

Uncommon Co-Workers: Horses Working with People

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I come into the work place and all the heads turn toward me. I hear the shuffling of feet and the long deep breaths of air as the swishing of tails continue. I wander down through the hallway of the barn and notice pairs of eyes following me, maybe a look of curiosity or hunger, always attentive and alert. These uncommon co-workers are not your usual work group. They come in many breeds, colors and sizes, some big, some smaller in stature. This crowd of co-workers I am referring to are the horses who have been my assis-

tants over the past couple of years in several new projects involving an emerging field of equine-facilitated activities. Equine Facilitated Mental Health/Education Services (EFMH/ES) is used to describe both educational and therapeutic services in which humans work in partnership with horses to learn, grow and change (Hallberg, 2008¹). Hallberg offers three overarching themes to define how horses may help humans. These themes are: communication skill development, relational skills, and the development of self through horse-person-ship.

In this article I will briefly outline how these uncommon co-workers have been a part of an innovative approach to nursing leadership retreat; a staff nurse fellowship program and a unique experience for rehabilitation patients preparing for discharge to home and community.

So why choose horses as part of my work team? As a graduate of the Gestalt-Equine Institute of the Rockies², I have come to know the benefits of working with horses both for myself and for my clients. Horses are dynamic and powerful; they help remind me that the present moment is all I really have; they have the abil-

ity to help with non-verbal communication skills, heighten my sense of awareness and re-ignite sensitivity. When in the presence of horses, I am able to re-connect with my empathy and compassion and that place of non-judgment. They offer profound opportunity for self-awareness, contact and relationship. It is these qualities that make them effective in bringing leadership teams together, stimulating the caring presence of staff nurses and boosting the confidence of newly injured patients getting ready for discharge.

In April of 2010, the first group of patients from Craig Hospital took a trip out to SaddleUp Foundation in Parker, CO for a 3-hour experience of working with the horses in preparation for discharge home. Functional goals were discussed with the patient's therapy team, personal goals were discussed with the patient and horses were selected to match the patient's age, experience and overall temperament. Safety briefings and learning tasks are discussed before each patient is introduced to their assigned horse. As part of each team, an equine specialist and a Craig Hospital therapist work in conjunction with the patient and horse. The patient and their horse

would spend time working on getting to know each other, performing grooming, leading, lunging and other hands-on tasks as well as forming a relationship by the end of the session. The intent of these sessions are to build confidence, practice relational skills, and ensure safety, all most important for a successful discharge home. To date over 20 Craig Hospital patients have participated in the Working with Horses Educational Experience.

In June of 2010, the Nursing Leadership team spent part of a day retreat working with the horses. In this session, they discovered team work isn't always so easy. The assigned task was to create an obstacle course in the outdoor arena that represented typical problems or challenges within the hospital system. As they began the task, the horses starting wandering around and the obstacles became evident as horses and people began to get in each other's way. The group members each had a different idea as to what the obstacle represented and certainly how to build the course. Group tensions surfaced even before getting to the activity of moving the horses and people through the course. Eventually the group completed the assigned task and safely moved

people and horses through the course. The horses reflected back to the group of humans how disorganization and lack of clear intention and communication makes for even more work in the end.

As a part of the Caring Educator Fellowship-2011 at Craig Hospital, staff nurse Fellows spent a half day working with horses individually as they worked with finding that place of caring and compassion in their workings with the horses. They practiced 'horse time' or slowing down the pace, getting the feel for each horse, working with their breath and body awareness as a way to get in touch with presence. So often the pace of modern health care does not allow for even a moment of time and contact with patients. Through a guided and intentional activity of making contact, self-awareness, and building relationship, each nurse took the time to experience presence as quality of nursing care.

The equine-facilitated activities over the past year involving Craig Hospital staff and patients has been a new and interesting experience adding to the growth, learning and healing of all participants. The uncommon co-worker is one who is

willing to be present, build relationship, and work on a slowed down time frame, all the while offering an uncommon experience of healing, health and well-being.

Terry Chase has been involved in the health and wellness field for almost 30 years as an educator, rehabilitation nurse, psychotherapist and program developer. Dr. Chase came to Craig Hospital in 1996 and has primary responsibility for the development, implementation and evaluation of patient and family education programs. Terry has published widely and presented many times in the field of health promotion and rehabilitation as well as consulted on projects around the US. In addition to her responsibility as Patient & Family Education Program Coordinator, she has been instrumental in the development of the Complementary and Alternative Medicine Program, the In-patient Equine Program and most recently the Caring Educator Fellowship.

Notes

¹ Hallberg, L. (2008) *Walking the Way of the Horse: Exploring the Power of the Horse-Human Relationship*. IUniverse, Inc: New York.

² Gestalt-Equine Institute of the Rockies. www.gestaltequineinstitute.com

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