

Trust overrides fear: Equine-assisted narrative practice



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This article describes the personal path that led the author to include ideas from narrative therapy, interpersonal neurobiology, and therapeutic riding in his current voluntary work with equine-assisted narrative practice. Concepts and practices are presented by linking theoretical perspectives with people's personal reflections and observed changes in behaviour and relationships with horses. Descriptions are provided for both conversations and non-verbal interactions that aim at promoting connections with security and trust as well as emotionally and positive and empowering experiences for the people and horses involved. Through moments of unique outcomes², invisible, untold stories are revealed and documented (in verbal and non-verbal ways) to facilitate preferred changes.

Introduction to narrative therapy

During my specialty in child psychiatry, I attended a two-year seminar on systemic therapy, and so I came to learn about narrative therapy. The new ideas were appealing to me. They helped me move beyond the equation assessment + diagnosis = therapy that reigns the mental health field and imposes pathologising labels and treatment on people in difficulty.

In many cases, I have seen that the complexity of people's lives and the problems that have led them to the clinic I worked in could not be addressed through the usual 15 to 30-minute review appointment. ADHD, for example, had moored permanently in the life of children diagnosed with ADHD and taking medication from months to years. I felt that focusing only on symptoms and medication created a massive gap between me as an expert and the children's and their families' experience by centralizing my own expertise and ignoring their resources, their striving, and their related stories. Fortunately, there were opportunities to do psychotherapy sessions with most of them, so I was looking for ways to connect with them and contribute to their efforts to make their and their children's lives better.

"Externalizing" is a therapeutic way that encourages persons to objectify, and at times, to personify, the problems they experience as oppressive. In this

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² *Unique outcomes or sparkling moments* are the exceptions to the dominant story of the problem. They are moments, events or actions that are related to a person's resistance to the problem and are consistent with his or her values (White, 2008).

process, the problem becomes a separate entity, and thus external to the person, that was (or the relationship was), ascribed the problem (White 1988). When at our meetings, I started asking children and parents about how they felt, how fear was preventing a child from speaking, and what they were doing to help, they seemed astonished, as if they had never thought of it. Until then, they believed that fear is something internal, inside the child or the family, and something for which someone had to be blamed. Our discussions about how they resisted in the past and how they could resist the problem at present and in the future, and about their preferred actions and choices, contributed to rewriting their story in a more positive and empowering way that made them see themselves more like they wanted to.

I kept in contact with the field of systemic therapy and was inspired by the postmodern ideas that give priority to the knowledge of clients and challenge the knowledge of experts. I used narrative therapy ideas at my private practice and in sessions with children, adolescents, and families that I met in local council structures that provided services for people with motor, mental, and developmental disabilities. Influenced by the ideas of narrative, I tried to get in touch with the knowledge, needs, problems, and skills of the clients, their families, and the therapeutic and support staff of these structures.

Neurobiology - introduction

In 2001 I got to know about interpersonal neurobiology by reading related articles and books. I was touched by the ideas concerning how to build secure connections between children and parents and their significant others. "At the most basic level, therefore, secure attachments in both childhood and adulthood are established by two individuals' sharing a nonverbal focus on the energy flow (emotional states) and a verbal focus on the information-processing aspects (representational processes of memory and narrative) of mental life" (Siegel, 1999, p. 89). Externalization and re-authoring helped me with the verbal focus in my contact with the clients.

What helped me to cooperate with them, by staying close to their experience was named by Siegel contingent communication (Siegel, 1) and is the way in which two individuals collaborate with each other. So, collaborative communication happens when a person first sends off a signal to another person. This signal can take any form, including a non-verbal signal like eye contact, facial expression, tone of voice, body gestures, or a verbal signal like a word. That signal is sent from the mind of person "A" to person "B" who receives it. A contingent response would be that "B" is not only able to perceive the signal sent by "A" but also that "B" is able to process it and make sense of it. "B" then would send back a signal that is not just a mirroring of what "A" sent but actually is a signal reflecting that "B" has received the signal, made sense of it, and now is sending a signal back to "A" as part of this collaborative dance of communication.

These ideas are very promising as they talk about brain plasticity and the possibility to change the relational patterns, as well as the structure and

function of each individual brain itself as a result of relationships, new experiences, learning, or therapy.

Therapeutic riding - introduction

In 2003 after a bad fall that I had during a horse trail, I was left with many questions about safety in our relationship with the horses, back pain for a few weeks, and a fear that led me to avoid any contact with horses and horse riding. At the same time, I knew that my wife P. (then working as a nursery assistant) had a great love for horses, and when I saw the brochure for a therapeutic riding seminar that would take place at a riding club, I gave it to her. So she got in touch with the club and was invited by the physiotherapist, who provided therapeutic riding sessions for people with mobility problems, to participate by helping her as a volunteer, a side-assistant initially, and as a horse guide later.

P was going to the club regularly. She started riding lessons for herself, and she was very happy. I was glad for her, but I kept myself at a distance. This attitude of mine changed in a single day of the summer of 2004 when she returned upset and said that the people in charge of the club told her to bid farewell to Rados, the horse she was riding and loved as the next day he would leave for "a nice meadow where he will graze carefree." This meant that because the horse was easily startled and the riders were falling, they would send it to Italy for slaughter to become food for horse-eating humans and animals. She asked if this could be prevented, and she was offered the chance to buy it herself. Knowing about my fear, she cautiously asked me to think about whether I wanted to go with her and see him.



Rados

Although in the modern world, the prevailing practice is to kill the horses when they grow old or when they cease to be useful to humans for activities, there were exceptions since ancient times. As revealed by archaeological studies of a mare's bones that lived 2500 years ago, and found in the Necropolis of Sindos, although she had suffered a fracture, it was treated therapeutically and healed at least 3-4 years before her death (Antikas, 2007).

Rescuing Rados was not an easy path because he had many problems as a former neglected and abused racehorse, but he changed our lives. For a start, to become able to help Rados, I had to face my fear that kept me away from

horses and to learn to collaborate and communicate with them. In the equestrian club, there was also Markos, a Thessalian horse that was also used in the riding school and in therapeutic riding sessions. Gradually, I hesitantly got involved with both horses and therapeutic riding. Together with P., we sought ways to help Rados overcome his own fears and also to deal with physical health problems, due to previous abuse and neglect.



Markos in the snow

During the next two years, we found out that people involved with horses had a strong belief of enforcement, namely that horses must be controlled and obey to whatever people ask them. Through our contact via seminars and supervision with the psychologist, coordinator, and therapeutic riding trainer Nihad Ibraheem we came to know an alternative approach to communicating with horses. We were trying to understand their needs, desires, preferences, and experience by using their own language not to frighten but help them feel safe in what we invited them to do with us. By his suggestion, we became aware of the importance of human nonverbal communication through attitudes, movements, breathing, and the impact the last has on the relationship with the horse on its training, care, and well being. Tellington Jones, who has developed her own method of horse training, states: "Horses will mirror your breathing" (2006, p. 123).

For example, when we are close to a horse, and especially if we are leading it from the ground or by riding, it feels and listens to our breathing and interprets it accordingly as reassuring or worrying for itself. If we hold our breath, breathe fast or breathe irregularly, the horse is vigilant, it can doubt whether we can protect it from possible danger, and feeling upset, is not inspired to trust us. We were interested in the ideas of Monty Roberts (2000, pp. 37-40) about the "language" of the horse. By using them horses seemed to communicate better with us. We attended Franklin Levinson's seminars on building trust in our relationship with horses.

Our efforts worked out, and the two horses began to trust us, too, to follow us even freely on various routes and the exercises we did in an arena. When the physiotherapist, the responsible for the therapeutic riding in the club, resigned, we decided to do ourselves the therapeutic riding sessions with children and teenagers. Their dedication to what we proposed to do with horses was impressive. We placed emphasis on helping the horse feel safe with us, on taking care of it as best we could, on communicating with it in ways it understands, and we did ground-based activities and riding with Markos and Rados.

P. focused on learning goals, and I concentrated on psychotherapeutic ones. The rapid change of emotions - within seconds - that the clients felt was noticeable. From very frightened, they looked excited and insisted on their effort despite the fear they might have experienced while being near or on the horse.

Changes in horsemanship: movement from domination to inspiration

I tried to help Rados overcome his fears. In this process, he reacted every time I did things that scared him. We had to learn as much as we could about his story, to understand his sensitivities and fears. And through this understanding and our communication with him in the present, we wanted to find ways to inspire him to trust us and try out ways we proposed to him to deal with his fears.

He was born in a horse breeding facility for racehorses. At the age of three, he went to the racetrack and ran 10 races. At first, he did not perform well, but then he had two firsts, and after these, his performance began to decline. Eventually, he was no longer useful at the racetrack and was given to a horse dealer. He kept him in horrible conditions without the care and sufficient food. He then sold him to the club where we met him. They used him for several years in the riding school, where most of the pupils loved him dearly as he was a very expressive horse. When he was cared for, he returned his love by seeking their strokes, and young and elders enjoyed it. But he was always scared easily and sometimes riders fell. To prevent this, the riding coaches had adjusted on the leash and on the saddle belts to restrict the movement of his head. Even so, he was still startled, and they decided to send him to that meadow. In the beginning, we took care of him in the way that the coaches of the club had told us and focused on us controlling him and him obeying us.

Nihad taught us how to communicate with him so that he can understand Franklin and us about how to help him to face fears triggered by our own behavior and changes in the environment to earn his trust and tame his fears. We started interacting with him from the ground without wearing a halter and with no material connecting us. In this way, we started moving from the quest for domination to a search for inspiration. We did not want to impose our will on Rados and Marcos but to inspire them to cooperate with us. We communicated with them in ways that they understood, and corresponded to their own reactions and desires, as they were expressed with their non-verbal communication.

Traditionally, many horse trainers and owners when they face challenges or difficulties in their relationship with horses, they consider the horse to be the problem. Alternatively, they could try to find out what is the problem that leads the horse to undesirable behaviors. The externalizing - narrative viewpoint helped me to take distance from the problems that troubled Rados, clients, and myself and to seek ways and partners in order to undermine the influence of problems, and to build trust among all of us. The spectacle was strange to those who were watching us, and some were talking derogatorily by saying, "You made the horses follow you like dogs." Although they were impressed

that both Rados and Markos cooperated very well with us and did things that seemed impossible in the past, they considered these horses to be of inferior quality because they did not participate in equine races and could not bring medals. But Rados and Markos began to trust us, and so we went by leading them from the ground and by riding them on routes outside the club facility, which was unthinkable until then, especially for Rados.

These changes took a long time, with me continuing to be troubled by the fear that something terrible would happen again. When I was leading Rados from the ground, outside the club, there were times when I felt my heart beating very hard. It was difficult to breathe steadily, but P suggested that I whistle or sing songs that I like and would calm me down. So, by singing, I was not holding my breath, my fears calmed down, and Rados seemed to enjoy it. When I was whistling or singing, he had his head lowered and his ears to the front, which meant he was calm even though we were walking in an environment that was unfamiliar to him.

Horses may not tell their stories in words as humans do, but they say it by their behaviour. Their reactions to our approach, to our touch, our movements, to the changes that take place around them tell us about their current history. So the current history of Rados began to include such images. There were times when we walked quietly without talking. If something startled Rados or me, I whistled, sung, or stroke his neck, I let him look around to make sure that no enemy is lurking, and once we quieted down, we continued our route.



Rados in the snow

The horse as a mirror of internal states of human beings

Horses are very capable of responding to changes in the environment and their relationships with other creatures, animals, and humans, as this is their way to recognize the dangers, ensure their survival and maintain the herd's cohesion. A common expression being used in Equine Assisted Therapy is that "horses hold a mirror that reveals who we are" and we consider this to be a very accurate description of the reflections of ourselves that horses provide. Horses cannot lie, and their survival over millions of years has depended on their capacity to interpret and reflect the emotions, feelings, and energy of predators. People are horses' most dangerous predators, and they remain very well aware of this (Emonson, 2011).

Clever Hans³ was a horse whose owner claimed that he could do arithmetic calculations. When asked to answer a question, such as how much it is 5 + 4, he would hit his hoof on the ground exactly 9 times and stop. He had become famous in his time for this. Inquiries were carried out to find how he could do it. Other people -not the owner - asked him to do the calculation, and he found the right answer repeatedly. He couldn't find the correct answer when he couldn't see around the people talking to him. Only then, he was wrong when he could not see his observers and receive messages from their reactions. We produce messages unintentionally and regardless of whether we prefer to display or hide them. Horses can and do perceive changes in our disposition through the way these changes affect our behavior and are expressed through our nonverbal communication. Horses read what we transmit with our body, our conscious and non-conscious behaviour, and translate it into intentions that invoke to them trust and tranquillity or fear and discomfort. "Safety equals trust, which also equals peace in the animal's life" (Levinson, 1).

Trust between a horse and a human is the basis for safe horsemanship, and that trust keeps the horse's fear tamed and its curiosity alive. "Curiosity is the emotion opposite to fear in a horse" (Pat Parelli, as quoted in Miller & Lamb, 2005, p. 28). When a horse feels trust and curiosity, they cooperate eagerly and are happy to explore what the human proposes.

Having seen the response of the horses and of the children with whom we did the sessions and observed the improvements in their motor, mental, and communication skills, we were impressed and began to dream of living on a farm with our horses. We worked with some children and adolescents with mobility problems. We consulted their physiotherapists so that we avoid activities that could be harmful (however, the physiotherapists were not present during the sessions). Still, P was worried about doing any harm and had already begun to see the benefits of Tellington Jones' chiropractic methods that she applied to Rados to help him with his health issues; she took nationwide exams and began studying physiotherapy. Nihad then trained us as Therapeutic Riding Instructors at the Therapeutic Riding Association of Greece (TRAG). Together with the other participants of the seminar, we started efforts to develop and distribute therapeutic riding in Greece.

Neglect, abuse and the "abduction" of horses

While we were excited about what we were learning and with the evolution of our relationship with the horses and the clients, there were issues that were of great concern to us as we found that Markos and Rados were neglected regarding their feeding and wellbeing. They were not given proper and adequate food, and in addition to that, a horse trainer punched Markos in the face when he was startled and threw off the rider. We were also told by the club people that they would no longer allow the car carrying a teenager in a wheelchair to enter the club area, so he had to get out of the car outside the club facility and move up a steep uphill in order to attend. At the same time, some able-bodied members of the club drove their vehicles into the club. We

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clever_Hans

felt that we were unwanted, and as our fundamental values of human and horse rights and care were violated, this situation had become unbearable, leading us to break up with the club. We threatened them to report the abuse, so they sold us Markos and took him away along with Rados.

This kind of "abduction" of horses was adventurous and dangerous as Rados was claustrophobic, and we needed 2 to 3 hours, a lot of steady breaths, and a lot of patience to get on the transport trailer.



Markos and Rados

In the new riding club, there was much more acceptance and better accessibility for people with diversity, better living conditions for horses as well as better cooperation with people. In that place they were not involved with sport riding and medals, they were more relaxed and did free riding, that is, horseback riding in the countryside. Although they used methods of domination in their relationship with horses, they were more gentle and receptive to our approach.

Then we came in contact with Mark Rashid's (2000) ideas about dominant (or Alpha) and passive leadership. The term passive leadership refers to leading by inspiration and personal example, something that is observed in the relationships between horses in large herds. The author refers to the story of Kit (pp. 34-40), who was chosen by the other horses of the herd to lead them - that is, she was chosen passively, without seeking it. Levinson (2) also states "The lead horse (usually a mare) in the equine herd does not coerce the other members of the herd to follow her. She does not force their compliance, nor bribe them for it. She does not plead nor beg. She does not push them along nor cajoles them. She simply goes where she needs to when she needs to, and they follow her. It's that simple, and that is the kind of inspired leadership we humans need to offer our horses."

Having more favourable conditions in the new club and in partnership with the urban non-profit social care organization *Politropo*, we implemented a pilot program of therapeutic riding that was free of charge for people with disabilities and special needs. In this program, we tried to provide the best conditions we could in terms of accessibility, equal opportunities, and we focused on efforts to resist problems, improve participants' lives and cultivate a relationship of trust between clients, the therapeutic riding team, and horses.

Changes in horsemanship

The interaction between a horse and a human being is a unique experience that has attracted admiration and has been a source of inspiration since antiquity. The legend of Centaur Chiron, the wounded healer, and teacher of Medicine who lived in Pelion has been of great importance to the philosophy of the program. Chiron was a monstrous, abandoned orphaned creature, a product of rape. As he was very different from the humans and the rest of the centaurs who were violent, his future was predetermined as ominous. But with his adoption from Apollo and his training in archery, astrology, arts, and healing, he not only survived, but he was self-healed and evolved into a therapist and teacher of many heroes and of Asclepius. Chiron symbolizes for us an archetypal, inner power that drives us to resist problems and seek solutions for others and us.

"In contemporary culture, the centaur (Chiron) 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 complementarity of the human and the equine nature. Symbolically, the physical aspects of being with the mental and the spiritual ones are merged (Atwood Lawrence, 1994, p. 66).

In terms of horse training, threads of the new, inspiring ideas that have become popular in recent decades had already been expressed by Xenophon (5th century BC), who wrote: "On Horsemanship." From this first saved horsemanship manual, Antikas (2012, p. 26) compiled "Xenophon's Horsemanship Decalogue and quotes: "Never be angry with your horse's behaviour, and this is the first and best principle in your relationships with him. Because rage is something meaningless, which often leads to actions we regret later."

Levinson (2018) refers to the horse's interaction as a "conversation" (pp. 56-63), in which he prefers to "suggest things to a horse" (p. 62) and to view it as a conversational partner who communicates with its movements, gestures, and reactions. The conversation is fruitful when there is an exchange of information and feelings in a positive way for both. This idea touches on my preference for offering to people suggestions rather than directions, prescriptions, or ready-made solutions, for inviting and thus acknowledging their own expertise on the issues we are discussing. Rashid (2000, pp. 83-103) describes how, by implementing "passive" leadership, he is alert to discover the slightest effort by the horse to cooperate with him, to acknowledge it in order to inspire the horse and gain its trust. When I talk with people about their problems, I am equally alert to recognize their effort to resist their problems, and to invite discussions about these sparkling moments, the unique outcomes. Concerning the role of the expert, there is a parallel movement in the areas of psychotherapy and horsemanship from an attitude of domination to an attitude of inspiration, respect, and cooperation (Anderson, 1) that expresses and moves me.



A mounting effort

In this program, we offered for the first time in the Volos area, an organized therapeutic riding service for adolescents and adults with disabilities, mental and developmental problems. We took every possible safety measure for humans and horses, in a facility fully accessible for all people and with great care for the welfare of the horses. Miller & Lamb (2005, p. 14) report they have started to see horses as "agents of change in the human condition." There are now many places around the world where horses assist the training and treatment of humans (i.e., Myers, et al., 2018; Hutton & Emonson, 2015). These activities have also increased in Greece in recent decades as a result of the increased demand from parents of children and people with disabilities and developmental, neurological, and mental health problems.



One group

In Greece, people with disabilities usually participate in educational, therapeutic, sport, and recreational activities indoors, at centres specifically designed for their needs. There are not many opportunities in our area for outdoor activities. There was no facility providing equal opportunities and accessibility for people with disabilities, such as wheelchair accessible routes, appropriate toilets, and a ramp for mounting on the horse. We did the best we could, we used facilities, equestrian equipment, and tools according to international safety standards and there were no accidents. Horse riding and horse riding activities are extremely dangerous and have many fatal accidents compared to other sports and activities.

The “externalization” and the therapeutic riding team

The clients, the horse, the coordinator, the horse rider, and the side-assistants, all work very closely in activities, such as horse riding, leading the horse from

the ground, games, and exercises. Through this interaction and collaboration, the client develops motor, cognitive, and social skills and resilience. The horse is the ally of the client. It is his assistant in dealing with problems considered as "external" to the person, and with the challenges of his/her life, considered as trials and opportunities for learning. Coordinators, horses, and the therapeutic riding team help clients resist the fear and other difficulties encountered during the horse activities in order to develop knowledge and skills that may prove useful in their daily lives.



Looking after the horse...

The clients described the horse as a valuable friend, and called "lessons" the therapeutic riding sessions. The term "lessons" is very liberating compared to the term therapy that focuses on pathology. Also, everyone knew that both Rados and Markos were abused horses and that they had to be very careful with them to help them not to feel threatened and to be calm and willing to cooperate.

Re-authoring - The Invisible story

In the therapeutic riding team, we used simple, popular, and co-defined with the clients, definitions of their problems. We avoided the use of 'expert's' terms (White, 1988) to facilitate changing the perspective of both themselves and of their relatives regarding problems as well as opportunities to solve them. When relatives, supporting staff, and themselves mentioned specific conditions, such as "phobia" or "hyperactivity," we invited them by posing relevant questions to consider the origin and the usefulness of these terms, which usually come from experts.

When we asked them how they name the problem in everyday language, it appeared that they used straightforward and accessible terms such as fear and rush, and we consciously gave privilege to these definitions. If some of them preferred the expert definitions, we honoured their choice and externalized the specific particular definition. This was the first step towards "externalizing" the problems. The therapeutic riding team and the horses were the allies and assistants of the clients in a collective effort to undermine the problem and overshadow its effects with the efforts and successes of the team members.

From the perspective of narrative therapy, an attempt is made to bring the clients in contact with the alternative story -usually "thin," or almost invisible-about their resistance against the influence of the problems in their lives and relationships. The preferred and alternative stories of their lives and relationships are less visible under the weight of the dominant problem saturated descriptions they bring to therapy (Morgan, 2006, p. 71).

Examples of questions are:

- - Do you always obey the demands of the stress to avoid getting close to your horse?
- - When fear makes your hands shake, and you want to brush your horse, how do you handle it?
- - What do you think for helping yourself focus on what you do, and ignore the thoughts that fear brings to your mind?
- - How are you, and how is the fear affected when you see Rados enjoying the care you give him? Is it you or the fear that is strengthened?

Exceptions to the history of the problem, unique outcomes and documents

The re-authoring of the clients' story began as they explored and recognized their resistance to the problem, the knowledge, and skills they used, as well as the new ones they acquired during their contact with horses and in their daily lives. We tried to challenge the dominant descriptions of people with disabilities, such as "isolated", "problematic", "disadvantaged", "disabled" and to facilitate the emergence of new descriptions such as "participant", "partner", "friend", "helper", "fighter", "rider" and "amazon." These new descriptions, roles, and stories were strengthened by a change in the perspective and in the language that they and we used to describe them and by the documentation of their equestrian efforts, of the unique life outcomes (White, 1988) or 'exceptions' to problems, with photos, videos, certificates, publications, and meetings. For clients who participated in the program, many of whom had difficulty reading and understanding texts, and it was much more familiar to view photos or videos, these recordings were a way to maintain contact with their knowledge, skills, and pursuits in their daily striving.

We also tried to challenge the traditional therapist-client relationship, which implies a position of power and expertise for the former and a position of passivity and ignorance for the latter. We invited clients to help us in our efforts for the rescue, survival, wellbeing, safety, and care of the horses. In return, we gave them opportunities to expand their horsemanship learning and skills and to live a different experience. Most had previous contact with the horses and a strong desire to be close to them.

The clients participated in weekly group therapy sessions, in two groups of 5 persons each. As soon as they arrived at the riding club, we went with them to the stables to meet the horses and take them out. The name 'therapeutic riding' may not refer to other aspects of the relationship with horses, but, like

McCormick & McCormick (1997, p. 43), we also consider that "Riding itself is only one component of our work. We stress the importance of all aspects of the relationship with the horse". So the team members lead the horses from the ground to the area outside of the arena, and all of them were taught horse grooming, basic principles of communication with horses, basic riding skills, and they participated in games and exercises with the horses.

Our clients responded to our invitations and showed a great deal of curiosity to learn by participating in these activities. For example, a teenager with extremely hyperactive behaviour, who run for a few circles like a horse around the arena. In this way, he managed to slow down his movements and resist the "rush" to avoid scaring Markos during grooming and riding. By offering that care to each horse, the clients communicated to it their friendly intentions and compassion; they were amazed by the cooperation of horses, Rados, and Markos. During grooming, and also at other times, we hosted conversations about horse communication, feelings, sensitivities, and needs, and this allowed us to discuss the communication, emotions, sensitivities, needs, and actions of each group member to take care of themselves and others. These efforts of theirs were acknowledged, validated, and reinforced by members of the therapeutic riding team and by the other members of the client group in our discussions.

Hoof care was particularly important. When a horse accepts to allow a person to hold and raise their hoofs, they literally surrender the only defence they have to protect themselves from danger as they are prey animal, and escaping away from the danger is their only option. Only if they are trapped will they bite or kick to defend themselves. The horse shows this kind of willingness to a person only when they trust and feel safe with them. Hoof care is challenging for every client. Regardless of their mental and motor skills, they all realized the danger, but with the encouragement and guidance, they achieved great victories over the fear. In the ensuing discussions, they talked about the obstacles that their fear posed to them, such as negative thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, about the difficulty of their effort, and about how they saw themselves after each new thing they learned and achieved. Many people said they felt more confident in themselves after all the hard work they had done. All of them were eager to offer care to the horses and used skills that were not visible, as they had previously been overshadowed by the problems.



Hoof care

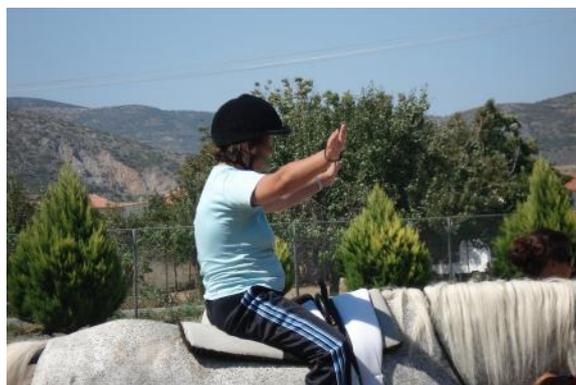
One father was astonished to hear me ask his son to go to the ramp and wait there. He hurried to help him but stopped as he saw him moving slowly in his wheelchair. The son went to the ramp by himself and waited for us to come close and help him to mount Markos. The father did not believe in his eyes as he thought his son would either not understand the instruction, or would not cooperate or could not do it on his own. Mounting the horse was a fun, transformative, and challenging experience. It allows clients to change their perspective, to see the world differently and from a higher level, literally.

Riding and leading a horse with the reins is a difficult and quite complex task. The rider must maintain his physical balance, withstand emotions that can be difficult, and communicate with the horse and the coordinator. Trotting with the horse is very exciting and fun, and it also helps to improve physical balance, self-control, rhythm awareness, physical strength, and endurance. One teenager enjoyed singing a popular song: "Hands up and I reach everything, let's go higher than Love! " each time she trotted with Markos.



Hands Up!

The clients dismounted from the horse with or without the use of the ramp. A young woman with motor difficulties and mental retardation made a great effort to overcome the fear and instability that troubled her and finally managed to mount Markos and rode him. When she dismounted for the first time, he said proudly, "I am a grown-up now." Leading the horse on the ground, in a free or pre-determined route, is also a very difficult task that requires high concentration, coordination, and good communication with the horse.



"I 'm a grown up now"

Towards the end of each group session, the riders offered a small amount of fruit to the horses, by hand or in a bucket, as a reward for the pleasure and

cooperation they had received. They collaborated very well and encouraged each other as some were still afraid the horse might bite them. Careful feeding facilitated risk management and team cohesion. They were all very supportive of a teenager who was very afraid of being beaten. When he eventually managed to feed the horse by offering carrots with his hand at almost all sessions, everyone was happy.



feeding...

Externalization, Re-authoring, and Evolution of Skills

Naming and externalizing the problems that oppress the clients was the first step in helping them distance themselves from the problems. With the coordinator's encouragement to resist the demands of the problems and insist on their own efforts, the clients performed various exercises and participated in games with horses. On one occasion, Markos was startled by something and made a sudden side movement, but quickly calmed down. Although the young man who rode him was terrified, he managed to stay seated, did not shout, and helped Markos to calm down. While he was on Markos, a volunteer photographed him smiling as he held a whiteboard on which he wrote: "Today I defeated fear."



Today I defeated fear

Until that time, my understanding of narrative therapy was based on books, articles, and videos I had seen, but I did not have the opportunity to do formal training. The clients who participated in the program had communication and mental difficulties. At the time, it seemed to be quite convenient to "externalize" the problems considering them as "enemies," and the response from the clients was positive. Through the training, I learned that something that is a

"problem" might have not only negative but also positive aspects. For example, one woman with mobility difficulties and instability described that sometimes her fear was helping her in walking very carefully and avoiding the danger of losing her balance. But when fear flooded her, it was literally an enemy because it made her tremble, and she was at risk of falling.

Examples of questions that can be asked in the context of horse activities are:

- What made you tremble when you tried to mount Markos for the first time?
- How would you name that?
- Does fear cause you anything other than shaking?
- How do you feel that it makes you feel this way?
- Why don't you like it, how else do you want to feel?
- What helped you stay calm, not scream and keep your balance when the truck got into the club, and Markos was scared?
- How do you feel about what you did? What does it say about you?
- How do you see yourself now, and how do you feel about it?

Helping each other and documenting efforts

The times when clients did not interact with the horses, they made drawings, constructed puzzles with pictures of horses, observed those who were close to the horses, and took photos or videos with a camera. A great deal of focus was on learning goals because according to Dweck (2000, p. 131) "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). Dweck's research has shown that focusing on learning goals facilitates an incremental view of one's self, while criticism and focus on one's negatives and failures reinforce a static view.

In the discussions that we hosted, we used a local and straightforward language to honour the story of each client and avoided using expert terms. We included the local, idiosyncratic, and favourite expressions of each client in our discussions, and we sang along with those who spontaneously sang their favourite songs during the activities. We also participated in dialogues from Karagiozis, the traditional shadow theatre that a client loved. He enjoyed playing such roles. Those who were present acknowledged, validated, and reinforced his efforts for a show he wanted to organize. A few months later, he gave his performance in a lecture hall at the local university with great success!

At some point, Rados got very sick with a severe foot infection, and we had to stop riding and give him a lot of care. The interest, care, and compassion of the group members for him were very moving. They were asking about him, they wanted to see him, to caress him and he enjoyed it!

At the program's closing meeting, the mother of one client shared her personal perception of her son's relationship with both horses and their positive influence on his life and behaviour. She said she thought that "the centaurs existed in reality, and that they were wise paraplegics who were able to achieve the cooperation of the horse to the point of it lying down to help them mount and then they walked together." She said she wants her son to do therapeutic riding to walk with the horse's feet.

After the expiration of the program, a farewell meeting with the clients and their relatives was organized in the riding club. Wishing to assist the program participants and to keep in touch with their alternative story, (the history of their resistance to problems), we gave everyone a photo album of the sessions, a twelve-minute video, a CD with more photos and videos from their participation, and a colour certificate. With the consent of the clients and their relatives, we have created eight internet-accessible videos and the website of [Politropo](#), which contains detailed information about the program.



Certificate of a group member

In this therapeutic riding program, we invested in building trust with clients and horses as a way to cultivate their resilience and problem-solving abilities. It was a collective effort to help them write new skill-focused chapters in their life stories. The therapeutic riding program became a meeting place for people from different systems and specialties (education, mental health, social sciences, horse riding), and we hope that it helped bridge the segmented perspectives that dominate each of these systems. We also hope that this pilot effort opened some space for more holistic, more respectful, and more "binding descriptions" (Michailakis, 2003) for people with disabilities.

After the pilot program

After the program had finished, the funding stopped, but we continued to offer therapeutic riding services. We did not have the opportunity to rerun groups, but as the children were now brought by the parents and not the escorting staff, we had the opportunity to work with the family.

Then, I got the opportunity to be trained in narrative therapy, and we also moved the horses on a farm at Sesklo, where conditions are better for them, with more freedom and space to move and where there is better accessibility for people regardless of abilities and difficulties. The dream had begun to come true!

At the same time, research has begun to appear in the literature reporting the benefits of treatment with horses for very diverse populations and problems, such as aggressive patients (Nuremberg et al., 2015) and people with autism (Borgi et al., 2015). The uniqueness of the human-horse relationship has attracted the interest of various researchers. In an attempt to investigate the biological background of this relationship, studies are conducted investigating the coupling of the rider's heart rate to that of the horse (Gehrke, 2007; Lanata et al., 2016); the correlation between blood cortisol level of therapeutic horses and traumatized children (Yorke et al., 2013), and hormonal changes in autism as an effect of horse-facilitated therapy (Tabares Sánchez et al., 2014).

We were inspired by Hutton & Emonson (2015), who are working narratively by training children, adolescents and adults to get connected with abused or neglected horses, to interact with them from the ground to earn their trust, and to contribute to the «un-suffering of the horses' suffering» (Monty Roberts, 2008).

Then, we consciously began to invite mostly able-bodied people, to connect with the horse while having it free in the arena, with no objects and by "speaking" its language. After that we discussed about their experience, the difficulties and the knowledge and skills they used.

Beaudoin (2010, pp. 155-162) symbolizes the neuronal pathway through which the influence of the problem is exerted on the brain as a highway in which the information flow is very high. If anything triggers the problem, its influence is catholic. It's like the problem is doing brain hacking, interfering with its smooth or preferred operation. The neural pathway for the problem is dense and fast, and its influence on the brain can affect and shape one's sense of identity. When the "highway" operates, with the focused effort of the client on the goals he or she wishes to pursue, there is an opportunity for adjacent neural pathways to start operating, "lanes" that correspond to his or her preferences. When I asked a teenager how he had been through the previous days, he said, "I'm paving slates to get my mind where I want and not where the anxiety takes it."

By making efforts to resist the influence of the fear or anxiety, keeping their breath stable, their body well balanced, and their attention focused on communicating with the horse, the clients trigger the operation of alternative neuronal pathways. Thus, patience, perseverance, and other values operate, and physical and mental skills are used.

With such repeated experiences of resistance against the "problems," the use of skills and knowledge, and of connecting them with values, dreams, hopes, and expectations, the persons gradually begin to change perspective for themselves. Alternative and adjacent to the problem-Highway pathways are increasingly used and linked to the person's preferred identity, that is, how they want to be and to see themselves, while the highway begins to operate less, and the problem exerts less influence.

Dimitra⁴ is now 26 and studying at the university. When she was in high school, she was troubled by some kind of social phobia that prevented her from leaving home. At that time, we had several sessions at the office and about ten sessions with Markos at the farm. She wrote: "Since we started the therapeutic riding sessions with Markos, I have seen changes. At first, I was anxious long before I got on the horse. When I rode it, my fear was telling me I would fall and hurt. I no longer feel this and experience no stress when I am close to Markos. Even my sleep is light after each session, and I do not wake up in the middle of the night, unlike the previous nights. I absolutely trust Markos when I ride him, and as a result, I forget all my fears". Nikos, an eight-year-old boy with motor limb problems, said: "No matter how difficult it is, I'll keep trying until it becomes easy".

Advance, retreat and the resistance of horses to fear

Roberts (2000, p. 40) describes how, as a child, he first encountered wild Mustang horses in the Nevada desert and understood how they could be captured. The Indians had taught him the principles of advance and retreat. The wild herd is directed away from a trap (an elliptical-shaped area enclosed by posts connected with ropes) for at least one day as one or more riders chase the herd. At some point, the riders stop chasing and return to where they started. Then the herd tends to follow them. Some riders remain behind following the herd that is being led into the trap, and they close the exit. So horses that are scared very easily tend to run away from threatening stimuli to escape danger (e.g., from a predator). After running for some distance, however, they stop and look back to see if what scared them is chasing them. If it doesn't, they turn backwards and look to see what was it was that they perceived as a danger. I suppose this act is their own resistance to fear and a way of becoming aware of what is threatening and what is not so that they do not run unnecessarily and consume their energy. If they do not have the energy to run, then they are highly exposed to predators, so saving energy is critical to their survival.

Embodied communication and experience in the relationship with horses

By studying human-horse communication Brandt (2004) refers to opportunities for embodied communication and experience with horses. She suggests that the ability of spoken language is limited to explaining a non-verbal communication system, which is a third language that allows the two to create a world of shared meaning and enforces a deeper understanding of one another. Much of the work with the clients is indeed non-verbal, even with those who are verbal. Conversations happen when they themselves initiate them or show signs that they are ready to ask or say something.

⁴ Quotations include, with the consent of the participants, their exact narratives, expressions, and descriptions from the therapeutic discussions that took place. Their personal data has been changed so that they feel comfortable.

I have mentioned elsewhere (Danilopoulos, 2012) the similarities that exist between some contemporary non-dominant approaches to the education and treatment of both horses and autistic individuals. Autistic persons do not forget; they think in pictures, they have such a robust, sensitive, and embodied understanding of the other's position and intentions that it is difficult to manage the emotions they are experiencing. As with postmodern psychotherapies, great attention is paid to needs. Choices are given for the interaction, discussion, actions, and schedule of each session. With Yannis, a teenager with Asperger traits, we rarely talked in the sessions with Markos.

At first, Yannis was leading Markos from the ground with a headstall and a rope, and then free. When I saw him delay making the next suggestion to Markos, I asked what was happening to him. He said he did meditation exercises found online so that he focused on his breathing to remain calm. He dreamed of making his own farm and was very concerned about how to find the way. Without knowing that meditation is suggested in neurobiology, he found on his own the way to calm down.

Even if a client does not have (or does not use) speech, discussions with parents, relatives, or companions may take place after the action. Sometimes caregivers are asked to observe if something their child is trying impresses them and why. These carers have a good understanding of the day-to-day life of the child because living with the child, gives them knowledge from inside. Therefore, if something impresses them, it may be something unique. So we invite them to put it into words and thus rescue through the talk the "unique outcome" that was previously experienced but perhaps was not connected to their preferred story. Children and parents seem to enjoy this process.

Takis brought his son Dinos (with mobility problems) five years ago, and we began therapeutic riding. They had to stop because of changes in their life. A little while before they stopped, after a session focused on Dino's motor skills, Takis was asked to say if something caught his attention. He said: "He had an appetite today, his movements were counted on the horse, he was more careful than previous times." He added that a picture from the future came to his mind. Dino is setting goals for his own development, working on them, becoming more autonomous, and "getting his degree."

As I was preparing this article, I invited them to meet to give feedback on their experience with us. They mentioned that Dinos had been immensely helped regarding his mobility, and also the communication between them had improved. Dinos said: "I would say that my journey started in essence from here, so that I managed to reach a good level, as I am now, with any difficulties with any problems I encountered along the way." He also said, "There were some moments that marked my life for the better; it was the first time I mounted on Markos, and I burst into tears because I couldn't. Because I realized that in this life nothing is invincible and there is nothing, as some say, that we cannot do it. You can do everything as long as you have stubbornness and will." Regarding where he wants to go on the course of this journey, he said, "I would like to achieve my goal with the gymnastics academy. That is, to enter that school, the rowing specialty of the special education department, and through that, I hope to be able to make known rowing to people with disabilities."

Takis said he was also influenced by his experience with horses, more so by Markos. "When you see an animal, like a horse, to be able to do these things, be patient, be able to accept anyone, help him in every way, with his handlers, to help this person, that means that it transmits a lot to you." He added that it's important that Markos gave him patience, something he didn't even have with his child. Since then, he has been dealing with problems and everything in life with more tranquillity. He said he recalls that he cried the moment that Dinos mounted Markos on his own, leading him in a semi-upright position for the first time. Dinos said he remembered that moment as a dream experience, as well as another time that he had mounted on Markos, and it started snowing.

Beaudoin and Zimmerman (2011 & 2015) suggest that we bring the emotion more consciously and directly to the narrative session. We focus on "moments" of real-world experiences regarding both the influence of problems and the "moments" of unique outcomes so that we don't get lost following the story instead of the emotional experience of the client. Focusing on such "moments" averts theoretical discussions and leads to "embodied" (emotionally connected) conversations (Zimmerman, 2017).

As I wrote elsewhere, through my journey with narrative therapy, "I am different from what I was. I am not so much a problem-solver anymore, but perhaps a little more aware of how to contribute to healing processes, asking one question at a time, and searching for threads of alternative stories" (Danilopoulos, 2011). Through my contact with the horses, I may have become a little wiser and more capable of dealing with my fear of them. Rados conferred patience and persistence to me. He never let go off the effort; he was always cooperative and patient in the many painful treatments we needed to do to him, and in the daily walking that he needed to get the swelling off his leg. I do not forget the caresses he wanted after the last treatment. He rubbed his head on my chest for a while, saying thank you in his own way, and after a few hours, he rested. "Horses can teach one to love, nurture, and care for another. They have been said to mirror the emotions of humans. I think they surpass mirroring and, instead, teach" (Myers et al., 2018).

Christos and Evanthia, parents of eight-year-old Tula, who has developmental difficulties, wrote: "We must admit that the first contact of our child with Markos was characterized mainly by fear, perhaps justifiable, being in front of such a large animal, in such a close distance. We believed that riding it seemed to be something improbable, as the child didn't seem to be able to overcome her fears. The events did not take long to disconfirm us. Within a few months, she not only mounts Markos alone and rides him with great ease, but she expresses feelings of love for him, misses him, and is really looking forward to the next session. At this point, we should emphasize that she is a child who has difficulty to express her feelings. It's amazing to see a little girl of the size of a horse's foot, to look after and take care of the horse.



Grooming...

As Myers et al. (2018) report, we also often hear comments about "enchantment" and "paradise" from clients and their relatives that come to the farm. We feel the same way, but this earthly paradise does not have only beauties but also challenges, risks, and losses. Evans & Gray (2012) refer to the ethical responsibility of people involved with therapeutic horses to provide them with "appropriate opportunities for rest and recovery." With the current conditions, especially in Greece, where due to the financial crisis many horses and other animals are abandoned, I would add that through the rescue and connection with them, unique opportunities might be opened to improve the lives of people with problems. By helping horses survive and feel safe helps people, too.

The future

Takis told us at a recent meeting that he has a project he is working on with his son Dinos and five others. They plan to create ample space for hospitality, entertainment, alternative activities, and therapies that will be fully accessible to people with particularities and disabilities. They want to develop facilities for activities with horses and other animals there.

Georgia is a young adult with motor and developmental problems who has been in contact with Markos for some years. Thymios and Maria are her parents, and when invited to reflect on our cooperation, Maria said: "Your approach was very modest and discreet without ever embarrassing us. Georgia has improved immensely in her mobility and perceptively, works well, she knows in advance a lot of things, can anticipate what will happen next and responds. Most importantly, she attends with joy and is happy. After some eye surgery, I don't remember which one anymore, she moved me as she remembered everything we had done before. That was a few months after we had stopped here, and it was so moving because I was afraid she would have regressed. I realized that all the previous work done here has been assimilated, registered, exists, is embedded in her. One winter, there was a lot of snow, and we could not come. You had uploaded, and we watched and re-watched a video of Markos with great pleasure, and we were talking with Georgia about it.

We hear now from other therapists working with her indoors from an early age of months, saying: "I didn't imagine Georgia could do ... and yet she does..."

And Thymios said: "Although I have contact with animals, I have not seen a horse such as Markos that comes when you call him. So patient and responsive to what we ask for, I didn't believe it could be done, especially with a person with a disability. In the last two sessions, I was very moved as I saw her having a great deal of flexibility in her body. Although her vision has deteriorated, she is still able to do all the things she did before when her vision was better. We went for a walk, and for a few meters, she didn't want me to hold her, not even from the jacket. Of course, I was next to her, but she was walking alone. I want us to adopt another horse for Markos to have a companion."

In summary, by using narrative practices in a therapeutic horsemanship context, we have opportunities to notice the influence of the problem on the client, and on his relationship with the horse and us. Exceptions to the influence of the problem during horse contact are frequent and available for the re-authoring of new chapters in the life-story and identity of the person by validating and documenting their skills, knowledge, and values. By being in contact with them, they can make choices and take actions to shape their lives, as they prefer.

Acknowledgments

Personally and on behalf of P. and the members of Politropo, we thank wholeheartedly: Nihad Ibraheem, psychologist, systemic therapist, coordinator and instructor of therapeutic riding, Theodore Antikatzides (Theodore Antikas), Professor of Equine Medicine, Franklin Levinson and Ilona Staikou, horse trainers, George Styllas owner of the Riding Club of Magnesia, the aiding members of Politropo who participate in the activities and contribute to the care of the animals, and those who help with the survival and welfare of the animals and with the activities.

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Internet resources

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