

A little 'horseplay' eases veterans' mind, body and soul

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Lisa Conway during riding therapy

(HealthDay)—U.S. Navy veteran Lisa Conway was having trouble

coping with mobility issues related to two newly diagnosed autoimmune diseases when her therapist suggested equine-assisted therapy.

"I rode [horses](#) mainly as a youngster and a couple of times as an adult. When my therapist suggested equine [therapy](#), I thought, 'Are you kidding me? How am I going to get on a horse?' " she said.

But the goal of equine-assisted therapy isn't to ride, unless that's what you want to do, Conway explained.

"The idea is just to show up. Horses are so healing that just looking into their eyes can help. At the time, I couldn't even stand for more than a few minutes. But the first time I went, I did ride, and I cried tears of joy when I rode," she said.

Conway said she had been feeling sorry for herself and had a serious "poor me" attitude. Since then, the horses have helped her learn to live with her condition and have a more positive attitude.

"When you're working with the horse, you don't think about anything else. I didn't think about my disease at all. It was the most freeing experience I've had as an adult, and I really feel like it's saved my life. Getting on the horse, I felt like Humpty Dumpty after the fall, and the equine therapy put me all back together again," Conway said.

Debbie Touchette brought the equine-assisted therapy to the Jefferson Barracks at the VA Medical Center in St. Louis, where she is a recreational therapist. She founded a program—called Medicine Horse LLC—that would bring horses to the medical center twice a month. The program, in its fourth year, is dubbed "Saddle Up."

Touchette said that "the benefit of the horses is remarkable. We're finding that mood increases, and anxiety and pain decreases after the

horses are here." (The veterans complete pre- and post-therapy surveys about their symptoms.)

People throughout the medical center can participate in the horse therapy, including those undergoing physical rehabilitation after strokes, amputations or joint replacements. Working with the horses—brushing them, for example—can be part of their rehabilitation.

Some of the veterans are dealing with depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Some are homeless. Some have schizophrenia. Some are dealing with substance abuse.

The therapy begins with an introduction to the horses. Patients learn how to approach them and gauge how the horses are feeling. Then the groups might work on communication and trust. Vets pair up, and one, who is blindfolded, leads the horse through an obstacle course as the other gives directions.

This type of therapy isn't yet standardized and may differ from program to program.

Laura Vernon, an associate professor of psychology at Florida Atlantic University in Jupiter, Fla., has studied equine-assisted therapy for PTSD and anxiety.

She said equine-assisted therapy means a range of things, and it can help patients and professionals alike.

"For some people, equine-assisted therapy is about doing activities with a horse and learning to ride. Other programs include trained [mental health professionals](#), and the horse is a tool in the therapy, kind of a co-therapist," Vernon said.

Horses are keenly attuned to human gestures and facial expressions, she noted. "Reactions of the horses can alert a therapist to what aspects of non-verbal behavior to pay attention to," Vernon explained.

People who have participated in this type of therapy talk about being able to let their guard down. They may feel they can be more emotional with the animals. And, Vernon said, the physical contact can be "reassuring and freeing."

In a study of people with PTSD or anxiety who received 12 hours of equine-assisted therapy, Vernon and her colleagues found that it decreased PTSD symptoms and lessened anxiety. It also helped people be less judgmental and more accepting of others.

"The findings were very impressive," Vernon said.

Conway would agree.

"I would say that horses heal. They have a great effect on mind, body and soul. I recommend equine therapy all day, every day. If any other VA medical center is thinking about this and has the opportunity, I would say the healing powers are magnificent," she said.

More information: Learn more about complementary approaches to mental health problems, including equine-assisted therapy from the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#).

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