysregulated

- Wide eyes and nostrils
- Tense muscles, head high
- Ignoring or resisting
- Checked out / dissociated
- Eyes glazed over
- Trying to control the relationship or be controlled in the relationship
- Inappropriately making requests

Regulated

- Responds with cooperation to requests
 - Appears calm and relaxed
 - Facial muscles and tail relaxed
 - Eyes and ears track you
 - Head may be lowered
 - Willingness to engage appropriately and positively
 - Expresses their “opinions” with clear communication
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A good therapy horse does not mean a perfectly behaved, compliant, “bomb-proof” or a do-whatever-you-want-to-me-horse. It’s a horse that provides feedback, has an opinion, and is allowed to be an individualized being. EEP helps to heal and grow the human and the horse. We all have growing edges, triggers and external activators, preferences, and opinions. Humans and horses are social creatures that require engagement in relationships.

This also does not mean that every horse is a good candidate to be a therapy horse. Every horse is different and some may not enjoy the work. Equines may illustrate a pattern of not wanting to engage with clients across multiple variables. For example, resisting going into

the round pen or arena, being very vocal when removed from herd mates, refusing to engage with the client, or a marked change in their responses to the facilitation team, just to name a few. Notice your reactions to the horse's behaviors... are you curious? Frustration? Reflect on and work with the parts that may become activated within you. There may be a whole host of reasons for these behaviors. The key is to remain curious and open to understand what the horse is communicating with you and what the horse may need to work through their responses. It is important to know the horse's baseline and pay attention to patterns and shifts in their behaviors with and without clients present. They may need more connection with you in order to work through their growing edges. Knowing the horse and understanding the horse's communication is vital for the horse's well-being. Be curious about what the horse prefers and enjoys. This requires being a student of the horse.

Being a Student of "this HORSE with this Client"

Building relational consciousness with intersubjectivity calls for everything to be considered within the context in which the interaction between client and horse occurs, and the environment in which it occurs. It is imperative that the facilitation team let go of any agendas for the session and instead hold the intention to create a Self-Led space for the interaction to organically unfold.

IFS informed EEP posits that healing can occur more deeply and permanently when there are external engaged witnesses to acknowledge the client's pain and suffering. Connection with a horse while trauma processing is much different than within the therapist-client relationship.

The therapist-client relationship has fundamental boundaries which exist within the professional relationship. The therapist (or practitioner) is being paid for a service and therefore the context of the relationship is not based on relational reciprocity and has an inherent unequal distribution of power. The client does not know the professional outside of their role and therefore is unaware of the richness of their unique personhood. The authenticity that reflects nuances that emerge within personal relationships (parts) may not be elicited in session. While it is true that "the personal is the professional" and being Self-Led means a genuine authenticity, the context of the relationship is professional not personal, and therefore is limited.

Horses are not bound by the same restrictions in the therapeutic relationship. They have the choice to be or not to be with the client. Horses have the freedom of reactions and responses to the client that therapists and equine professionals do not. A horse's feedback is authentic to the relationship with the client without fear of rupturing therapeutic rapport, having an agenda and expectations, or forecasting an interaction.

Like mental health and equine professionals, however, horses have unique personalities, preferences, experiences and histories that do influence their relationship with clients. It is the equine professional's intention to develop their own relationship with the horses that they partner with in sessions in order to get a deeper understanding of each horse's baseline and patterns in relationships and attachment patterns. Noticing a horse's "parts" is extremely valuable data as the horse also heals within relationships with clients.



For example, the more I got to know Rocky the more I realized how different he was with different people. I would receive texts from the boarding facility staff that he would break every cross-tie they put him in and would be nearly impossible to catch in the pasture. They stated he would become "aggressive" when the staff tried to ride him, but would be different when teens in the riding program "used" in him lessons. They said he could be dangerous and would buck off adults.

My reactions ranged from "I think you have the wrong horse" to terror that he would deliberately harm someone. I was confused because his behavior was different with me. He was never aggressive, but could be pushy on the ground (trying to control the relationship). When I would retrieve him from the pasture he came to the gate, often being there as he saw me walking from my car. I went slowly when saddling him and casually rode him. In the beginning we were both nervous, but once we found our rhythm, we would both relax and enjoy our time together. Although he had a high startle response, he never bucked me off, kicked out, or refused to be ridden. I was interested in getting to know him and finding ways to have a conversation with him. I understood him as an anxious horse who didn't trust anyone because he lacked consistency and connection in his life. I wanted to give him that. I did this by being clear in my intentions when I made viable requests and was genuinely curious about him while attuning to his responses.

I concluded that he was trying to communicate that he didn't feel safe being cross-tied or ridden by adults due to their lack of attunement and task-oriented handling. They were trying to get him to submit to their demands, and he fought or fled when he felt unsafe. But that didn't happen when he was with teens. Perhaps he could more regulated because he was able to understand that their intention was to have an experience and were more focused on themselves rather than making him perform. Probably for similar reasons, he was never aggressive with my clients or students. In fact, those who felt rejected, socially isolated and misunderstood seemed to gravitate towards Rocky. They focused on building a connection with him and exploring their own interpersonal patterns.

Over time, Rocky's behavior became more consistent as he became more regulated, thus increasing his window of tolerance to be more present and less reactive. The physiological brain-body integration explanations made sense to me. However, when I considered the variables contributing to the differences in Rocky's interactions, I began to consider his negative behaviors as protective strategies, and wondered if those protective strategies could be considered parts.

To be clear, I am aware of the dangers of anthropomorphizing animals. I am also aware that some psychological constructs can be useful when carefully applied to animals in a relational context in order to more readily understand their behaviors. Consider that all equines are unique in their own expression of their personality. They all have likes and dislikes. They become bonded with specific horses in the herd and have conflicts with others. Horses are relational beings. They have behavioral strategies to communicate needs and they can be very different with different people. Sometimes they have extreme parts, often for very good reasons (eg: Rocky's "aggression"), and when those are acknowledged, understood and treated with compassion (along with having good boundaries), the energy shifts and the parts soften. Consistency increases predictability and predictability builds trust. Extreme parts learn by experience that they do not need to do their jobs to protect the system.

At the time of this writing, to my knowledge, there are no studies focused on IFS with horses or parts of their personalities. It is a goal of Equid-Nexus to conduct such research in the future. Therefore, attributing parts to a horse's behavior in relationships is purely a theory and an extrapolation of IFS concepts adapted to equines. Again, this is not to anthropomorphize horses, but is used instead as a lens for the equine professional to put the horse's behavior into the context within the interaction with the client.

The Natural Lifemanship Institute (NL)¹ teaches about the application of pressure in order to make a request of the horse. The horse can ignore, resist or cooperate with that request, as the horse is given the choice in how to respond instead of being made to comply. If the horse says "no", curiosity leads us to ask "why no?" to get a clearer understanding of what the horse is trying to communicate within the context of the situation.

Noticing the horse's regulation and dysregulation patterns is key information. It is important to get a baseline of the horse's regulated or dysregulated states to inform the context of the situation. Being curious about the horse's reaction to stimuli inside and outside of the session will help provide a clearer picture of the quality of intersubjectivity between client and horse. Clients may take on emotions or responsibility from others that is not theirs to carry. The equine professional is tasked to distinguish between the horse's responses to the context with the human or if the responses are coming from the horse about its own internal dynamic.

¹ Jobe, T

For example, if the session is being facilitated outside and it is quite windy, a horse may have a behavioral pattern which indicates that they do not like the wind and begin rearing or running. The client may think they are “causing” the horse to act in this manner. The work is guiding the client to be curious about what is happening inside of them and notice what parts are activated in response to the horse’s behavior. Assisting the client to find and focus on the part increases awareness of their internal states and what the part is trying to communicate. This shift in observing the parts instead of being absorbed by them leads to un-blending from the activated parts and invites a broader perspective of the horse’s behavior. If the client is unable to un-blend, then the work is with the part(s) that are activated. Getting more information by fleshing out and befriending the part provides increased insight for the client and facilitation team. The mental health professional focuses on the client’s process while the equine professional attunes to and asks for connection with the horse.

Dysregulated horse states are ripe therapeutic opportunities to extend Self-Energy to the horse and aids in co-regulation and connection. The client witnesses this and begins to make the distinction between what emotions and reactions are “theirs” and what are the horses’. This can be a healing opportunity that clients with developmental and attachment trauma may never have had. This change in perspective increases curiosity and decreases fear. Identifying and healing fear is the portal to courageous connection as fear creates isolation and separateness from Self and others – for both humans and horses.

Returning to the dysregulated states of horses, equine professionals need to know what dysregulation looks like for each of the horses they partner with in sessions. Some horses are more prone to hyperarousal while some lean towards hypoarousal. Dysregulation is on a continuum and can change over time as the horse becomes more regulated by brain integration. IFS informed EEP facilitates horse regulation by interacting with the Self-Led facilitation team and by being in relationship with the client that is actively working towards a corrective experience based upon the intersubjectivity of the moment with the horse.

Natural Lifemanship maintains that “horse issues are clinical issues” which means that the horse’s well-being is of the utmost importance as “one cannot heal at the expense of another”. This means that equine professionals must maintain connection with the horse throughout the session or until the client is able to sustain engagement with the horse (or while they are actively working up to this). The horse must be assessed before and after sessions for regulation, based upon the horse’s baseline.

Self-Led Horsemanship™ as “Lifemanship”

There are many types of equine-facilitated services (EFS) and models of equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP). Each has a rich foundation of theory and practice interventions. Although there are training programs and certification institutes many places throughout the world, the EFS field is relatively small. Prominent founders and leaders have all crossed paths and learned from each other on their journeys, and some have developed their own models of incorporating equines into learning or psychotherapy. Many models have made significant contributions to this fast-growing field and it is highly encouraged to learn from as many as possible.

While horses serve as the prominent feature in interventions, each model has its own way of regarding the equine’s usefulness and applicability. Some models see horses as mirrors for humans, while others see them as mystical creatures. Other models use horses as a vehicle for healing the human body, while others see them as wise story tellers. Horses are sometimes called “therapists” and anthropomorphized by client transferences or as a projection of themselves. All models can be useful depending upon client goals and the treatment team’s training and theoretical orientation.

The Equid-Nexus facilitation model regards horses as sentient beings, capable of making their own choices within relationships, and have the capacity to think, learn and make their own decisions without the need for dominance, control or compliance. Self-Led Horsemanship™ maintains that equines are an equal partner and are to be respected within relationships. The foundation of horses and humans having connected relationships is the hallmark of The Natural Lifemanship Institute (NL).

This principle-based model was developed by Tim Jobe in 1986, and in 2010 Natural Lifemanship was officially co-founded with his wife, Bettina Shultz-Jobe. NL successfully marries neurobiology and attachment theory, bringing forth “the art and science of connected relationships”, as relationships are co-created between human and horse. The NL “relationship logic principles” are a foundational brick of the Equid-Nexus model, as they encapsulate my own interpersonal ethics with horses and humans that were reflected in my relationship with Casper and continue to evident in the relationships with my current horses. Although not an exhaustive list, below is a list of a few NL principles that I have found particularly useful:

- Equines are sentient beings.
- The relationship with the horse is a real relationship (not a tool, a metaphor, instrument, or mirror).
- Healing cannot happen at the expense of another.
- The absence of no is not a yes.
- Safety comes from a connected relationship; not from arbitrary safety rules.

- If it's not good for both, eventually it's not good for either.
- Connection with Self is necessary in order to request connection from others.
- Who we are in session is more important than what we do.
- The horse doesn't know who the client is.

In Chapter 8 of the book "Integrating Horses into Healing", I detail blending IFS specifically with the NL model. For the purposes of this writing, I will provide an overview of NL's basic tenets for context of fostering a connection between human and horse. Additional learning is encouraged as a wealth of information is available on The Natural Lifemanship's website (<https://naturallifemanship.com/>).

(Engaged) Connection is Always the Goal

Since NL is a principle-based model, it does not offer specific techniques or skills, but rather focuses on applying the principles in requesting connection and consent in building a real relationship with a horse. Making requests in relationships and getting needs met is a vital component in developing secure attachment and trust in relationships. Pressure is used to make requests to connect through attachment or detachment, and the release of pressure is the reward for connected cooperation. The application of pressure and release is contingent upon the horse's responses of connection, compliance, resistance, or ignoring.

The application of pressure begins with the least amount of pressure because this gives the horse the most choice. The horse will let you know how much pressure they need in how they respond. Pressure comes from the core of the body and directed towards the horse's back hip for attachment (asking the horse to look at you or follow you), and towards the horse's barrel for detachment (asking the horse to move away from you while remaining connected or allowing you to move around the standing horse while remaining connected). The dance of attachment and detachment illustrates the conversation between the person and the horse, and the quality of the connection.

The pressure is released if the horse understands the question grants the request with connection. The pressure is increased if the horse ignores the request and released once the request is answered. The application of pressure remains the same when the horse is resisting, which can mean the horse is looking for the right answer. The pressure is held until the horse understands and connects. It is very important to note that cooperation in a connected relationship is not the same as compliance.

There is a vast difference between a task-oriented interaction with a horse and a connected conversation in order to fulfill a request. For example, making a request by

asking a horse to walk with you without a halter and a lead rope can be achieved in a variety of different ways. In NL it is not about the task or the achievement of a certain goal. It is about building a connected relationship with your horse so that the horse can choose to walk with you or say no (by ignoring or resisting). Saying “no” is information, so being curious and asking “why no?” is the next best question in order to continue the conversation.

Conversely, if you make the request for a horse to walk with you and they are conditioned to comply, they will answer the request and walk with you while being disconnected or checked out. In addition, the horse may try to control the person or have the person control them when they are not connected. So simply achieving a task does not deepen the relationship, it just further deepens the horse’s neuropathways of compliance. However, by practicing making requests for attachment and detachment, the horse is asked to think and make its own choices, hence creating new adaptive neuropathways.

Along with attachment theory, Dr. Bruce Perry’s Neurosequential Model is another major foundational component in NL’s trauma-focused model, as connection can best be achieved with an integrated regulated brain. There are 4 regions of the brain that gain particular attention in integration: the brainstem, the diencephalon, the limbic system, and the pre-frontal cortex. In order to help heal trauma, new neuropathways must be formed. New neuropathways are formed by providing rhythmic, patterned, repetitive, predictable stimuli and is helpful to heal relational ruptures and trauma for humans and horses alike. This begs the question “what does connection feel like”?

People often ask, “how do I know if the horse is connected?”. The answer is that it is a **felt sense**. This is a large component of the work since people can experience connection differently. The first step is knowing what connection feels like specifically for you by being curious and open to explore your inner world.

Connection Reflection

If it feels right to you, close your eyes or soften your gaze. Take a few deep breaths and notice the support of what you are sitting on. Allow yourself to go to a time when you felt a strong connection to something. It could be another person, an animal, or even a place. What do you notice in or around your body? Focus in what you notice. Is there an image? A memory? A thought or an emotion? A physical sensation? Allow yourself to deepen into this experience. When you feel that you’ve got it, and it feels right for you, maybe add some bilateral tapping to enhance this experience. When that feels complete for now, gently open your eyes and maybe jot down a few notes.

This reflection practice highlights connection through detachment, meaning that it is possible, or maybe even probable, that whatever you just experienced was influenced by someone or something that may not have been present with you. This is an incredibly important skill to hone, especially if a person only feels connection through physical presence or even through touch. It's also possible that this reflection may have proven difficult. If this was your experience, what did you notice? Perhaps a part(s) emerged that hold reactions of sadness, regret or guilt. This highlights the usefulness of an IFS framework.

Identifying needs and requesting them to be met can be extremely difficult for individuals who have experienced developmental and relational trauma. In order to heal and subsequently build securely attached relationships we must first connect with the parts that protect us from that pain and then connect and heal parts that are burdened by the pain.

The NL framework summarized here is a vantage point to understand the main Equid-Nexus premise that engaged connection from Self is always the intention and needed to build authentic and durable relationships within our internal system and with others. The relational healing (and sometimes spontaneous unburdening) occurs when we have more access to and discover our true Self by intentional engagement with another (a horse). The process of building connected relationships brings forth the opportunity to repair inevitable ruptures and with each experience of repair results in increased healing and trust into the relationship. The benefits to the horse can be equally transformative as they become more regulated with increased brain integration due to engaging in connected Self-Led relationships.

Self-Led Horsemanship™ is defined as upholding the values of constant consent, cooperation, respect, patience, kindness, connection, curiosity, and the compassionate treatment of equines engaging in life with us; regardless of their role or lack thereof. A commitment to treating each equine as an individual with preferences and the ability to say no. It is an ethical dedication to listening to horses with our eyes, a “gut” felt sense, our open hearts, and our Core Selves. Self-Led Horsemanship conveys a promise to take responsibility for ourselves, and continue to heal on our own journeys of contemplative Self-Discovery.

This truncated summary of the NL model is included in this writing to provide perspective and clarity in the importance of connected relationships and the ethical treatment of horses. Both are foundational to Equid-Nexus. Again, it is highly encouraged to continue education and training, and hopefully you continue to familiarize yourself with everything that Natural Lifemanship has to offer, both personally and professionally.

The 12 A's of Self-Led Horsemanship™

Self-Led Horsemanship is foundational to the ethical partnership with equines providing IFS+EMDR EEP. It is not about perfection in relationships, but rather a willingness to uphold an intentional promise to be willing to invest in the relationship in the spirit of healing and fulfillment. There are 12 qualities offered to impart understanding of this intentional promise. These qualities are explained below and specifically apply to the horse-human relationship. The reader is encouraged to reflect on the presence of these characteristics in their equine relationships; to take what makes sense and leave the rest.

- Attention – The person focuses their senses and notices the horse's quality of presence, behaviors, and communication expressions.
- Awareness – Being conscious of your internal state and how your behavior or energy impacts the horse. Being conscious of the external experiences and interactions with the horse.
- Attunement – The ability to sense into the behavioral expressions, energy and pressure of the horse's requests and needs and to respond intersubjectively.
- Acknowledgement – Recognition of and responsiveness to the horse's "tries" and willingness to engage and cooperate without compliance.
- Affirming – Expression of support and encouragement to positively reinforce the quality of engagement that feels right within the context of the situation.
- Appreciation – The extension of gratitude towards the horse.
- Authenticity – Congruency in thought, action and expression with the horse.
- Attachment – The feelings of closeness and affection within the connected bond with the horse.
- Accommodation – Adapted from Jean Piaget, meaning to be open to modify existing schemas in an effort to receive new information from the horse's expression.
- Articulation – Expressing needs and effectively making clear requests of needs and boundaries within the horse-human relationship.
- Accountability – The acceptance of taking ownership for your part's behaviors, actions, re-enactments, transference, and displacement of emotions and expressions onto the horse. This also applies to not internalizing (or taking personally) the horse's behavior or reactions (their "parts") that are incongruent to the situation or personal interchange. Discernment is found through an intersubjective perspective.
- Alliance – A collaborative relationship between human and horse to promote a mutually beneficial connection. Indicates a willingness, intention and commitment to repair ruptures within the relationship.



Self-Led Horsemanship is not about technique, but rather about intention versus agenda, experience versus task, and a willingness to be a student of yourself and the horse.

Reflection

What did you notice (thoughts, beliefs, physical sensations, emotions) as you were reading these qualities? Did any memories emerge? Take a moment to get curious about the parts of you that popped up. Ask them what they would like you to know. Ask yourself, how am I feeling towards these parts? to identify any other parts that emerge in response. Getting a clearer understanding of your activated parts uncover what IFS calls “trailheads”. Trailheads indicate that healing is needed around a certain issue. This illustrates the importance of doing your own personal work in on the journey of Self-Led Horsemanship.

Equine “Self”-Care

Building an engaged, connected relationship with a horse is not dissimilar to building one with another human. Applying the values of permission and consent and the pillars of compassion, connection, and curiosity to an engaged relationship is transferable and applicable to a relationship with an equine. The mindset of active and thoughtful engagement in communication allows the dialogue to unfold and increases understanding and cooperation. Self-Led Horsemanship embodies the 8C’s and 5P’s in addition to conceptualizing the horse’s responses and feedback in terms of protector parts communicating consent, ignoring and resisting requests.

Horses that partner with humans in therapy need their voices to be heard and their wisdom to be whispered. In order to hear them we need to be attuned to the unique way they communicate. Equines may participate in other jobs or activities for their owners or where they are boarded. They could be psychotherapy horses, work within occupational and recreational therapies, lesson horses, utilized for trail rides, show horses, eventing horses, and/or are ridden by their individual owners. There will be some activities they enjoy and others they do not. Their consent and permission are not always asked or even considered. They may try to communicate but it may not be received. Self-Led Horsemanship helps humans listen to their equine partners and work to understand them. In IFS we say “don’t think just ask the part” when we are curious about something. How we ask is as important as what and why we ask.

When we request a horse to partner with us in the therapeutic process, we are asking them to show up as they are, to engage with our clients and to bear witness to their pain. This is not something to be glossed over or to be taken lightly. As equine professionals we must attune to our horse’s experiences before, during and after the session, and respond appropriately. Processing trauma can be taxing on both humans and horses. Self-care is paramount to be able to provide the space for the client’s healing to unfold and supporting our equine partners. Adopting curiosity into the horse’s unique needs will help develop supportive interventions to prevent burn-out.

Engaged connection with the horse starts with the team before the session begins and continues after the session ends.

To adequately address the horse’s needs, the equine professional should spend time with the horse prior to session to assess the horse’s current state and check if there are any physical issues. Getting a behavioral baseline prior to the session may help to identify any discrepancies or unique behavior during session and help put the behavior in the proper context instead of contributing the horse’s responses to the client. Requesting connection

through attachment and detachment is also an important assessment of how connected the horse is with the EP and vice versa.

As previously mentioned, the EP is the anchor for the horse during session. After the session the best practice would be for the EP to spend time with the horse holding space for the horse to release any remaining tension in their body and to return to baseline (or better) state. It is through the engaged secure relationship with the EP that the horse feels safe enough to make the best decisions for how to take care of themselves, while being scaffolded with the EP's Self-Energy and Presence. Attuning to the horse's unique needs after sessions will help the horse grow in durability and flexibility. EP's are highly encouraged to develop a Self-care plan for themselves and for each horse in their program. Another component is choosing the equines to partner with on the facilitation team. To shift to that discussion, I offer a poem dedicated to Tim Jobe.

Miniature Horses, why?



The first time meeting my boys Louie and Warrior.
This poem was written with love for Tim Jobe, as a
response to his cowboy poetry - "Miniature Horses...
why?"

*Short legs, golden hearts, rounded bellies and
frequent side eyes*

The miniature horse is often cast aside

*Their usefulness lies not in their ability to carry a
rider or win dollar ribbons or prizes to flaunt
But rather in captivating the hearts of those
whose fears creep up and haunt*

*Like echoes in cold corridors and
dark attics of the mind*

*The past so deliberately and desperately left
behind*

*The miniature horse can be fierce in their own
right - to smooth away the wrinkles of worry and
fear and replace it with the purity of connection
and
joyous tears*

*The miniature horse has quite the affection - if
only we use unbiased eyes of connection....
Free from perfection and filled with appreciation*

*For those short legs and rounded bellies and side
eyes are gifts to help us find ourSelves within,
and for that they have my lifelong dedication.*

Miniature horses have always been a powerful presence at Whispering White Horse Stables, as they have been in the therapy program since its inception. Many programs include a few token minis, but in my experience, they are often not taken as seriously as their full-sized counterparts. Perhaps due to their size, their fluff or considerably cuteness, minis may often get overlooked as serious partners in psychotherapy or learning sessions. They are often offered up to be brushed or painted, or relegated to work with children as they may be deemed "safer" than full size horses.

While the safety issue may have merit, they are not often not treated with the same respect as other equines due to their size. I have often heard them being referred to in derogatory ways when they try to communicate their opinion, have specific needs, make requests of humans, or deny the requests of others. Given their stature relative to humans, they are

subject to more exertion of power and control, which unfortunately is sometimes modeled by staff to clients.

Equine welfare issues, such as pervasive “goals” of control and compliance, are clinical issues (NL principle) and are widespread across all breeds and disciplines. However, given that the majority of miniature horses are not often subjected to the rigorous training of riding disciples, they are less conditioned to comply. It would seem that a mini’s “short comings” and the lack of taking them seriously may have gifted them with the grace of “just being horses” instead of applying more typical expectations of a larger horse.

It is important to note that these reflections emerged from my own experiences and are not intended to speak on behalf of anyone else’s experience or other owners of miniature horses. Context is crucial to convey why I personally choose to partner with minis in my psychotherapy program and why I believe they are invaluable assets.

Exercise

Imagine you are walking in a large field on a warm day. The sun is shining and you can feel the breeze. The grass is green and knee-high. You are relaxed and content.

Suddenly, you hear the thundering sound of hooves hitting the ground. Over a small hill you notice a herd of horses running full speed heading straight towards you.

You suddenly stop and catch your breath – they are miniature horses!

Reflection Questions

What was your reaction? Did your experience shift when you realized they were minis?

Do you have parts that have opinions about minis? Have you treated them differently than full-size equines? What has influenced your thoughts and behaviors? Can you identify the parts that hold these beliefs?

I believe that the personal is the professional, and a person’s lived experiences influence their choices and decision making. My answer to the question of “why miniature horses?” began when a colleague rescued a few from a hoarding situation and began integrating them into her program which I was a part of at the time. Previous to these experiences, I had only seen minis at an equine assisted psychotherapy conference, seemingly on hand for comedic relief. As I started working with my colleague’s minis I noticed that they were somewhat different from her other horses, and from this perception I noticed I also reacted differently towards them.

Looking back, I realize that there were a multitude of reasons why I was drawn to them. When they first arrived, they needed extra care and attention and a few were sick. Their

perceived differences may be attributed to my transference and projection, but also rooted in reality due to their own histories and coming out of a less than optimal situation. By observing my colleague care for them I learned about their unique needs and over time witnessed them coming out of their “shells”. I could tell that they probably were not handled often and were distrustful of people, but I didn’t have the understanding or knowledge at the time that they were checked out and dissociated. It took time and attention for their unique personalities to emerge.

At the time I had minimal horse experience, so the minis and I were learning the equine facilitated psychotherapy process together. Facilitating sessions with them (and the other horses in the herd) increased my confidence and installed a belief that I was in the right place at the right time. When I was ready, I added two young mini appaloosa geldings to my family and thus had a herd of three.

I quickly became a student of the miniature horse in a different way than I had become with Casper, who was 16.3. Honestly, I was more comfortable building a relationship from scratch with them than I would a full-size younger horse. A part of me believed there was less risk of “screwing them up” because I had limited expectations for them anyway – they were to become therapy horses so they “just” needed to be themselves and be well behaved (eg: standing for the vet and barefoot trimmer, and not kicking, rearing or biting people). I had no idea at the time, but these two mini half- brothers changed the trajectory of my therapy herd and my identity as an equine professional.

Currently there are 6 miniature horses in my program; 4 of which are related and the other 2 are related. I have two sets of dams and geldings, and a sister to my half-brother geldings. They partner with me for trainings, and with groups, individuals, couples, and families. I live the Natural Lifemanship principles to foster secure connected relationships and have used them to teach one of my minis to carriage drive. The others have made spaces for themselves in other ways, such as the daughter mare, who has a special talent for facilitating ground-based IFS informed EMDR.

It's important to clarify the importance of including this section in this writing. It is not to encourage or persuade people get miniature horses to add to their programs. Rather, it is to encourage thoughtful reflection on your own story and relationship with equines; essentially your “why horses?”. Remember that our parts can heavily influence and persuade our “whys”. Understanding your own projections and transferences are a vital step towards healing relational wounds, which creates more internal space to allow for curiosity and Self-Led facilitation for others. This is essential work if you partner with your own horses during sessions. In addition, I highly encourage facilitators to do their own work with their horses to strengthen the relationship and bond, to increase trust and understanding, and to repair any relational ruptures. This is essential to Self-Led Horsemanship.

While there are numerous circumstances and ways we acquire horses, below are some reflection questions to get curious about your own equine choices:

- What breeds or physical characteristics are you most drawn to?
- Do you prefer a certain gender over the other?
- What relational characteristics are important to you?
- What kinds of equines are you least drawn to?
- What are your beliefs and ethics about purchasing, breeding, and rescuing equines?
- What are your thoughts about papered versus stock?
- What equine qualities are you concerned about or fearful of?

Connect with your internal system by going inside and noticing what is present. Be curious and ask what parts answered these questions. Did you experience any polarizations? Befriend these parts to understand their experiences and the reasons for their choices.

Roles of the Self-Led Facilitation Team

Below is a list of bullet points that highlight the roles of both the equine professional and mental health facilitator. While IFS, EMDR and EEP have specific interventions to process trauma, the importance of being Self-Led cannot be overstated. Self-Led facilitation, put simply, is to be present with the client and horse and with your internal system. It is the balance of intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness. Returning to curiosity with an intention for connected engagement is ultimately the main goal of the facilitation team – essentially being is more important than doing.

Having clarity and differentiation in the team's roles promotes confidence and perspective between professionals and increases their connection with each other. Modeling securely attached relationships between the facilitation team (MHP, EP and horse) holds the container for hope and healing, as IFS facilitators are "hope merchants" for the client. The below list is not exhaustive, but rather a blueprint for reference.

Equine Professional

- Use Self-Energy as an anchor for the horse
- Manage own parts by awareness of thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, and not having an agenda
- Holding space for the horse throughout the unfolding process of exploration of engaged connection with the client
- Identify relational dynamics which may be harmful to the horse
- Balance continual interaction with the process between therapist and client while maintaining focused connection with the horse
- Noticing the horse's parts, patterns and reactions to the client
- Facilitate the client's awareness to the horse's reactions
- Providing appropriate thoughtful horse disclosure on the horse's background

Mental Health Professional

- Extending Self-Energy as a scaffold for the client
- Manage own parts by awareness of thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, and not having an agenda
- Facilitate the session with the 6Fs and the healing steps
- Attune to the client and horse's interaction, notice blending or re-enacting from a part(s)
- Use relational observations as interweaves to assist in the intention of building relational consciousness through intersubjectivity
- Working with the equine professional in noticing the horse's reactions when the client is in a part versus Self

The below diagram provides a visual representation of the interpersonal variables present during sessions.

