

## Preparing your energetic ground for effective EFP/L sessions

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So you've got your EFP program all set up. You have all the right forms, your therapist is doing intake assessments, your staff and volunteers are all up to speed on confidentiality and their respective roles. Your horses are already being themselves, so they're ready to go. You have some dynamic activities in your back pocket. All the seeds of a meaningful session are ready to germinate.

But have you prepared a fertile ground for those seeds? What will hold the energy of those discrete parts and allow them to bloom as one beautiful garden? How will you drop into that creative space where discovery and movement happen? As always in our field, bring it back to the horses. See if you can get your team operating on an energetic level that might be aligned with how the horses and the clients themselves experience your sessions.

It's so important to have a beginner's mind. The more we teach and facilitate, sometimes the further we get from the newness and unfamiliarity of this work. We forget what it feels like to *not* understand or predict what happens, to experience performance anxiety, or become frightened or overwhelmed. Our horses and clients experience this regularly, more than we know sometimes. So whether your team is brand new to the work or you are just re-grounding your team, there are a few activities you can use to come back to that humble space of the beginner. These are also appropriate to try with your therapeutic riding team as well.

These activities do not involve horses; they're to be done before you work with them, and will allow you to focus more completely on your own inner experience. They can take place in the arena or in a classroom. If possible participants should partner with people they are not well acquainted with.

**Proxemics** – You've probably done this one. It is a standard part of crisis intervention training, for those of you in the mental health profession. (As an aside, there are so many similarities in that training to good round pen work, it's uncanny.) Participants pair up and line up facing their partners. The lines should back up 15 or 20 feet or more if space allows. Look into the eyes of your partner. Refrain from speaking. Line A will gradually step toward their partner. Line B will raise a hand when they feel some level of discomfort at the proximity of the partner. They can signal the person to step again or for them to just stop where they are. How big is your bubble? Notice what you are feeling, can you meet or hold their gaze? Do either of you smile nervously or make comments, perhaps shuffle your feet? What do you feel in your body and where? Reverse roles and try again, or if time permits, this also can be done with one's back to the partner, just to emphasize the sensory component of proximity.

What can we learn from this about how our horses may perceive our energies? What about our clients and their vulnerability? Their boundaries? Their physical and social awareness? How often do we just assume that horses and clients are as comfortable as we are in the arena, overlooking a basic first step in trust and awareness in our relationship with them?

**Training game (credit to Centered Riding, <http://www.centeredriding.org/>)** – Pick 2-4 volunteers, or have entire group pair up, depending on size. Observing can be as valuable as participating. One person will be the trainer, one is the horse. The trainer has a particular task in mind for the horse to do, say pick up a pen from the desk, or walk to a particular cone if you are in the arena. The horse has no idea what the trainer wants. All the exchange they have will be for the trainer to say yes if the horse is coming closer to the desired behavior, and no if he's moving away from it.

What happens? Who gets frustrated and how? What would have made it clearer? What pressure is experienced? What did it feel like to be watched, maybe judged? How does this give us insight into what our horses experience from us? Might the client also feel as clueless when we are guiding them in an exercise? If you did this exercise with a client, how might he or she relate to this situation? It could bring up some valuable information for the therapist to explore further.

**Blindfold leading** – A word of caution about blindfolds. Some people experience them as terrifying, or at least highly stressful. I always use the option of closing one's eyes and having permission to open them at any point. The blindfold illustrates the vulnerability of the person or horse to the situation. Even though we as facilitators "get it", they don't, at least not at first. We are asking them to do things that they haven't done or aren't prepared for.

Choose a team of four: client, horse, ES, therapist. Others act as observers. Set up a simple obstacle course, chairs in a classroom, cones and poles in an arena, etc. The horse or the client can be blindfolded, depending on the perspective you want to explore. The "staff" tells the client that he or she will be leading the horse through an obstacle course, and they go ahead and do it, each assuming their respective role.

What was that like? First hear from anyone who was an observer. What did they notice about the situation, particularly the blindfolded person? What about how directions and support were given? Was it ever more about the task than the person's experience? Then hear from the participants. Same questions, what was that experience like for each of you? What might we take from this to apply to our own practice?

**Concluding thoughts** – Take a moment to think back on these experiences this morning. If you were a participant, will there be some level of heightened awareness between you and the person you worked with today? How might that be a building block to take back to your team of horses and people? What will you do to slow down your format to allow this level of awareness to exist in your arena? What expectations are you willing to release and what do you want to invite in their place? What do you think the horses might have to say about that?

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