

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy: What You Should Know & What to Look For

With so many ads promoting “equine therapy,” these days, how can you distinguish between them to ensure it is the kind of experience you are looking for. If you’re considering equine therapy for yourself, or someone you love, it’s important to know what to look for. Let’s try to clarify it for you.

What is Equine Therapy?

“Equine therapy” is probably the most commonly used term to describe therapeutic services involving horses. It is the most commonly searched term online, BUT there is a problem—it’s most often incorrect and always confusing.

Using the term “equine therapy” to label the work that is being offered in Equine assisted Services (Equine Assisted Learning, therapeutic riding, horsemanship lessons, coaching, wellness activities) not only muddies the definition of the work, but also complicates marketing and leaves consumers confused. They often find the wrong services for their needs, thus harming both industries, EAS and EAP

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is a more specific form of mental health treatment provided by a licensed mental health professional, where horses are intentionally integrated into the therapeutic process. EAP is grounded in clinical theory, neuroscience, integration of multi-phasic trauma-informed principles, ethical standards, attachment and relational work.

What Is Equine Assisted Psychotherapy?

In equine assisted psychotherapy, clients don’t just talk about their problems. They engage in real-time relational experiences with horses and mental health professionals that bring patterns, emotions, and nervous system responses into the present moment. Rather than sitting with a therapist and telling their story over and over, the client, the therapy team (psychotherapist and equine professional) and the horse work together to see how life is affecting the client in the present, and how to become unstuck and move forward. The relationship with the horse offers opportunities to practice new ways of being, to bring to the surface what the client is unaware they are carrying, and to process and renegotiate it safely.

Horses are sensitive, responsive beings, capable of forming deep bonds with humans. That connection can be more powerful than words and for those who have experience developmental distress, it is often the first safe relationship a client has experienced. With the help of a skilled therapist trained in EAP, that relationship and the patterns that emerge become part of the therapeutic process.

The therapeutic approach or model is centred on what the client needs and where they are at. What makes it psychotherapy is not simply the presence of a horse. It is the presence of a skilled licensed clinician who is facilitating the process as things unfold between the client and the horse.

What to Look for in an Equine Assisted Psychotherapy Program

If you are thinking about EAP, here are several important factors to consider:

1. Provider Credentials: Equine Assisted Psychotherapy is a mental health service. That means:

- A **licensed mental health professional** is involved in your care
- A licensed mental health professional has completed master's level education
- The practitioner should be practicing within their **scope of licensure and training**
- The practitioner has specialized training/certification in equine assisted psychotherapy, not just horse experience
- An EAL certificate alone does not make someone a mental health professional

The presence of a horse does not replace professional mental health training. The two must work together.

2. The Role of the Horse: Prop or Partner? The horse matters deeply!

You might ask:

- Is the horse treated as a sentient relational partner?
- Does the model address attachment and nervous system processes?
- Are therapists trained to work with relational dynamics as they emerge?

The horse should not be 'used' as a metaphor, a tool for an activity, a backdrop for insight. Because many mental health struggles are rooted in attachment wounds, relational trauma, or nervous system dysregulation, healing needs to happen while engaging in relational interactions. Horses offer the opportunity to experience authentic relationship, safety, rupture, repair, boundaries, connection, and attunement in real time.

There is a meaningful difference between symbolic activity and relational psychotherapy.

3. Safety: Safety in EAP must include both physical and emotional care

Physical Safety:

- Experienced equine professionals are trained to read equine behaviour and stress signals are involved in sessions
- Horses are appropriate for therapeutic work
- Therapists carry Insurance and liability coverage

Emotional Safety

- Experienced equine professionals trained in integrative trauma-informed practices
- Clear boundaries and consent for both horses and clients
- An understanding of equine and human neuroscience and nervous system regulation
- The ability to pace sessions appropriately

A thoughtful program demonstrates care for clients as well as for horses. Horse welfare is not separate from the clinical process. Healing should never be at the horse's expense.

4. The Therapeutic Environment: The space itself matters

Inviting Atmosphere & Spaces for Connection:

- It should feel calm and intentional, inviting you to engage your senses and allow your nervous system to settle into groundedness and safety

- There should be areas where connection with horses can unfold naturally, with ample room to move if your body needs regulation or safety?

A strong therapeutic environment offers flexibility, allowing clients to engage at their own pace. It provides space for reflection, connection, and integration, supporting the work without overwhelming it.

5. Horse Welfare & Ethical Standards

- Do the horses appear well cared for and relaxed?
- Is there downtime for horses?
- Are sessions structured around the well-being of both client and horse?

Ethical horse care is not just about kindness. It directly impacts the therapeutic experience. A stressed or overworked horse cannot participate in safe relational work.

Ara Equus Incorporates These Elements

At Ara Equus Horse Guided Wellness & Psychotherapy, equine assisted psychotherapy is grounded in attachment theory, neurophysiology, somatic practices and trauma-integrated care. It is about the healing power of connected relationships, and reconciliation in the present.

Ara Equus offers access to a licensed mental health professional and equine specialist working within their scopes of practice who:

- Have completed additional training and certification in the neuroscience of trauma
- Have completed structured training specific to equine assisted services
- Have accumulated required client hours, professional supervision and competency
- Engage in ongoing professional development and case consultation
- Carry professional and liability insurance
- Are approved by many employee health or extended health plans
- View horses as relational partners rather than therapeutic props
- Prioritize the welfare of the client, the horse and the practitioners

At Ara Equus, our space is designed with regulation and relationship in mind. The horses live as they are intended to live, in open pastures where they can roam, graze and being in relationship with the herd. In sessions, their boundaries are clear and respected, their consent is prioritized, they choose how to and how much they interact, and they have downtime. This ensures that the horses participating in therapy are regulated, supported, and capable of authentic relational engagement without being retraumatized repeatedly by what the client brings.

EAP at Ara Equus offers a unique opportunity for healing not only through conversation, but through real-time relationships with a skilled therapist, equine professionals, and a responsive, sentient herd of equines. This kind of healing can be immensely powerful and life-changing!

Hopefully this has provided more clarity about the work we do at Ara Equus Horse Guided Wellness & Psychotherapy.