

Learning to *feel* with horses



From the Hamilton police to whispers with horses, Brenda Elkins remains steadfast in her desire to help victims and those in need of emotional support.

By Brenda Elkins

As a civilian employee for the Hamilton police service for 31 years, I witnessed some of the most abhorrent acts of human behaviour and its lasting effects upon the victims, their families and the emergency services personnel who deal with these situations. For two decades, I worked in the victim services branch providing emotional and psychological support to victims. When I retired from the Hamilton police in 2012, I wanted to continue assisting those in need of emotional support, but was eager to find a new approach to facilitate this. When I discovered a therapy called Facilitated Equine Assisted Learning (FEEL) that connects humans and horses to bring about deep healing, I knew I had found my next calling.

I have always loved horses. I was that typical pony mad girl growing up in England who lived and breathed horses. I apprenticed with FEEL to begin

this exciting work and, since then, have witnessed the tremendous benefits reaped by those who experience it.

Horses are one of the more powerful and majestic forms of prey animals in the natural world. Their survival is dependent upon their sensitive observational qualities and intuitive responses to the environment. The horses work instinctively to naturally decipher what a person needs and what they need to know about themselves. These interactions can be powerful, enlightening and intimate.

During a FEEL session a person can learn about being grounded and present, to be still and quiet and to connect with another heartbeat without saying a word. There is no judgement. It is incredible to observe a 1,500 pound male horse teach an angry at-risk male youth how strong male energy can be used appropriately without violence but with inner strength. Likewise, that same male horse can show a female victim of domestic violence about self worth by understanding her own personal energy.

FEEL is especially effective for those who shy away from talk therapy. I love the way the horses will connect with those who are uncomfortable vocally communicating their feelings. This process allows them to fully feel their emotions and embrace them. It is not uncommon for Emergency Service Workers and Military Personnel to suffer in silence with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These professionals are required to be competent and in control as they work in highly stressful and dangerous situations. Suicide rates are alarmingly high in these professions. With the horse as teacher, I have seen clients like these make progress, gain insight and become more positive. This can come in baby steps, from mustering the courage to pick up a paintbrush again, journaling, trying yoga or adopting a healthier diet. All brought about by a silent conversation with a horse and an exchange of energy between two beating hearts.

Horses sense and interpret human energy. They sort the prey from the predators, assess the creature's intentions and respond accordingly. Horses have a unique language. They communicate with every part of their body; positioning it in relation to a client can say a lot. The horse may put its forehead against one client's heart, and place its tail close to another client. It is the facilitator's job to pay close attention to this language and provide feedback to the client.

A client who approaches a horse with a brave smile despite feeling broken and scared will elicit a response from the horse that the facilitator picks up on. For example, I worked with one client who approached Sienna, my bay mare, quietly smiling. Sienna responded by running around the arena at full tilt. When I asked my client about her emotions, she revealed a lot of underlying pain and anxiety. When the client approached Sienna a second time, she openly acknowledged this pain and told Sienna that she had been putting on a brave face. Sienna then allowed her to get up close, and responded by licking and chewing – horse language for acknowledgement. It was rewarding for the client to recognize the difference her honesty made on another being.

The gentle, non-judgemental acceptance and connection made between horse and human is magical. I've come to realize that there is much that horses can teach humanity. I feel privileged and humbled to be a part of this transformative process.

Brenda Elkins runs a private practice called Red Horse Sense in Brantford, Ontario.