

Horses offer emotional healing to recovering addicts, others facing mental health challenges

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Tim Funk slid open the barn doors, and his herd of horses thundered into the arena, kicking up thick clouds of dust that mixed with their steamy breath to dance on the slivers of afternoon sunlight that peeked through the windows.

Six men, bundled in heavy coats and hats and wearing borrowed boots, leaned against the rail and watched.

"See if you can pick out the leader of the group, and who's low on the totem pole," Funk told the men. "Watch them, and see if you can find one out there that matches your own personality."

Some of the horses dropped down and rolled on their backs in the dirt like playful puppies, others stood passively and alone at the closed doors that led to their stalls just waiting for someone to let them go in.

The men all laughed as a giant draft horse named Stanley chased a miniature horse named Wyatt in circles around the ring, the animals' manes whipping around as they raced.

"Stanley follows the little one wherever he goes. It's like a codependent relationship," Vinny Vincent, who was visiting Stockhands Horses for Healing for the fourth time, explained to some of the newcomers beside him. "It's kind of toxic, to tell you the truth."

The men all laughed even more. Toxic relationships are something they know about. All were part of an inpatient program at the Ohio Addiction Recovery Center in Columbus, each on a different step in his journey toward sober living.

They were one of several groups that regularly visit the nonprofit

Stockhands organization, which rents a sprawling 38-acre ranch on Olentangy River Road in Delaware County that, just as its name suggests, uses horses to help the wounded heal.

Funk, who started the program about five years ago, uses his 26-head herd as therapy for adults and children with special needs—those who have behavioral issues or physical disabilities or are on the autism spectrum. But his niche is serving veterans and those in [addiction recovery](#), two things he knows all too well.

A combat veteran with the 2nd Marine Division and a recovering alcoholic, Funk said that those in recovery who visit the farm build relationships with the horses that help them in ways they don't even realize.

"The horse is never gonna judge you," the 48-year-old farrier and former construction worker said. "They're looking to you as a leader."

The work that goes on builds confidence and develops a sense of accomplishment for all—even mucking out the stalls brings the rewards that come from physical labor—but especially for those in recovery, said Brian Gennett, the counselor and clinician who leads the men's group at Stockhands every Thursday and a women's group every Tuesday.

"Sitting in a classroom group session can get so old and boring," Gennett said. "The horses add another layer. They are so in tune with our feelings and emotions. In recovery, we learn how to connect first with the horse and then with ourselves. And finally, we learn how to reconnect with other people."

It isn't always an easy sell.

At this recent session, Gennett pulled his pickup truck into the middle of

the arena and threw open its doors. The men and their chosen horses circled around it, each pair standing somewhat isolated along the edge. Soon, a soothing voice from the truck's speakers filled the air: "Breathe in through the soles of your feet, breathe out through the top of your head. Imagine walking so close to the sea, some of the waves touch your feet. Breathe in, breathe out."

At first, some of the horses were restless. Like Tinkerbelle, the 16-year-old paint mare that 48-year-old Brian Graziadei picked. She just couldn't settle in. But neither could Graziadei.

"As an alcoholic, you're emotionally, physically and spiritually a mess already," he said later. "I still have a lot of anxiety. I think she could tell that."

Eventually, about 10 minutes into the session, Tinkerbelle had dropped her hip and cocked a hind leg, a sign of relaxation. And Graziadei? Well, he nuzzled his cheek into her when he thought no one was looking.

Later, when it came time for a riding lesson, Graziadei declined. He groomed the horses and handled the lead rope as the other men took spins around the arena, but he opted not to give it a go himself. A Clevelander, he said that was a bit much for a "city boy."

But it really went deeper than that. He'd frozen up during a recent confidence-building exercise and wasn't ready to push the envelope once more. Just being in the barn around the animals has been helpful enough, he said.

"You're already doing something you inherently wouldn't do because you're afraid," he said. "That's worth something."

The work that happens at Stockhands helps not only those who visit but

also Funk.

Years ago, after a string of drunken-driving arrests and some personal and legal trouble, he hoped to piece his life back together by trying to woo an ex-wife back with a palomino named Sunny he had bought.

"Sunny didn't save the marriage, but Sunny saved me," he said.

As Funk's personal herd grew, a friend visited once and asked if her son, who is autistic, could ride. The changes in the boy's demeanor were almost immediate, Funk said.

That was about five years ago, and that's when a business was born.

Stockhands, which Funk co-founded with his fiancée, Lisa Benton, has rapidly grown. They two have more than 100 active volunteers to help run it now, and they raise about \$150,000 a year to operate it. Funk said they will soon embark on a \$3 million capital campaign to buy the land they rent, with plans to build a large, indoor arena with many upgrades to improve access for those with handicaps.

For those who visit, the experience can be life-changing, said Vincent, the 25-year-old who had entertained the group with his explanation of toxic relationships among the [horses](#).

The Dayton man says he had used drugs every day for at least the past seven years. In mid-December, he had reached 45 days of sobriety. He credited the work and therapy at Stockhands as a part of that.

"Everyone finds their place ... and it gives you a chance to be a part of a group," Vincent said. Then, he talked about that day's meditation session, where he and his horse, Junkyard Jake, stood so silently and still that they could have been mistaken as asleep.

"I knew when he wanted to be hugged," Vincent said of the horse. "It definitely was a magical experience."

More information: For more information, visit www.stockhands.org or search its page on Facebook.

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