MEDICINE AND HORSEMANSHIP

EQUINE EXPERIENTIAL TRAINING IN AWARENESS AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE CLINICAL RELATIONSHIP

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HORSENSEI EQUINE-ASSISTED LEARNING & THERAPY

PURPOSE

A major challenge for health science students and healthcare providers throughout our careers is to conduct our relationships with patients, colleagues, “superiors,” and employees in a manner that is professional, sensitive, perceptive, confident, and authentic. Especially with regard to patients, our conduct must be characterized by compassion, insight, and respect.

The aim of the Medicine and Horsemanship Course is to help healthcare students and professionals develop awareness of the subtleties of self-presentation and communication that are necessary for the provider-patient relationship and other professional interactions. These relationships are based on interpersonal skills as much as on the factual clinical information that we bring to the therapeutic transaction. Because the health sciences often emphasize intellectual proficiency over other forms of intelligence, many professionals have not developed the emotional intelligence, perception, and communication skills required for clinical excellence. Currently, the National Board of Medical Examiners and many specialty boards require videotaped interviews that demonstrate interpersonal as well as cognitive skills as part of the credentialing process.

Horsemanship requires an appreciation of the nonverbal as well as verbal messages that we give to others. It requires patience, gentleness, self-confidence, sensitivity, focus, and awareness. Horses are large, but nevertheless easily frightened, prey animals whose survival has depended on becoming exquisitely tuned in to body language, innuendo, and emotional tone, and to the position and movement of objects in their sensory fields. By reflecting back to us the signals and intents of which we aren’t even aware—much less aware that we’re communicating outward—horses train us to notice at all times the information that we convey.

Horses develop in us the three nonintellectual, nonrational aspects of our intelligence—instinctual, emotional, and sensory—that may have atrophied in our quest for the correct answers on exams, the right diagnosis, or the most relevant journal article. Yet all four forms of intelligence are necessary in the clinical encounter. Unlike cats and dogs, horses make little use of the reasoning function, excelling instead at the other three ways of information processing.

As swift, powerful and sometimes intimidating animals, horses create a natural opportunity, especially for those new to or uncomfortable with clinical decision making, to overcome fear and develop confidence. Because it’s difficult if not impossible to bluff one’s command of a situation around horses, we learn how to cope with feelings of insecurity, ask for help, and succeed at developing authentic self-assurance.

While we are careful not to equate patients with horses, humans and horses have much in common. Horses are social animals with defined roles within their herds. They have distinct personalities, attitudes, and moods. An approach that works with one horse doesn’t necessarily work with another. We must win a horse’s respect on his or her own terms before imposing our own. Because horses react to the most subtle human signals, they hold up a magnifying mirror to ourselves and our behaviors. In this mirror we see the image and path for our professional development and our personal growth.

OBJECTIVES

The Medicine and Horsemanship program will help you:

Become aware of subtleties of verbal and nonverbal communication

Many times in the patient interview, clinicians are oblivious to indicators we get from and give to patients about attitudes, moods, and boundaries—theirs and our own. We are unaware of body positions and other nonverbal cues that signal respect vs. lack of it, incongruency between words and deeds, and flagging self-assurance. In working with horses, we receive clear and explicit feedback about messages that we may not be aware we are sending.

Improve attention, mindfulness, and focusing abilities

How many times do we as clinicians seem to be listening to our patients while surreptitiously glancing at our watches, thoughts elsewhere, tittering with impatience while uttering our absent-minded “Uh-huh, uh-huhs”? We think our patients don’t notice our divided attention, but they do. Horses are not too polite to tell us when our concentration has lapsed. Even grooming a horse demands an unbroken immersion in the task, performing it mindfully and with focused awareness.

Become aware of incongruency of intention vs. behavior

Patients can tell when we say one thing and mean another. But they don’t often tell us. Horses unabashedly react to our behavior and to our inner intentions, not to the surface appearances we try to create. Through work in the round pen, the culminating crucible of equine experiential learning, participants will see how the horses, their classmates, and our instructors perceive and respond to their often contradictory intentions and behaviors in a nonjudgmental and often humorous way.

Identify and respect boundaries in ourselves and others

Clinicians need to sense when we are making other people uncomfortable, especially those of other cultures and traditions, and when we ourselves feel uncomfortable with intimacy and physical contact. Horses give unequivocal cues and valuable lessons about maintaining personal space for ourselves and others and about degrees of gentility vs. aggressiveness of touch and contact.

Recognize the nature of projection and transference

In any relationship, especially a therapeutic relationship where we presume to try to “fix” someone, much of what we see in others is that which exists in ourselves. We project our hopes, fears, issues, moods and personalities onto our patients, colleagues, loved ones, and animals. In psychiatric models we speak of transference and counter-transference as doctors and patients re-enact lifetime patterns of psychological behaviors. When we look at a horse and say, “He looks sad,” or “She’s the boss in the

herd" we are often projecting our own feelings and self-images. In the "Choose or Be Chosen" exercise, participants often elect to work with a horse that embodies for them some quality, strength, or weakness with which the participant identifies, sometimes unconsciously.

The round pen session that is the culmination of our work with the horses is a quintessential exercise in projection, not only in the psychological sense, but in the sense of the felt energies we project into the horse's physical sphere of awareness. After each person plays in the round pen, the group discusses the individual and consensus realities of the experience. We use the form, " [Person's name], when I see you [perform a task], I feel [an emotion or opinion]. Is this true for you?" In this way, we see where our perceptions may vary from those of others—not that one is "right" and one is "wrong", just how they might differ. If we feel one way and are perceived another, we get valuable feedback on our communication styles and our congruency of thought and action.

Confront insecurities and develop confidence

So often in medicine we are called on to summon courage and good judgment in the face of fear and uncertainty. Especially in training, there is often a premium placed on "never letting them see you sweat." We walk a fine line between false bravado and overplayed insecurities. Horsemanship demands that we develop true confidence by dealing honestly with both our strengths and weaknesses. In the Lead While Following exercise and throughout the course, the horses teach us how to avoid using aggression to compensate for lack of command, and build the self-assurance we need.

Adjust to the relativity of time, expand the moment

Related to our inability to be present in the moment, clinicians are always rushing around, leaving things undone, never being fully located in one place. We are spread thin among beepers, cell phones, email, and overhead pagers. We leave patients in the exam room without proper goodbyes or closure. There is never enough time in the day. Horses restore our sense of duration and location by teaching us that we cannot take short cuts, that things happen in their own good time, and that each task deserves the whatever time is necessary for its completion.

"Closing ceremonies" at the end of each day teach the importance of respectfully taking leave.

Cope with stress

Participants will learn basic techniques of centering, grounding, and relaxation both for stress management and as a prerequisite for mindfulness in the other exercises. course materials

COURSE MATERIALS

Each participant will receive a syllabus with:

- Curriculum and schedule
- Registration and safety agreement
- Monographs on didactic material
- Related articles from the literature and other sources
- Evaluation form

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