

Trust overrides fear: Pilot therapeutic Riding program of NGO Politropo

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Introduction – Narrative therapy

During my specialization in child psychiatry in UK, I attended a 2 year course in systemic and couple therapy and that's how I got to know about Narrative Therapy. I was attracted to the new ideas that helped me move beyond the assessment–diagnosis–treatment equation that reigns the mental health field and imposes pathologising labels and blaming 'treatments' on people who were in difficulty.

- I was not so attracted to the distant doctor figures who were *scanning* with their gaze and interviewing the 'patient' in order to diagnose their pathology and then provide the magical drug or psychotherapeutic technique to make them healthy.
- I then started to use externalization to assist children and families that sought help and was fascinated by both their positive response and improvement.

Introduction – Therapeutic Riding

- A few years ago and following a bad fall I had during a trail ride with my wife Pinelopi and other riders, I was quite fearful of horses and riding and I avoided contact with them.
- In the meantime Pinelopi became very interested in Therapeutic Riding (TR) and started to be involved as a side assistant of a physiotherapist who provided TR sessions for people with mobility problems. She also took riding lessons and when she was told that because Rados (the horse she rode) was ‘uncooperative’, he would be sent to be slaughtered unless she bought him, she became quite upset and invited me to the riding club to introduce me to him.



After months of no contact with horses I went to meet Rados and when I saw him I couldn't bear the idea of him becoming food for horse eating people... Later I read prof. Theodore Antikas research about some archaeological finds which showed that in ancient Greece 'They didn't shoot horses'.

Training

- We bought Rados, I started to be involved with riding, and with Pinelopi we started our quest to find ways to help him overcome his fears and health problems. We were trained as basic level TR instructors and attended several seminars by horse whisperer Franklin Levinson, studied books and watched videos by Linda Tellington Jones, Monty Roberts, Mark Rashid and several other horse trainers. We managed to earn Rado's trust and to assist him to overcome fears that he had since he was a racehorse. We also bought Markos, a Thessalian horse and we applied the training methods we were taught to both of them. At the same time Pinelopi was studying Physiotherapy and we started to provide TR sessions for people with mental health developmental, and mobility problems.





Non Governmental Organisation

Politropo

www.politropo.org

In 2007 some friends that were members of the local social care NGO Politropo told us that there was an opportunity to use funding from EU and the Greek government in order to provide TR services free of charge for local people and that's how we decided to cooperate with Politropo and materialize this program in our home town Volos.

Changes in horsemanship

- In the last few decades there is a revolutionary shift in our perception of our relationship with the horse. We have begun to see horses as “agents of change in the human condition” (Miller & Lamb, 2005, p. 14). The wisdom that for 50.000.000 years helped the horse to survive as a herbivore social being is offered to us, and enriches our 60.000 years of homo-sapiens knowledge.



trust and safety

- A major objective in TR is to cultivate a relationship of trust and safety so that the horse will want to cooperate with us, without being forced. The horse helps us cultivate and improve our communication with it and with our fellow people because the horse functions as a mirror of the internal states of people. When, for example, a human approaches a horse and is afraid, the horse senses it from the first moment, reacts, and invites him/her to face his/her fear and to deal with it. I tried to help Rado overcome his fears and in this process I was helped by him to face my own fears and change my relationship with them. My fears could no longer keep me away from horses.

Externalisation: The person is not the problem. The problem is the problem

- The horse is a human's ally and assistant in the face of his problems (that were regarded in the TR program as external to the people) and in the face of the challenges of his life (that were considered as ordeals and opportunities for learning).
- The instructors, the horses and the TR team assisted the clients to resist the fear and the difficulties they faced during the activity, in order to enable them to generalize this effort and its results in their daily life.

Force and dominance make a horse to comply. Trust inspires a horse to cooperate.

- A great deal of time for study and practice is being invested by us in order to develop this precious trust. “Safety equals trust which means peace for the horse” (Levinson, 8th paragraph). We regularly cared for, played and trained with our horses. Trust between a horse and a human is the basis for safe horsemanship and this trust keeps the horses fear tamed and its curiosity alive. “Curiosity is the emotion opposite fear in a horse” (Pat Parelli as quoted in Miller & Lamb, 2005, p. 28). When a horse feels trust and curiosity, it cooperates willingly and is pleased to explore whatever the human suggests.

Changes in Therapy for Disabled People

- In Greece, disabled people usually participate in educational, therapeutic, athletic and entertaining activities indoors, in centers specifically designed for their needs. This is good but not sufficient because it isolates them from outdoors activities. In our area there was no riding facility that provided equal opportunities and access for disabled people.
- Our clients described the horse as a “precious friend” and called “lessons” the TR sessions. This name is quite liberating in comparison with the name “therapy” which implies pathology.

Re-authoring

- We aimed to provide accessible riding facilities for disabled people and to help change the way clients and people in their environment viewed themselves by the “revising and re-authoring of their lives and of their relationships with their problems” (White, 1988/1989, p. 15).
- We aimed to challenge the dominant descriptions ‘isolated’, ‘problematic’, ‘disadvantaged’, ‘disabled’ etc, and to facilitate the emergence of new descriptions like ‘participants’, ‘collaborators’, ‘friends’, ‘helpers’, ‘strivers’, ‘horsemen’, and ‘horsewomen’.

Unique outcomes and documentation

- These new descriptions, roles and stories were strengthened with: a) a change in the language that we and they used to describe themselves and, b) with the documentation of their horsemanship efforts with photographs, videos, certificates, publications, meetings, etc.
- These documents of their efforts formed a deposit of recollections of “unique life outcomes” (White, 1988/1989, p. 11-14) and an opening for the recognition and utilization of other unique abilities and efforts that may lead to more unique outcomes in their daily life.

ΠΙΣΤΟΠΟΙΗΤΙΚΟ

απονέμεται στον Ματία Σγουρίδη

Για την μεγάλη προσπάθεια που κατέβαλλε και την πρόοδο που πέτυχε σε συνεργασία με τους Ίππους Μάρκο και Ράδο συμμετέχοντας στο πρόγραμμα Εκπαιδευτικής - Θεραπευτικής Ιππασίας της ΜΚΟ Πολίτροπο το έτος 2007 – 2008

Οι Εκπαιδευτές του προγράμματος
Δανιήλ Δανιλόπουλος - Πηνελόπη Σαράφη

Contingent communication

- In order to connect with clients and build relationships of trust, we did our best to be present in the moment, to understand and be aware of their (and also of our) sentiments, position and communication and to respond in a contingent, sensitive, and clear way to their feedback (“contingent communication”, Siegel & Hartzell, 2003, pp. 80-81). From our experience, we have found that exactly the same principles apply in relating and connecting with horses.

The not knowing expert

- We also attempted to challenge the traditional therapist – client relationship that implies a status of power and expertise for the former and a status of passivity and ignorance for the latter. We tried to privilege the client's local knowledge and to use our expertise humbly. We invited our clients to assist us to look after the horses and in return we offered them opportunities for expanding their learning about horsemanship. Most of them had previous contact with horses and a strong desire to be close to them. Our clients and our horses taught us well too. They were models of patience, perseverance, cooperation, devotion and altruism.

Centaur Chiron

- The interaction between horse and human is a unique experience that has attracted public admiration and has been a source of inspiration from ancient times. The myth of centaurs was of special importance to the philosophy of this program. The mountain Pilon that lays next to the city of Volos has been regarded from ancient times the home land of the wise centaur Chiron who was a peaceful healer and teacher of medicine.

complementariness of the human and equine natures

“In contemporary culture, the centaur persists. Its benign character has become established, perhaps mainly because the one characteristic most closely associated with horses is nobility. The “noble horse” is an archetypal concept, and the equine animal often has the capacity to confer that quality upon its human associates. No human-animal relationship is more intimate, both mentally and physically, than that between mount and rider, for the two share an interspecies unity of understanding and kinetic communication that is unparalleled. The centaur figure is holistic, celebrating the oneness and complementariness of the human and equine natures, symbolically merging the physical aspects of being with the mental and spiritual” (Atwood Lawrence, 1994, p. 66)

TR as a holistic therapeutic approach

- TR capitalizes on this unique horse human interaction and promotes learning and wellbeing for both species. It includes continuous care, training and learning in a three way relationship between horse, TR team and clients.
- The client, the horse, the instructor, the horse leader and the side assistants collaborate very closely. Through the interaction with the TR team and the horse (during grooming, exercises and games, recreational walks and discussions), the client develops motor, cognitive, psychological and social resilience. Consequently TR acts as a holistic therapeutic approach.

Setting of the TR program

- Via the program we offered - for the first time in the region of Volos, an organised TR service for adolescents and adults with disability.
- The clients participated in weekly group TR sessions. We formed two groups of 5 individuals and each group lasted 2 ½ hours.
- In order to prevent accidents we did our best to use installations, tools and tack equipment that were in accordance with international safety standards and thankfully there were no accidents.

Feedback and information

- Feedback was provided to the parents /guardians about their child's participation in the TR program in person or by phone. They could watch the activity but without intervening to the work of the TR team and had the opportunity to discuss with the team after the session.
- The clients, their relatives, every interested professional and the public could be informed about the evolution of the TR program by visiting the website www.politropo.org/ridding_cure.htm
- This website is still available and contains photographs (of the horses, of the TR sessions, of the installations and of the tools), videos from the program and from the training with our horses, texts (publications, essays, and articles in Greek and in English about TR, disability, horses and horsemanship).

Publicity

- Within the context of publicity of the TR program, several articles were published in the local press and we produced a leaflet, a poster, and a few videos that are available on Youtube.
- We also published the first greek therapeutic riding e-book (170 pages) that includes essays and articles about horsemanship, therapeutic riding and disability and also photographs and a detailed description of the program. The e-book is available to download free of charge from the website of Politropo.
- This program would have been impossible to exist without the priceless contribution of professionals, volunteers and students whose names are all listed on the web site.

Description of the activity

- As soon as clients arrived at the Riding Club of Magnesia we headed to the stables to meet the horses and take them out with us.
- Then the group members took turns to lead the horses to the area outside the arena. All members were taught horse grooming, principles about communication with the horses, basic riding skills and participated in games with the horses.
- “Riding, itself, is only one component of our work. We stress the importance of all aspects of the relationship with the horse” (McCormick & McCormick, 1997, p. 43). Our clients responded to our invitations and displayed great curiosity to learn by using the opportunity to participate in these activities.

Grooming

- An adolescent with intensely hyperactive behavior managed to slow down by resisting the *demands of the 'rush'* in order to avoid scaring Markos during grooming and riding.
- By offering this care to each horse, the clients communicated their friendly intentions and compassion and they were amazed by both horses' cooperation! During grooming we hosted conversations about the horse's communication, feelings, sensitivities and needs and this provided the opportunity to discuss about every group members' communication, feelings, sensitivities, needs and actions for the care of themselves and of others.

Hoof care

- Hoof care was particularly important. When a horse accepts to allow a human to clean his hooves, it literally surrenders the only defense it has to protect itself from danger because it is a prey animal and flight from danger is the option for it. The horse displays this kind of willingness to a human only if it entrusts him and feels safe that he won't hurt it.
- Hoof care is a trying experience for each client because - independently of their mental and motor capacities - they all recognized the danger involved (to be kicked) and felt fear, but with encouragement and instruction from the staff, they achieved great triumphs over their fear and motor difficulties and this elevated their self confidence.



Brushing

- The brushing of the horse's mane, body and tail was a pleasant activity for the participants and the horses, a good chance for practicing fine motor skills and a starting point for discussions that acknowledged, validated and reinforced their efforts for self and other care and for independent living.
- By offering care to the horse, abilities (that were previously overshadowed by difficulties) emerged and the clients' role changed. From troubled and disabled people, they were transformed to helpers, partners and strivers.



Mounting

- A father was surprised when he heard the instructor asking his son to go to the mounting ramp and wait there. He rushed to help his son, but stopped when he heard 'He can manage on his own!' The eighteen year old son moved slowly but skilfully with his wheelchair and then waited for the instructor, the horse leader and the horse to approach the ramp and assist him to mount. The father could not believe what he was seeing...
- Mounting was an entertaining, transforming and provocative experience. It allowed clients to change their observation point: to see the world differently and from a higher level.



Walk and trot

- Riding and leading the horse with the reins was a difficult and quite complex task. Riders needed to maintain body balance, contain their feelings and communicate with the horse and with the coordinator.
- Trotting with the horse was very exciting and entertaining and also assisted the improvement of body balance, self control, rhythm awareness, physical strength and endurance. An adolescent enjoyed singing “Hands up and I reach everything, lets go higher than love” (Chatzigiannis, 2006) every time he trotted with Markos.



Dismounting and horse feeding

- The clients dismounted from the horse with or without the use of the ramp. A young woman with moderate mobility difficulties and mental retardation made an enormous effort to override the fear and the balance instability that troubled her and finally managed to mount and ride Markos. When she dismounted after the first session she said “I am a grown up now”!
- Towards the end of the group session riders shared and offered by hand or in a bucket a small quantity of fruits to the horse as a return for the pleasure and cooperation they received. Careful horse feeding facilitated the riders risk taking management capacities and the group cohesion. The members of one group were especially supportive to an adolescent who feared he would be bitten by the horse and he managed to feed Markos by hand in most sessions!



The Narrative influence and the emergence of new stories

- The TR team used “popular” and mutually negotiated with the clients definitions of their problems and avoided the use of “expert” ones (White, 1988/1989, p. 10) in order to assist them and their relatives to change the way they viewed the problems and the opportunities for resolution.
- When especially the relatives, mentioned “expert” terms like ‘phobia’, ‘hyperactivity’, ‘retardation’, we invited them to reflect on the use of simple and popular terms like ‘fear’, ‘rush’, ‘slowness’. This was the initial step to externalizing the problems and was followed by the organization of their resistance to the problem. The TR team and the horse were the clients’ allies in a collective effort to undermine the problem and overshadow its effects with their efforts and achievements.

Resistance to problems and skills evolution

- The externalization of the fear that troubled most of the clients and the instructor's encouragement to resist its demands and persist with their efforts empowered the clients to perform several exercises and to participate in games (with balls, buckets and fruits) while riding the horse. These activities enhanced the evolution and improvement of several motor, cognitive and social skills.



Helping each other and documenting efforts

- The times that clients were not interacting with the horses, they either made drawings and constructed horse puzzles or observed the other riders and documented their efforts by taking pictures and videos with a camera.
- During the TR program we departed from the rationality of traditional ‘therapy’ and felt like teachers doing lessons – as our clients named our meetings. A strong emphasis was given on effort and on learning goals because “...facing challenges, working hard, stretching their abilities, and using their skills and knowledge to help others, make students feel good about themselves” (Dweck, 2000, p.131)

Use of local language

- We included each client's local, idiosyncratic and favorite expressions in our discussions and joined the clients who spontaneously sang their favorite songs during the activity and sang with them.
- We also participated in a client's favorite dialogues from a traditional shadow puppet theater. He was very talented in acting such roles and we validated and reinforced his efforts for a show that he wanted to organize.
- A few months later he gave his show in a local university lecture hall with great success!

Snapshots from the program

- In one occasion Markos was startled by something and made an abrupt side movement, but he quickly calmed down. Although the young man who was riding him was very scared, he managed to stay mounted. After this incident he wrote on a white board “Today I overcame fear” and smiled while a volunteer took a picture of him and Markos. He was also very attached to Rados and often used to say with pride “You are my brother Rados.”!



- At some point Rados became sick with a severe limb infection and we had to stop riding him and to provide care for him. The clients' interest, care and compassion for him were quite moving! They grabbed the chance to provide help and with their care, devotion and respect they entered the helper's role.



'They walked in unity'

- In the conclusive community meeting of the program, the mother of a participant shared her personal account of her son's relationship with horses and their positive influence in his life and behavior. She said she thought that "centaurs existed in reality and they were wise paraplegics who were capable of achieving the horse's cooperation to the point that it laid down to assist them to mount and then stood up and they walked in unity". She has been the most dedicated supporter of TR because she wants her son to "walk with the horses legs"!

Farewell meeting

- After the expiration of the program, a farewell meeting was organized with the clients and their families at the Riding Club of Magnesia. Each client was offered an album with printed photographs from their sessions, a DVD with a 12 min video, a CD with more photographs and videos, and one color printed certificate.

Conclusion

- In this TR program we invested on building trust with clients as a way to cultivate their curiosity and problem resolution abilities in a collective effort to assist them to “disable disability” (Esler & Adams, 1999, p. 65-72) and to author a new, ability centered chapter in the history of their lives.
- The TR program was a meeting place for people from different systems and disciplines (education, mental health, social services, riding) and we hope that it contributed to challenge and bridge the “partial observations” that are the problem-focus of each of these systems. We also hope that it opened space for more holistic, respectful and “binding descriptions” (Michailakis, 2003, pp. 225-226) of people with disabilities.

For more info

- **As we say in Greece, one picture is worth a thousand words, so we encourage you to see the pictures and videos at the website of Politropo:**

http://www.politropo.org/ridding_cure_ENGLISH.htm

- **or contact us: daniildan@gmail.com
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