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Katie Fallon is the Founder and President of Bridle Paths in McLean, VA, and collaborator with Gil Institute's new HEARTS Project, Hope through Equine Assisted Recovery and Therapy Services.

**1. Before we begin, and to acquaint our readers with what you do, perhaps you can give us a quick example of a child you worked with and how you feel that equine therapy contributed to that child's improved functioning?**

I have worked with a number of children who were adopted following significant experiences of trauma. One child in particular came to Bridle Paths with a history of learning and social challenges at school, relationship difficulties with parents and peers, and episodes of self-injury and emotional dysregulation. She struggled to fit in and to define herself in relationship to others. Over the course of her time at Bridle Paths, we watched her progress from being an observer of the horses (frequently on the outside looking in), to gaining the self-confidence to influence the horses' movements herself. A particular defining moment occurred when she participated in a session with her parent, who had very definite ideas about the way in which many tasks should be accomplished, including those with the horses. Using her experience of interacting with the horses in her own unique way, this child succeeded in laying out a path of her own design (representative of her own personal path and challenges) and then moved the horses across the arena down that path. Significantly, she was able to use that experience with the horses to articulate her own goals, outlook, and values, which in some cases were quite different from those of her goal-driven and success-oriented parent. This client used her experience with the horses to define and achieve a comfort level with her own unique strengths and abilities, and used that awareness to cultivate a new and different level of relationship with her family members and peers.

Thank you, I think that helps us understand the potential benefits of equine-assisted therapy.

**2. Could you define equine-assisted therapy and talk about how this type of therapy began?**

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is an experiential therapeutic approach that addresses treatment goals using collaborative efforts among a horse professional, licensed therapist, the horse, and the client. Each client-driven session includes hands-on activities with the horses, as well as processing (discussion) of feelings, behaviors, and patterns designed to enable clients to learn about themselves and others. Clients interact with the horses on the ground and use non-verbal communication, problem-solving, and creative thinking to address a variety of mental health and developmental issues, including: depression; anxiety; sibling, parent, and family conflicts; behavioral issues; communication disorders; attention deficit disorder; and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The meanings that the client assigns to particular activities or interactions with the horses yield significant insights into patterns of behavior and relationships. The EAP process is solution-focused, allowing clients to arrive at their own best solutions. Because of its intensity and effectiveness, EAP is considered a short-term or "brief" approach.

EAP at Bridle Paths is conducted according to the method devised by the Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA). EAGALA was founded in 1999 as a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization. The organization provides education, standards, innovation, and support to professionals providing services in EAP and EAL. EAGALA is committed to setting the standard of professional excellence in how horses and humans work together to improve the quality of life and mental health of individuals, families and groups worldwide.

**3. There appears to be more interest and acceptance for this wonderful therapy. Say a little about why you think the climate has changed for incorporating equine-assisted therapy with other psychotherapies?**

EAP is a powerful adjunct to traditional therapies, because it allows clients to explore their own best solutions in the moment, in a non-judgmental setting. As prey animals, horses are honest communicators, conveying to clients the message that changes within themselves can result in significant changes in the horses' responses. Horses facilitate a level of congruity between clients' "insides" and "outsides" that can be difficult to achieve in an office setting. Working with horses in a herd setting, and observations of individual horses' personality traits, can offer unique opportunities for metaphorical learning in an engaging and oblique way, yielding significant yet subtle insights that inform and encourage both introspection and relationship-building.

**4. How could referring professionals know whether to request individual or family or group therapy for the client they are referring?**

EAP services are available for individuals, families, and groups; the appropriate form of services will depend a great deal on individual clients' diagnoses and goals. For example, clients seeking treatment for anxiety, depression, or trauma might initially seek individual therapy, in order to work on issues pertaining to individual identity, strengths and skills, and confidence. As clients become more attuned to their own capabilities and responsibilities, we might transition to family sessions in which family groups work with the horses to explore issues such as boundaries, perspective-sharing, and ways in which to stay connected and safe within the family. Group sessions would be appropriate for clients with similar ages and/or diagnoses who are working on comparable issues, such as trust, anger management, impulse control, boundaries, and peer/social interactions.

**5. How did you become interested in this work?**

Although I have worked with horses for many years, I did not become involved formally in equine-assisted activities until my daughter was diagnosed in infancy with hydrocephalus. I swelled with powerful emotion as I watched her achieve physical and cognitive milestones that initially seemed out of reach for her, and I was struck by the incredible motivation and connection that the horses offered to her. For that reason, I was prompted to achieve certifications in both therapeutic horseback riding and EAP, and to offer those services to clients in a setting that is welcoming, safe, and effective. Working with horses requires me to be my best and most authentic self, and I believe strongly in the efficacy of this work in helping others to discover those strengths for themselves as well.

**6. If you had to choose the most important helping factor in equine-assisted therapy, what would it be.**

The belief that our clients have the best solutions for themselves forms a foundation for the EAGALA approach used at Bridle Paths. Rather than instructing or directing solutions, we allow our clients to experiment, problem-solve, take risks, employ creativity, and find their own solutions that work best for them. Clients are defined not by their disabilities, experiences, or diagnoses, but rather by their abilities and possibilities, in partnership with horses.

Thank you Katie, we are very excited about our collaboration! – Eliana Gil