

EQUINE ASSISTED/FACILITATED/GUIDED WORK BUYER BEWARE

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There is no magic about Equine Facilitated Wellness (EFW) but there is the possibility of true connection. Over the years, the horse has not been led astray from his inner wisdom and intuition. To survive for thousands of years the horse has relied upon his ancient ability to be in his body and feel situations. As opposed to humans, whose ability to access their ancient wisdom has been clouded by many things. This may be why we are observing so many mental and physical health issues today. This is also why the field of equine assisted/facilitated/guided work is emerging. We are looking for that connection. Many programs are popping up as people are enthusiastic and get programs running quickly after a few days of training in the practice. In these days of immediate gratification, we want the quick training. I find it worrisome when I hear stories of participants feeling shamed or scared in sessions, or stories of horses being controlled or scared in sessions. There are many aspects of Equine Facilitated Wellness work that comes into play when either choosing a program to engage in as a client or a program to train in as a professional. This is quite important because not all programs are created equal.

To help you make an informed decision as to what program you wish to receive services from or to train with, I will tell you a bit about lack of connection, the nature of horses, what to look for in a facilitator, the nature of the horsemanship used in programs, important values to consider, the settings of EFW sessions and some safety considerations.

Lack of Connection

Today's pace of life is difficult to keep up with. We are losing our connections to earth, to fellow humans and to ourselves as we are more and more indoors and plugged into our devices. Humans are

social beings much like horses, and although we have so much technology to stay connected, we find ourselves more and more isolated, experiencing anxiety, depression, shame, a sense of inadequacy, etc. The way through this for us is connection ... connection to nature, connection to our environment and to other humans and connection to ourselves. Furthermore, I will add that it is a compassionate connection that can lead us to the way. I truly believe the horse can help us rediscover the inner wisdom that will lead us to connection. In EFW work, the horse is a partner who does not judge. If we listen, he can lead us back to this inner power we all have. The horse does not interact with us because we have money, nice clothes, a great car ... he chooses to spend time with us because he can feel the comfort of our true nature. He can see past the façades we have created to survive our world. He will not give you the answer, but he guides you back to your heart, your true self, your inner wisdom. This is what our rational mind's adaptive response has alienated us from, to survive the overwhelming expectations of our new world. And this to me is the essence of EFW work.

The Nature of Horses

The horse reacts accordingly to what we are holding within us at each moment. As an herbivore, he has never had to worry much about the food source in the wild, he would roam around eating, finding water, playing, and at times flying to safety when a predator approached. The horse lives in the present moment. He has an itch; he scratches, he is hungry; he eats, he is hot; he seeks shade ... his actions are motivated by his present moment needs for safety, food, comfort and play. If he reacts negatively, it's because one of those needs is in jeopardy. And not because he made a negative judgment regarding the personal worth of whomever he is interacting with,

or because he is manipulating a situation. These are human behaviours.

In many ways, when his basic needs are met, his need to seek comfort is what helps us learn about ourselves when interacting with him. He will experience some discomfort in the presence of incongruence. He will react to us in different ways if we are acting (non-verbal) in a way that is different from, the felt sense of our internal experience. He needs us to recognize what we are truly feeling and sensing and learn to be present with that. This ability is at the root of every healing. As humans, we tend to avoid often. It is a protective mechanism. However, a lack of awareness and overuse of such mechanisms can lead us to lose our true selves.

What to Look for in a Facilitator?

With the skillful help of a qualified mental health, learning or equine professional, you can achieve personal growth and development working with the horse. The extent of this growth and development is determined by the participant's personal goals achieved through a respectful relationship with the horse. Note that the respectful relationship with the horse is the secret ingredient. We all have different journeys and rhythms for change and growth. Somehow, the horse has this beautiful instinctive ability to know how much to do, if we listen. It is the job of the human facilitator to help the participant pause and listen in his interactions with the horse. Any intervention that is goal-oriented in contrast to relationship-based can neglect the needs of the horse. This can be effective in some cases, but often it leaves an aftertaste indicating that something is just not right. Many therapy horses in such programs become weary of working, and this is not acceptable. It is also not acceptable in EFW to model such relationship patterns. Only in situations potential of physical harm should we place the goal ahead of the relationship.

Knowing this, choose your practitioner wisely. What is their scope of practice? What is their education, their experience, their knowledge of horses, mental

health and human growth? Whom do they work with, how do they work? Alone or with another professional? What is their philosophy behind their EFW work? How do they value safety? Emotional and physical safety? Do they have proper insurance? I invite anyone who wants to find a therapist to research and to interview their therapist. This is no different because there are horses involved.

The Nature of the Horsemanship Used in Programs

The type of horsemanship practised in the EFW program is very important because the treatment of the horse must model respect and care for their physical and emotional well-being. Traditional horsemanship methods and even natural horsemanship methods which put the emphasis on performance versus the relationship with the horse are not recommended for an EFW setting. Clients who witness distressed horses when being ridden with all kinds of restrictive equipment or even being yelled at or hit for expressing a need (seen as misbehaving by some horse people) could trigger clients. We can also witness super obedient horses that are disconnected and only obedient because they were conditioned to do so with too much pressure. This type of horsemanship is modelling abuse of power.

Horses which are kept in stalls and turned out for very short periods by themselves and do not have the opportunity to be in a herd will struggle to act naturally. They may be stressed and lonely, and this can make effective interactions and true connection with the horse very challenging. If the horse's basic needs are not met, he is not able to be comfortable, and he will not engage with humans in the same way. Horses forced to behave may look very docile and cooperative on the surface, but often they turn themselves off (dissociate) in the presence of humans who do not listen to their needs. Other horses living under similar circumstances may become aggressive if they do not want to interact with humans but are not given the chance to move away.

Important Values to Consider

To do this work, it is an art, and it takes time, skill, knowledge and commitment. Practitioners hold quite a responsibility to create a safe space for participants and for horses. We cannot create space for one and not the other. When doing EFW work, never can we overpower a horse for the goals of the participants. This may be observed in horsemanship but not in EFW horsemanship. The work is not to include participants into the horse world, because the horse world/industry is often about restraining, controlling disguised as safety or caring. Not to allow a being to have an opinion is not a true relationship. This does not mean that the horse runs the show (although horse's natural tendencies look more like, co-operation and negotiation. We observe in horses more competition and aggression when they are kept in artificial settings by humans.) It means that boundaries are being negotiated in the relationship. Assertiveness is being modelled in a way that builds true connections. In real life, these skills will be more valuable because healthy relationships are not created by overpowering or dominating people or situations. Therefore, this is not how you want your EFW facilitator to work with their horses in EFW.

The human facilitator ensures that the needs, abilities, strengths, challenges and preferences of the horse are being respected. If a horse is not wanting to do something, they support him either by stopping the exercise, breaking it down into smaller steps or modifying it. The horse himself often has great ideas about what activities can take place if we can listen to him. The facilitator must be able to listen to the horse, accept the answer and be flexible enough to reroute.

EFW Session Setting.

EFW work requires a calm and peaceful setting. It is essential when working with a vulnerable population that we provide a safe environment. A boarding facility may present some challenges to EFW work.

Having many people coming and going will most likely interfere with the emotional safety of participants or even physical safety. The intense personal issues that are dealt with in sessions need to be worked on in private. Confidentiality is a must to ensure emotional safety of clients.

Some Safety Considerations

For the emotional and physical safety of the horse and the client, interactions are done with minimal equipment and always allow the horse to refuse or walk away. His expression of his immediate needs are invaluable in EFW. We are seeking understanding and co-operation in all that we do. This may seem very obvious but over the years studying many types of approaches, I have discovered that it is not the case. Horses are still viewed as beasts of burden in many programs still today. We place them in unnecessary stressful situations for the needs of the human. Not recognizing the horse as a sentient being, we neglect the true lessons they can teach us, and we are placing valuing only on the needs of the human. This is what causes so many issues for humans in the first place, why we are repeating this dysfunctional way of interacting to heal ourselves. I do not believe we can achieve any healing by arming another being.

Interactions or activities should be done slowly with a present moment focus by helping the participant stay in his body and helping him and the horse stay within their own window of tolerance. We focus upon the process versus the goal as this allows the relationship to come first. We stay attuned to signs of arousal in the horse and in the client. The human facilitator can slow the process and ask questions to help the client get back in the body and lower their level of activation, or to help the horse to lower his level of activation. This attunement training happening in the facilitated interactions between horses and participants becomes a stepping stone to future healthy relationships and connections. This paves the route to a fulfilled life. When that facilitator does not have the abilities, the knowledge and the presence to listen to both the horse and the

participant, the latter will not be emotionally and physically safe.

Conclusion

As the EFW practice has grown, it has been marketed in different ways, and in an effort to bring the practice to as many people as possible, we may have left the horse behind. His sentence is what makes this practice so powerful. I hope you take the time to pause, reflect, research and ask questions before choosing a program to work with. This is certainly why I have chosen to affiliate with EFW-Can. I have certified and become a mentor through this association which has allowed me to work in a way that fits me and my herd of five horses. EFW-Can structures and guides my practice and has helped me develop high standards. I abide by the [EFW-Can code of ethics](#), which values respect, professional competence, integrity and honesty as well as responsibility in the practice of EFW. I chose this association because they respect the rights and dignity of all individuals—both human and equine. As such they view equines as sentient beings and advocate for their welfare in the field of EFW.

Any professional from various approaches that shares the philosophies and ethics of EFW-Can may [join the association](#) and [get certified](#). Clients can obtain information and access a list of certified professionals on the [EFW-Can Website](#). I feel quite confident and proud to refer clients to any EFW-Can Certified Professionals because they have obtained EFW-Can's stamp of approval. I know they have gone through a rigorous certification process that takes a minimum of two years. As well, to maintain their certification-Can professionals are required to provide the association proof of their insurance, professional affiliation in good standing and continuing education. You can consult the list of [trainers, mentors and certified professionals by clicking here](#).

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