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## STRESS AND EQUINE THERAPY

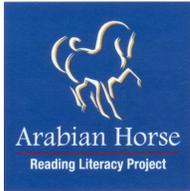
~ *By David Rosenker*

Stress is an equal opportunity issue, meaning it affects all kinds of people regardless of their race, gender, profession or location. For some, stress is an all too common part of their everyday routine, causing complications in many areas of their life. These stress-related obstacles can make a previously well-rounded individual start to fly off the handle at a moment's notice and/or begin internalizing their feelings of impending doom created by their stress. It is absolutely crucial that individuals who are struggling with a great deal of stress seek the help they need in order to avoid the many associated consequences of their current state.

### **How Does Equine Therapy Decrease Stress for Adults and Children?**

Equine therapy is one of the many forms of therapy, for numerous psychological and physical conditions, however it is especially beneficial for those attempting to deal with the many effects that stress has caused on their lives. Some of the numerous ways in which equine therapy helps address stress-related issues include:

- Decreasing hyperarousal – For many individuals struggling with stress, they often feel that they are constantly on the edge of their seats. This type of energy can cause many issues in a person's life be it physical, emotional, spiritually etc. When a participant brings a high level of stress into the arena with the horses, it does not go unnoticed by the horses. They typically react to the emotional tone of the person's present, i.e. restless behavior, not standing still for any length of time. As a result, individuals must work on relaxing enough to alter their energy so they do not non-verbally communicate their stress with their horse, nor carry it themselves. We will incorporate different experiential exercises to help lower the stress levels of the participants such as mirroring the breath of the horse. This is not as easy as it sounds, and can result in a lower stress level immediately.
- Encouraging expression – Everyone handles stress differently, and many individuals do so by bottling up their emotions until they can't hold them in any longer. By working on the ground with both a horse and an equine therapist, an individual can begin to develop stronger communication skills (both verbally and non-verbally) that help him or her avoid reaching a breaking point that lead to negative outbursts. Paying close attention to the horse's reactions to your non-verbal reactions through equine therapy will result in some significant awareness of yourself. For children, equine assisted therapy is a terrific alternative to sitting in an office with an expectation to talk about there feelings. We offer unique experiential exercise aimed at children who have



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difficulty discussing their feelings and helping them to open up in a brand new non-threatening manner.

- Promoting self-esteem – healthy self-esteem is crucial in being able to manage stress, as an individual can begin building confidence in themselves to a point where they can work through their challenges without losing their cool. Equine assisted therapy can help foster solid self-esteem by not only providing individuals with opportunities to succeed in equine activities, but also by allowing them to work through their issues through equine assisted psychotherapy that is guided by their equine therapist.

Not only does equine therapy provide individuals who are dealing with stress the chance to educate themselves on decreasing their hyperarousal, encourage positive expression and promote their self-esteem, but it also serves as a place where individuals can come to get their minds off the stress of their every day lives. Removing themselves from their usual environments and working in a therapeutic setting can decrease stress by helping an individual engage themselves in a fun and progressive hobby that benefits their overall mental and physical health.

### **Dr. Brenda Abbey adds ...**

Children are not immune to stress in their lives. I have seen positive changes in the child's ability to regulate arousal and an increased awareness of non-verbal communication through their interaction with my therapy horses.