



# The truth about equine therapy

*Animals have been a source of emotional support to their human companions for thousands of years. The roles that dogs and cats can play in wellbeing is becoming better known, but what if we thought a little bigger?*

*Equine-assisted therapy has been proven to have numerous positive effects, so we headed to the Equine Therapy Center in Monmouthshire to see what it's all about.*

The horses from the Equine Therapy Center (ETC) are inspecting the new steels for the barn up at Bewitching Wind Farm. Just before Christmas, they made the journey to their new home in Monmouthshire. At the moment, the site comprises a caravan, a series of dodgy outbuildings and a lot of empty land. By the summer, it will be a large custom-built therapeutic centre, working with hundreds of children and adults a year.



Life for Nicky Amor, the centre's leader, changed dramatically when her sister died in a car crash, leaving three grieving teenagers, one of them on the autistic spectrum. Nicky gave up a successful career as an international business consultant to raise her nephews. Increasingly passionate about the inequalities of mental health provision compared to support for physical health, she wanted to work on the front line with people affected by trauma. She was destined for a degree in psychotherapy when she met an inspiring equine therapist.

Five years later, she set up the ETC with Copper Bobby, her first therapy horse. Last year ETC worked with more than 200 people, mostly children aged 5-18, who were referred by social workers, teachers, counsellors and educational psychologists. The herd is growing, and welcomed its newest and smallest member, Robby, in March.

The centre is a pioneer in the field of therapeutic work with horses, known as equine-facilitated therapy (EFT) or equine-assisted psychotherapy. EFT is grounded in neuroscience, with growing evidence of its transformative impact on the lives of some of society's most vulnerable people. Nicky treats people with a huge range of mental health challenges. They could be struggling with the impact of early childhood neglect or abuse or may have experienced trauma later in their lives, such as domestic abuse or bereavement. They may be highly anxious, have neurodiverse conditions or be living with dementia.



We spoke to Nicky as she took a break during her busy day juggling clients, the herd and the building work.

### Why did you choose equine therapy as opposed to more conventional work in mental health?

Underlying it was a passion for horses. I've ridden since I was a child. I was an incredibly shy child – I had a stutter, I was highly anxious. I would take all my angst about school, parents, friends down to the stables and just sit and breathe with the horses. I felt they connected with me in a way nobody else could.



### Equine therapy has plenty of sceptics. The Adoption Support Fund in England doesn't fund it. Why do you think people are sceptical?

We're sceptical about therapy full stop, and anything that's considered a bit alternative is even worse. We're British. We think people should have a stiff upper lip and carry on. In some countries, including Australia, America and others, equine therapy is relatively mainstream, partly because there's a solid body of research and evidence there. We need to build that up in the UK.

Equine-facilitated therapists don't have a governing body yet. And there's such a huge range of therapeutic practice. There's no doubt in my mind that just hanging around with horses has a therapeutic benefit. But that's a mile away from EFT, where you have a highly trained professional delivering bespoke therapeutic programmes for people, with specific goals.

It's my experience that there's a widespread misunderstanding about what EFT is. EFT is primarily conducted with the clients' feet on the ground and focuses on behavioural, mental and emotional wellbeing, which has clear links to good physical health. We as professionals need to work much harder to explain what we do.

### Why do you think care-experienced children in particular benefit from EFT?

The majority of care-experienced children have experienced, in many cases, very complex trauma. We now know trauma is held in the body. EFT treats the body as well as the mind. In an EFT session we're actually moving the body as well as thinking and sensing, as well as interacting and forming connection with another sentient being – it's a whole of body therapy.

If you think about a child who has experienced trauma very early in life, the experiences were pre-verbal; they won't have had language to express what they experienced. They will have had a sense of not feeling safe, of feeling cold or frightened or threatened. You're dealing with something the body knows, but without the ability to articulate that. What you're hoping to do by working alongside horses is to facilitate the healing of the consequences of the child's trauma (thoughts, behaviours, emotions) that are embedded in their nervous systems. We focus on helping them to acquire a toolkit that supports their change from often defensive, unhelpful strategies to greater resilience and capacity to cope with their lives, going from surviving to thriving.

### Take us through what a child experiences in their first session.

Depending on the needs of the child and the referral source, we may have up to three initial assessments. During this process we will decide on goals for the time we're working together, and we will tailor the programme very closely to meet those goals.



**Maddie** (not her real name) was 13 when she started coming to ETC. She was badly abused and neglected in early childhood, removed into care and later adopted.

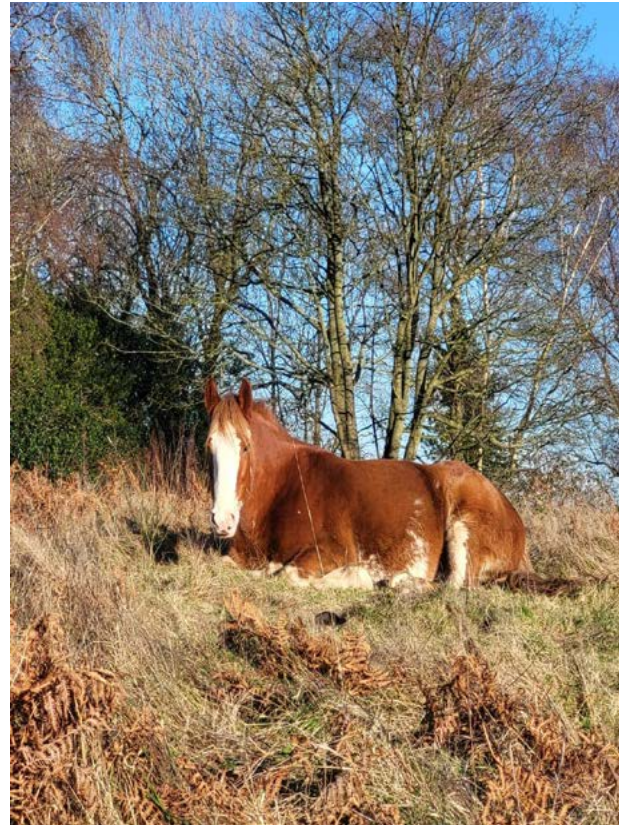
Maddie was, understandably, an angry girl with deep attachment issues. When she was referred to us she had just been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, was refusing to accept the diagnosis and said she didn't care whether she died.

The family had been struggling for some time and had sought help, but Maddie refused to talk to anyone. She hated people but loved animals, including horses.

For her initial assessment, Nicky and Maddie visited the herd in the field to choose which horse to work with. Nicky told Maddie about one of the horses – Copper Bobby – and his serious medical problems. A bit like Maddie, he needed intervention and a controlled diet. Maddie was interested in working with him but the herd had other ideas. Jack was a young, ungainly thoroughbred. He came over but stood back a little. She saw the connection between Jack's reluctance and her own.

Through working with Jack she learned strategies to overcome barriers and stay emotionally regulated. After a few sessions the family were due to attempt their first holiday in many years – Maddie had previously found the change too difficult and the expectations too high. For the first time, the whole family were able to enjoy spending time together away from home.

Early in her therapy, Maddie had told Nicky that school wasn't for her and she wanted to leave. Since then, Maddie has sat her GCSEs, done a BTEC and is about to start university. She has also been able to build a supportive friendship group.



At the first in-person assessment the therapist will start to build a relationship with the child, and a sense of safety and holding. At this stage we often take the child to meet our herd of horses in the field. Through observing the herd and talking about what the child experiences (though the child may not want to talk about anything at this stage), meeting the horses together and individually, the child will choose the horse they'd like to work with. Sometimes they think they've chosen, but a different horse comes over and decides they're the one! It's definitely mutual choosing by child and horse.

Sometimes we start work with the horse in a fairly enclosed space like a stable. Sometimes that's too close – either for the child or for the horse. If the child is highly activated – high heart rate, highly anxious, angry, wound up – the horse will not want to be too near them, in that situation we might be in a fenced paddock or even a field. Then the horse can move away if they want to, and the person can, too. Horses naturally want to be in a calm state – they're a prey animal, so they recognise activation, they have acute hearing and can hear a human heart beat. Early sessions are very much about observing the animal's body language, their breathing, the way they respond, and talking about how our own bodies feel and respond.

I have had clients who've been terrified of horses. In which case we might talk about what a horse needs to feel safe and happy. Then we can go away and do chores that will meet the horse's needs, such as filling water buckets or making up a feed or closing a gate. That helps us think about how we care for ourselves.



### Tell us about a recent memorable moment with a client.

I'm working with a teenaged boy who finds it very hard to manage his emotions – he gets very angry at home and damages property. He chose to work with our Gypsy Cob, Anoush. The last time he came, he wanted to lead her round all 31 acres of her new home. She wanted to eat every bit of beautiful green grass. They were struggling against each other – she wanted to eat, he wanted to walk, he was tugging her, she had her ears back... the conversation went like this.

I said: Just stop!

What do you mean? he asked.

What would it be like to just stop? I said.

He stopped. Anoush stopped. They were no longer fighting each other.

She's not pulling, he said.

I noticed you're not pulling either, I said.

He said: Do you think that would work with my parents?

I said: What would it be like to try?



### What's special about the new home for the centre?

It's a wonderfully calm environment with some amazing old trees, at the foothills of the Brecon Beacons. It feels incredibly open – a great sense of space, but held by the mountains. When it's finished, we'll have an arena, a round pen, indoor working space, stables and consulting rooms.

The move gives us the space to spread our wings a little bit. This will hopefully be the hub for centres in other parts of the UK. Our vision is that everyone who would benefit from equine-facilitated therapy should be able to access it.

I also want to start working with specialist education settings, to offer education through working with horses, building resilience for children and young people to cope in a more traditional school setting.

### Interested in finding out more?

If you think you, your child or someone you know could benefit from EFT, you can:

- Search for a centre near you using The UK Human Equine Interaction Register (HEIR), which brings together people involved in working with horses in education and therapy. You can search the register for provision near you: [hetifederation.org/heir-register](http://hetifederation.org/heir-register)
- Talk to your local authority post-adoption support team – they should be able to help you make a referral. Some local authorities will cover the costs – even though in England it can't be paid for via the Adoption Support Fund.
- If you can travel to Monmouthshire, you can get in touch with Nicky and team directly – details are on their website: [equinetherapy.center](http://equinetherapy.center)

