

HEALING WITH HORSES

A Feminist Sexual Trauma Recovery Group for Young Women and Non-binary People with Equine Partners



Lovingway Farm with Laura Sanders, LMSW, and Friends

Healing with Horses Sexual Assault Recovery Group:

a case example and pilot study in progress



The Diamond Model Team:



Therapist



Client



Animal Handler/Volunteer Mentor



Animal

Thanks to the Team

- Lovely team of 5 equine
- Laura Sanders, LMSW, ESMHL with PATH, Lead Therapist
- Ramiro Martinez, Farm Manager
- Maryanne VanSaders, Assistant
- Katie Czarnik, Rossi Clark, Social Work students who participated as:
 - Volunteer mentor participants in the intervention
 - Research assistants in Julie Cushman’s class
 - Research subject consent forms
 - Post test interviews

Who are we? The Team

Laura Sanders, LMSW – Lead Therapist

5 Clients:

- clients are or have been in therapy with Laura
- have histories of sexual trauma
- are female or non-binary identified – teens or young adults

5 Mentors and animal handlers:

- two U of M SSW students – Rossi and Katie
- one U of M SSW alumni – recently graduated
- one elder adult horse woman, survivor, and animal handler
- one young adult, survivor horse woman who had been a client
- most mentors had a history of sexual trauma

5 Equine partners:

- Willie: 20 year-old, standard, Tennessee Walker
- Chevago: 19 year-old, standard, Arab retired show horse
- Mink: 13 year-old, miniature, brown Bey horse
- Flash: 14 year-old, miniature Shetland pony and horse
- Arnie: 2 year-old, miniature donkey

Consent for Healing with Horses

- Consent to Participate in Healing with Horses
- Medical intake and consent
- Consent to participate in research study

Parental consent for minor clients

Consent for volunteer participation on the farm

Pre-intervention interviews and surveys

- All pre-test surveys were filled out by the lead therapist through a trauma-informed interview with each client. The surveys include:
 - The CPSS-V SR: Child PTSD Symptom scale
 - The PH-9: depression screening tool
 - The GAD 7: anxiety screening tool

**The Intervention: Healing with Horses
Group Therapy**

- **The structure of the program:**
 - 6 weeks, one session per week, from 4:00-5:30
 - Each client is partnered with a mentor and an equine for the entirety of the program
- **The structure of the group sessions:**
 - Check in and defining the theme for the day
 - A mini-psycho-education on the theme
 - A horse activity related to the theme
 - Group processing of how the horse activity relates to recovery from sexual trauma in daily life
 - Closing ritual

The Healing Themes

- **Safety and Coping:**
 - Greeting and brainstorming group safety norms
 - Meeting and learning to be safe with your horse and human mentor



The Healing Themes:

- **Boundaries and Grooming (healthy and not):**
 - Sexual offense, grooming and boundary violation
 - Positive grooming to build relationship with your horse, claiming space, and leading your horse



The Healing Themes

- **Telling trauma:**
 - Externalizing and expressing your painful experiences to break isolation
 - Telling your trauma to the degree you can to your horse, your human, and your group





The Healing Themes

- **Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn:**
 - Understanding the neurobiology of trauma responses – how we react in the moment
 - **Herding horses:** studying their flight response – Horses have the fastest flight response of any domesticated mammal



The Healing Themes

- **Assertiveness:**
 - Understanding passive, aggressive and assertive responses
 - Challenges with horses: leading on the grass, backing up

Assertiveness

Passive > Assertive < Aggressive

Too Nice	Firm	Mean
Suck it up	Clear Messages	Explosive
Hold it in	"I" Statements	Arrogant
Denial	Broken Record Technique	Oblivious
Subtle Manipulation	Well Respected	Manipulative
Guilt	Self-Accepting	Self-Absorbed
Shame	Self-Aware	Threatening
Low Self-Esteem	Self-Confident	Low Consideration of Others
Powerless	Powerful	Tyrannical/Put of Control
Latent Hostility	Comfortable	Hostile
Weak Boundaries	Well Defined, Clear Boundaries	Overbearing
Passive	Active	Attacking
"Door Mats"	Content	Dominant
Needs Acceptance	Self-Sufficient	Needs Power



The Healing Themes

- **Self-harm, self-love and sexual healing**
 - Exploring harmful and healthy self-soothing, sexual exploration, and consent
 - Adorning your horse and a parade for parents or friends

Big Thanks to Rossi and Katie



Post-test surveys and interview

Data Analysis in process

- Post-surveys by Laura – we are still analyzing this data
- Focused post-intervention interview with Rossi:
 - How was the group helpful to your healing process?
 - Were there any ways it was not helpful? How?
 - How was it for you to involve a horse partner in your healing?
 - How was it for you to include another support person as a partner in your healing process?
 - The themes for the group included, safety, boundaries, grooming, telling trauma, assertiveness, self-love and sexual consent and healing. How relevant were these topics for you?
 - Which were the most meaningful to you?
 - Are there other topics or discussions you would like to address?
 - What was your biggest take away from the experience?
 - How could we improve it?

Some Themes of the Post-interview

- All participants highlighted the horse work as a significant and positive part of the process.
- All reported their human mentor as a positive support.
- Several participants reported reduced isolation – “not feeling so alone”.
- Several participants related their own experiences in coping and learning to their horse partner’s experiences.
- One participant stated this was the first time she had been able to discuss a memory of sexual abuse in detail and found that to be significant to her healing.
- Several participants reported increased skills in boundary-setting
- The group felt somewhat rushed for some participants.
- All participants said they would consider joining another Healing with Horses event in the future.

Themes of the Post Interview

- **Working in a group:** created community and connection, providing a greater understanding of their trauma experiences as shared, not isolated.

"It was a benefit to hear similar emotions and experiences because I've never really had a lot of that."

R learned that they were "not so alone".

"... helpful in assuring other people that you aren't just isolated".

"This thing affected everyone them and me and it's not about who needs support more or less. We are just trying to survive. It's there and we all went through it. There were people in that room that understood what was going on with me and I with them".

Themes of the Post Interview

- **Involving horse partners:** eases the efforts of emotional healing. They are a nonjudgemental and a clear representation of the healing themes that participants can reflect on through their work with the horses. The horse provides a mirror to the survivor's individual responses, needs, and growth.

"It makes you look at yourself and your reactions in order to communicate with horses".

"It scratched my brain just right". It was helpful to work with an animal partner that was in tune with human emotion and reaction.

"They feel safe".

Themes of the Post Interview

- **Involving older peer mentors:** It was supportive to have both an animal and human partner to start processing the themes of group discussions. Mentors provided empathy, understanding, and a platform to be heard and work through individual processing of trauma.

"Sometimes having someone who is older, even if it isn't the same, helps ease your thoughts and processing of trauma that happened".

M felt it was helpful to have someone who was "personal to you and someone to check in and make sure you were doing okay". – especially during discussion of sensitive topics.

Themes of the Post Interview

- **The healing themes of the group:** Topics for the group were relevant to their stage of trauma processing. Boundaries was a commonly discussed topic that was valued by the group.
- There was some common reaction that discussing sensitive topics in a group setting was a difficult process, but some clients found it to be the most impactful part, depending on where they are at individually.
 - “Telling trauma (was the most helpful) because I haven’t opened up in that much detail. I think it made it easier to heal overall”.
 - N noted that the group made it easier to “find ways to talk about the trauma”.
- Some found new ways to work individually on their healing through group discussions.
 - “Everybody has a story, their own reactions, healing, triggers. There is no correct way to deal with it”.
 - R identified self-love and grooming as important topics to their individual growth in the group.

Some comments to learn from. .

- For some survivors, depending on where they are at in their recovery process, group work can be overwhelming. They felt it would be easier to tell about trauma if they knew each other better.
 - “It felt a bit rushed at times”
 - “It was really difficult to hear other people’s stories and tell my own. It was impactful but not sure if it was in a positive or negative way. There were a lot of emotions overall”
- One survivor felt it would have been a better experience if she was not in the same group with her sister who was abused by the same person
- The presence of older peer mentors was generally positive but can change the group dynamics if adults out-number the youth.

Thanks to PATH!



Lovingway Therapy Farm:
Laura Sanders and Ramiro Martinez



Flash: Shetland pony and miniature horse



Mink: miniature Bey horse



Lucky and Willy:

Arab/Saddlebred and Tennessee Walker



Chevago: Arab Sweetie



Arnie: when he was a baby


