

ABOUT HORSES AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

by Lindsay Fovargue and Pam Billinge

Lindsay Fovargue and Pam Billinge met in 2008 and since then, with Pam's small herd of horses, they have been offering horse-guided psychotherapy, personal development and CPD for therapists, both individually and in groups. The work is profound, moving and often surprising. It can feel almost magical. Most participants, by the end of a "cycle", whether a session or a day, experience a sense of calm and grounding. Here Lindsay and Pam describe how they came across this type of work, how their unique approach has evolved to date, the impact which it has on them as therapists and what it can offer the field of humanistic psychotherapy.



How our work came about

At a time of personal bereavement and loss, Pam discovered that her own emotions had a profound effect on the behaviour of her horse. As a second-year student of Body Psychotherapy at the time, she was able to draw on a range of body-based techniques to help her and her horse mend their relationship and learn to trust each other again. This was the beginning of an exploration into the horse-human connection which took Pam to the USA in 2008 to study "natural" horsemanship for two months. Here she met someone who already practised what is called "equine assisted therapy" and realised that her own ideas about using horses in therapeutic and personal development work were not completely crazy. She returned to the UK and set about integrating horses into her work as a trainee psychotherapist under supervision and as a leadership and personal development coach.

Lindsay had almost no experience of horses, so came to it "clean" without any expectation of horse behaviour. She had read about Pam's ideas in an article which she had written for a therapeutic journal and coincidentally they met shortly afterwards at a networking meeting. Lindsay was establishing a mental health project for isolated 11-25 year olds at risk of deteriorating mental health at the time and was eager to secure funding so that some young people could benefit from a therapeutic experience with the horses. Pam, Lindsay and the horses were able to support ten young people from Cambridgeshire with a programme of six sessions each. The project was later awarded Best Youth Project for Cambridge 2008.

The early days

This project was our first experience of working together, with the horses. We were both impressed and moved by the experience, by how effective the process was for these young people, and how significant this journey was also becoming for them as therapists. The ten young people we worked with were aged between 11 and 25. They received guidance on initial safety, and were then facilitated in their interaction with the horses. Some sessions involved activity-based exploration, inviting clients to set out with poles or blocks representations of their internal or external conflicts and dilemmas. Other times they were able to be more process-led, allowing the experience to "emerge" for the young people, led by the dynamic between them and the horse.

Lindsay describes: "For a number of the young people the sessions had direct impact in their lives at home and at school/college. Because of the non-verbal presentation of "feedback" from the horses, and their lack of "front", we saw how clients were able to experience the replaying of dynamics and then be coached by us to use embodied awareness to support a sense of self and of their choices. Watching young people who had lived in abusive circumstances reclaim their energy and open-heartedness was at times very moving. Others explored how they might be taken seriously whilst remaining kind, by changing their way of

being from the inside out. Through experimenting with breath, movement, sound and observing their own energetic states, these young people developed skills and self-awareness which took them out of situations of bullying, friendlessness and depression.”

How our approach has evolved

In addition to working with young people, we now co-facilitate CPD workshops and longer personal development programmes for therapists, counsellors and others in the caring professions. The approach is process-led, based on our own therapeutic experience and on Pam’s knowledge of horse-behaviour. It draws strongly on Body Psychotherapy in the attention to embodied counter-transference for us as co-therapists, and attention to grounding, breathing and tracking of nervous system arousal (fight or flight/freeze, and the startle reflex) in the clients. Longer sessions unfold within awareness of relationship, and of the internal or externally played-out dynamics.

The horses are central to the process and what actually happens in a session is wholly down to how they respond to the client/s. This is how one participant described her experience at a recent CPD workshop:

“The day was both enlightening and inspiring and confirmed my belief of the parallels between the silent communication of the horse and the conditions which we strive for in counselling therapy. Through their unique sensitivity and genuine way of being these magnificent creatures can help us to unlock our deepest emotions and really see and feel ourselves in the moment. I witnessed this and experienced this for myself as the day unfurled and had my own special moment of connection with two of the ponies”.

What this work means to us, and what it has to offer humanistic psychotherapy:

Lindsay: What engages me most is the strongly energetic and experiential nature of the work, which is so compatible with Body Psychotherapy. It is a context for experimentation and for developing awareness: noticing how the horses respond to my energetic state, and to that of a client or group participant. I have been impressed by my experiences of less embodied emotional states being unexpectedly amplified and made conscious. I have come to understand that horses are prey animals, and rely on accurate resonance with other creatures for their survival. Resonance seems to spread through their herd almost instantly, and as therapist it seems that I too become a resonant member of the herd.

I can make valuable use of this mirroring of non-verbal states. As the work often deepens and unfolds in a surprisingly direct way, which brings significant clarity, I can attempt to make sense of what happens, a left-brain function, and gain valuable insights. Yet, I experience the approach as most profound when I allow it to unfold at a level without analysis. To my mind, this allows for right brain processing, and a different type of knowing which is more fundamental to our emotional health, and to completion of emotional and energetic cycles.

Supporting a session to unfold is a clear moment by moment illustration of how posture, breathing and embodiment (or not) of unfinished business can support or undermine us. I have stood alongside in awe as horses respond so accurately to clients’ internal states and focus attention on unresolved issues. Sometimes this has been acutely and painfully direct: a chronically lonely young woman being ignored by horses repeatedly, until she embodies her longing and pain; deeply moving then when the horses spontaneously gather round her protectively. Experiences such as this are un-choreographed and always extraordinary to witness. They are a potent re-experiencing for a client or a participant, as well as for witnesses. It is not magic, although it can at times feel so: the “magic” is, I think, simply reconnecting with Being.

Pam: My breath is often taken away by the simplicity and beauty of the experiences which we witness between client and horse/s. There is a universal holding of the process – we therapists, the horses, the sky, earth and environment. There is something about this dimension of the work which seems to facilitate a connection with the Self in a gentle, safe and peaceful way. I have seen clients struggling with the most difficult emotional states find

some joy in their interaction with the horse and a spark of aliveness ignites somewhere within. I, too, am able to contact a joyfulness – even playfulness - whilst working (and also not working) which helps me be with the more painful aspects of our human struggles with lightness and hope.

The fact that the primary relationship in the session is between the client and the horse, rather than the client and the human therapist is also an important dimension. This relationship tends not to be governed by verbal processing or structuring and remains largely experienced at a non-verbal level. As therapists we help the client to make sense of their experience yet it is very much for the client to interpret and take responsibility for their learning process. This aspect is particularly empowering for young people. As a therapist I have become much less dependent on words as a result. Witnessing, silent holding, and carefully timed intervention are much more what are needed. It is here that I depend very significantly on observing and sensing the horses' behaviour and responses.

What seems “magical” is the way in which the horses can tune into our hidden truths and help us to see, in a very short time, what it is we really need to give our attention to. So, the client who comes wanting to explore their playfulness is led to still and silent meditation by the horses who only wish to sleep alongside them. As herd animals with complex social hierarchies the ability to read subtle cues and signals (of each other as well as of predators) is essential for horses to not only evade predation, but also to preserve stability within the social hierarchy. It is this ability which lends itself well to support human therapeutic interactions. Embarking on this work I quickly learned to trust the horses to know what is needed, or to trust them to help **me** know. If I can rest in this trust they do, indeed, guide us all the way.

Yet perhaps the most magical aspect of this work, for me, is my own relationship with the horses through the process, and that shared relationship with Lindsay as co-therapist/facilitator and the clients or participants. Equine science theorises about the natural instincts of horses for bonding and attunement as a result of survival instinct and herd behaviour. Yet I prefer to stay with the magic – the sense of us coming together with these magnificent creatures to discover our embodied spirit. To be so very present, together, in every precious moment whether there is pain or joy. That has to be the gift of life and love itself, and why we pursue humanistic psychotherapy.

Lindsay is a UKCP Registered Psychotherapist and an accredited member of UKAHP. Her core psychotherapy training was been in Body Psychotherapy. To this she added therapeutic work with PTSD and somatic trauma, and therapeutic approaches using Arts and Gestalt. She is an experienced practitioner and member of staff at Cambridge Body Psychotherapy Centre with a private psychotherapy practice. She offers individual psychotherapy, supervision and training. Until recently she was Therapeutic Services Manager of a Mental Health and Counselling Project for young people, delivering services across Cambridgeshire. Lindsay has also led a variety of projects for adults, having begun her career in specialist outreach (Active Outreach) supporting adults who experienced severe & enduring mental illness.

Pam has worked for 25 years supporting people to grow and meet their potential, as a leader in various organisations and later as an independent coach, consultant and therapist. Her passion for horses and their unique contribution to our personal learning led her to qualify as an equine assisted therapist and she completed the EAGALA Certification Process in 2009 (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association). She was a student at the Cambridge Body Psychotherapy Centre from 2002 – 2009 and discontinued the clinical phase of her training in order to focus on developing her equine guided psychotherapy practise. She also delivers equine guided learning interventions to a wide range of individuals and organisations. She dedicates a great deal of time to deepening her understanding of horses and what we can learn from them through the Parelli Natural Horsemanship Programme. Pam is also Chair of the Association of Humanistic Biodynamic Massage Therapists and a member of UKAHP.