

Horses teach troubled people to be free again

The mare was pacing, pacing pacing. Up and down the arena she stomped, to the point where a gelding stabled nearby picked up her frustration, and began weaving in sympathy.

Understanding her need for freedom, the human observer let the horse out of the confined space. Once through the gate, the mare immediately relaxed, and started to graze. Her stabled friend became calm too.

For the human, it was a startling lesson. The horse was reflecting her own feelings of being trapped in her life. It was not a revelation for Miranda Carey, who uses Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) to help people deal with relationship problems, eating disorders, addiction and grief, among other things. Based in the Forest of Dean, she is the only such qualified therapist in the UK, and is much in demand from clients in the UK and abroad.

Perceptive horse owners and observers will understand that horses, like all animals, pick up on human emotions and actually mirror our moods. And because they are incapable of hiding their feelings, horses' responses to us are always blatantly honest.

It is this that makes them such useful teachers, particularly for people with problems, who often have trouble relating to others. Communication and body language are key words here.

Former footballer Paul Gascoigne has famously been treated with a form of equine therapy for his alcoholism and violent outbursts and the Greatwood racehorse rescue centre in Marlborough, Wiltshire, runs an award-winning HorsePower scheme using horses to help special needs children.

In 2006, Miranda was trained in EFP by Linda Kohanov, who's based in Arizona, America, but she has a background in counselling, having previously worked with grief charity Cruise, the Bristol Drugs Project and run the student counselling scheme at Hartpury College, Gloucester.

Following a one-to-one sit-down session, which might last for an hour or more, Miranda will take her client to meet the select band of horses she uses for her treatment. They range from her own in-foal Hanoverian mare, to little Welsh ponies and bigger, stocky cobs.

This first meeting takes place in a field, when it will become clear to Miranda which horse suits which client. "Often the horse will choose the person," she says.

"Usually, there's a mutual attraction, but sometimes a horse will take a dislike to a person, which is equally telling. One woman went into the field and all the mares walked away. She said she had trouble relating to women!"

Once a "match" is made, Miranda usually moves horse and client into an arena, which is safer, and enables the client and horse to concentrate fully.

Troubled people usually have difficulty communicating and are often unaware of how they are perceived by other people. Horses can show them, in no uncertain terms.

Couples, for example, can see the results of their behaviour toward each other. Miranda explained that

Miranda Carey has always loved horses, and has ridden all her life. As an adult, she trained as a counsellor and now combines both these aspects of her life as the only qualified practitioner of Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy in the UK. **Kate Edser** went to find out more about this fascinating work



Intuitive: Equine psychotherapist Miranda Carey with her five-year-old Wodka Blue at her base in the Forest of Dean
Picture: Chas Breton

she might ask one of them to hold the horse while the other grooms it. She will be looking to see how the groomer approaches the horse: does the person "introduce" themselves first, or wade straight in and roughly start brushing.

Is attention paid to the horse's face to see if it is relaxed or irritated. Does the tail swishing and twitching skin go unnoticed? Does the person realise when they have reached a spot that the horse finds particularly pleasant?

Chances are, if the groomer has little idea how their actions are received by the horse, the same is probably true about their efforts to communicate verbally, or nonverbally, with their other half.

Miranda will also keep an eye on how the person holding the horse is

reacting to their partner's efforts. How is the horse being held? Is the person relaxed? Is constructive advice offered, does the person nag and issue constant instructions, or simply keep silent? After this exercise, there'll be another period for reflection and discussion.

Not everyone who comes to Miranda has had previous experience with horses, but for those who have, she will sometimes move on to lungeing, or even ridden work.

Several professional riders have been to Miranda because they are not happy with how their own horse is reacting to them, either on the ground, or when ridden.

In this situation, when people have reached a dead end, it seems to help, says Miranda, if people are

removed from the place where they've become stuck (at home with their own horse) and they often find a fresh outlook and a way forward after a session with her.

Besides pointing out what they do not like, horses also make it very clear when a client has done well, typically licking and chewing a lot, which is a sign of relaxation and release.

Miranda maintains that using horses in therapy is less intense and less stressful for all concerned, including herself. "It's not so emotionally draining," she explained, "because it's the horses who do all the hard work. I'm there mainly as a leader and translator."

For more details, visit www.ehwaz.co.uk, or call 01594 544262.

Case study

When Miranda invited me to take part in this workshop, I was struck by her sense of timing. At that point I had been feeling that I had been living on a razor sharp edge.

After 13 years, I had returned to Bristol to live and was confronted moment by moment by the reality of my past. Every corner and every street held a memory of the horror of my life back then, a time when I had submerged into the world of heroin and prostitution.

I have spent most of my life feeling like someone without skin, totally open and susceptible to the energies coming my way.

Horses, in my view have always represented intuition, freedom and indomitability. These are qualities within myself that I had to bury and deny in the name of survival.

We were all led into the field where we were encouraged to meet the horses. I was amazed at the ease in which people moved toward the horses. I was afraid and couldn't go much further than the inside of the gate.

I was transfixed by the gaze of one particular horse whose name was Freddy. Even though I was terrified, my feet felt rooted to the ground and I could not move. I don't know how long had passed in his presence but I felt flooded by compassion and love. It felt like Freddy had chosen me.

We took a break before the individual sessions began. When we all returned, Freddy was in the school waiting. I was afraid of him and his sheer size and power. But I was also becoming aware the fact that Freddy was representing the relationship I have with myself, the fear of my own wildness.

In my life I have learned to drown my fear, to deny it. My fear was always followed by a sense of worthlessness. Fear had become taboo. But Freddy's peaceful and loving presence allowed it to be without judgement.

I felt released from something and then able to move. Step by step I moved closer and closer to Freddy. All this time Freddy was holding my gaze.

I took my final step towards him. It was at this point when I felt a strong need to invite him to let him know I was trusting him.

I was awestruck by his intuition. He immediately began to walk towards me. There was also something about the way he was moving towards me – really slowly and really gently – that was making me feel safe. I guess he was communicating this to me.

We stood close for what was a few minutes, but seemed like an eternity. I was being intimate in a way I had never been before. It was hard saying goodbye.

Freddy has helped me recognise my fears. I am realising that my fears are necessary as they are guarding the gateway to a place where love and freedom live. My essence.

I don't have enough words to thank Miranda for her incredible timing, for clasp my hand once again when I felt I was falling.

■ Hellena, 44, lives in Easton, Bristol, and is now in a steady relationship with a man. She is also part-way through a masters degree course in psychotherapy at the Karuna Institute in Devon and plans to use her qualification and her experience to help women in the sex industry and those who suffer domestic violence and addiction.