

# Guest Blog: Healing Through Horses

Posted on: July 12, 2016

## What I've Learned from My Horses about Supporting Vets with PTSD

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What do you mean, horses? What do horses have to do with PTSD? Let me explain.

Horses are the original “trauma brain,” wired less for well-thought out responses than for quick reactions to stimulus and potential threat: it’s how they have survived for centuries in the wild. They, like humans, have fight-flight-freeze impulses in the face of danger. Horse psychology and the horse’s brain structure is built first and foremost for survival in a rough, predator-heavy world. The pathways of the brain that say “Run first and ask questions later” are the strongest, with neural pathways for survival that look like super-highways rather than dirt roads.

And yet, horses are part of the fabric of daily life for many, incorporated into all kinds of regular activities for people, from high-level Olympic competition to multi-million dollar racing operations, to scenic trail rides and backyard ponies. They are doing it with grace and ease that belies their “prey animal” status. How do horses—prey animals—learn to live and thrive in the midst of the human predator herd? The answer is it’s not easy to be a horse in humanville. It takes time, flexibility and repetition. And it’s not easy to be a Veteran in a civilian world. Adaption takes time.



How can we support Veterans who are living and responding from the impact of trauma on their brain? The same way we help horses become partners with humans.

Two key elements are being flexible and having a broad timeline. If we have a desire to get a horse in a horse trailer in 15 minutes and that horse hasn’t been in trailer in 5 years, we are likely going to have to be flexible about our timeline. So we say we are in charge of the goal (getting in the trailer) and the horse is in charge of the timeline. We ask for small, simple efforts in the direction of the trailer, and reward the slightest try. Yelling at a horse or whipping a horse into a trailer just because the horse “shouldn’t” be scared or because the horse has done this many times in his past without incident rarely creates a stronger, more mentally-balanced horse. Progress, not perfection is the key.

Similarly, insisting that a Veteran go to the mall, say, or to another similar place with a lot of stimulus and action, might be asking too much too fast. But going to a small coffee-shop might be a start, and might allow for plenty of challenges internally. Once those smaller challenges are met and addressed, moving forward to bigger and bigger challenges is possible. Breaking the big things down into smaller chunks is a great way to work through any challenge.

At our farm most of the horses come to us with some kind of trauma experience, either from abuse or neglect or both. Some have been significantly traumatized by humans, others have been worn down by lack of care, attention and food. But when Veterans come to our farm for the first time, that's not how we introduce these horses. Over time, our Vets might learn that one horse was hog-tied and beaten by a human, and another was on the brink of starvation, but these experiences don't define that horse and his/her world. To pigeonhole these horses as "broken" or otherwise "less than" is, in our opinion, insulting and demeaning. They are so much more than that moment or that time in their lives!

Similarly, although our Veterans may have significant challenges as a result of trauma they experienced, they are still much more than that moment or those moments in their lives. Remembering that the trauma is a part of them, but not all of them, is empowering for all involved.

Horses have a wonderful way of reflecting and also normalizing the erratic and sometimes scary human responses to PTSD. When people are given an opportunity to work with this part of themselves not as a flaw but as a normal response to potential danger, and given an opportunity to shape their own behavior in the face of that danger, the results are empowering.

