

Reining in PTSD with Equestrian Therapy



Army Veteran Larry Opitz spends some time with his favorite horse, Kris, at Strongwater Farm in Tewksbury, Mass. PHOTO BY BOB WHITAKER, LOWELL SUN. USED WITH PERMISSION.

Article by Tom Cramer, VA Staff Writer; Thursday, September 18, 2014

A horse is a horse, of course, of course ... except, perhaps, when he's also your therapist.

"Interaction with an animal just makes you feel more relaxed," said Joe Grimard, a recreational therapist at the Edith Nourse Rogers Memorial Veterans Hospital in Bedford, Mass. "You're connecting with an animal, a living thing and that's all you're focused on. You're no longer focusing on yourself, or your problems."

Each week, Grimard drives four to six Veterans out to nearby Strongwater Farm, where they get to ride horses for free. Family members of Veterans are also welcome.

"These guys are in the 90-day treatment program at our domiciliary," said Grimard, a Navy Veteran. "So it's good for them to get away from the hospital now and then and do something different."

"It's my job to get these guys back out into the community, doing healthy things," he added. "They need to know they have alternatives to the lifestyles that landed them in trouble before."

Just Relax

Grimard said the whole idea is to provide Veterans with relaxing, positive experiences.

"A lot of these guys have anxiety," he said. "They have traumatic memories, so we want them creating new, pleasant memories to replace the not-so-pleasant ones. This is a peaceful place. When I bring them out here, I don't tell them I'm taking them to therapy. I just tell them, 'I'm bringing you out here so you can enjoy life a little.'"

"Once they get around a horse, they start to loosen up," he continued. "You can see them begin to relax. You can see their self-esteem and their confidence building. Gradually you can see them becoming the person they were before all that stuff happened to them."

Grimard said he's now seeing an increasing number of younger Veterans — those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan — expressing an interest in visiting the horse farm.

"They're very physical, very enthusiastic," he said. "They just jump right on the horse without a second thought. It doesn't matter whether you're dealing with posttraumatic stress, addiction or family problems, coming out here is just a fun, cool thing to do."

I feel like I have a friendship with the staff here at the Bedford VA. Without them, I would have been dead years ago.

--Larry Opitz

An Apple a Day

"Some of the guys, they'll come out with a bag of apples," Grimard said. "They want to feed the horses, so a staff member teaches them how to feed an apple to a horse without losing any fingers. And if they don't want to ride, they can sit in the sun, or talk to the staff out here. The staff is really friendly. They'll teach you how to approach your horse, how to brush your horse down, where to stand and where not to stand when you're near the horse." (Helpful Hint: never stand behind a horse. Just don't.)

"Our staff is very accommodating, very low key, very down to earth," said Patti Lessard, program director at the non-profit, 800-acre horse farm. "We provide the environment and the four-legged partners and the Veterans take it from there. They become one with the animal they're working with, so in a sense the horse becomes the therapist. All you're thinking about is grooming your horse, riding your horse, building a relationship with that horse."

"You're very engaged," she added, "and you become very clear. The horse is your new buddy, your new partner, another member of your support system. Horses are intelligent, intuitive animals; they have a sixth sense. They can read where you're at."

Air Force Veteran Theresa Mickelwait couldn't agree more.

In The Moment

"Horses, like people, are sentient beings," Mickelwait noted. "Each one is different; each one has its own personality. The first time we went out to the farm I talked to a horse named Big Red. He was very friendly, but he had no problem invading your body space. He liked to go into your pockets to search for snacks. He was like a hyperactive little kid. He was a handful, but I liked him."

Mickelwait recently completed her treatment program at the Bedford VA and will soon be working full-time and living in her own apartment in Boston. Recently, she won a scholarship that will enable her to take a writing course at the University of Boston.

The Air Force Veteran said her experience at Strongwater Farm was a memorable step on her road to recovery.

“Riding was the best part for me,” she observed. “I like to ride. I find it relaxing, because I’m focused on my horse. It’s an ‘in-the-moment’ sort of thing. You’re doing nothing but being with that animal.”

“Sometimes I won’t even ride,” said Army Veteran Larry Opitz, another recent graduate of the Bedford VA’s residential treatment program. “Sometimes I just like walking around the barns, or walking through the pastures. It gets you away from everybody. You can do a little soul searching.”

I grew up raising horses, so I truly understand and appreciate the impact this program has on our Veterans.

*--Christine Croteau, Hospital Director
Bedford VA Medical Center*

Getting Back Out Into Life

Opitz said he wasn’t quite sure what to expect on his very first visit to the horse farm. But he soon found out.

“When I went up there, all my anxiety was gone,” he said. “It’s dead quiet, except every now and then you can hear a horse whinny. They’ll whinny when someone’s grooming them, because they love it when you groom them. I’d love it too, if someone was scratching my back.”

Opitz said he still goes out to Strongwater Farm every Wednesday to help out. He said he wants other Veterans recovering at the Bedford VA to experience the same sense of peace he feels when he’s grooming his favorite horse (a big Belgian Quarter Cross named Kris), or walking through a quiet pasture, or simply sitting in the sun, watching other Veterans ride their horses.

“It’s about getting these guys back out into life,” he said. “A lot of these guys haven’t been on a horse...never. But now they tell me they can’t wait to go back. They’re like a bunch of school kids.”

In an effort to pay it forward, Opitz said he hopes to somehow raise the \$500,000 Strongwater Farm needs to build a much needed indoor riding arena.

“That way the Veterans can come here year-round, even when it’s raining,” he said.

For more information on how VA is helping Veterans with PTSD, visit www.ptsd.va.gov