

# Parkfield Equine Solutions "TheHorseCourse"

Equine therapy for when talking isn't helping. By Kris Thomas

Counselling (or talking) is society's 'go-to' therapy, effective in helping people understand and modify unhelpful behaviour and difficult feelings.

However, in some cases when people shut down, zone out, become upset or disruptive, talking can be ineffective.

TheHorseCourse (THC) offers a different approach to mental health and self-regulation and boasts an excellent level of success where other therapies have failed. THC helps people to become

calm and focused by learning to communicate with specially trained horses. Founder Harriet Laurie established THC in 2010 and was made an MBE in this year's New Year Honours List. The charity first started in Portland Prison before opening its centre in Weymouth. There are now 12 similar centres around the country including at Parkfield Equine Solutions in Hurstpierpoint, West Sussex.

Parkfield Equine Solutions opened five years ago after becoming a registered charity in April 2019 and is now the Sussex Hub of TheHorseCourse. CEO Dr Terri Martinus told us, "I was already trained as a THC facilitator and I saw the need for the service here in Sussex especially as a mother of a young son who was bullied at school and also seeing the "other side" of those that were the perpetrators."

There are now five hands-on trustees, two facilitators including Terri, and two dedicated volunteers running the operation. THC sessions are offered free of charge to participants and to enable this, the centre relies on grants and donations. They have been funded by The National Lottery, Children in Need and last year Parkfield Equine was awarded £4,750 from The Safer in Sussex Community Fund from the Sussex Police & Crime Commissioner, Katy Bourne. Terri explains, "Funding is a real issue as competition for grants is so fierce. Our referrals far outweigh our ability to deliver more sessions due to financial restraints, so we know need for our work is there."

Parkfield currently has two horses and three ponies and the animals' welfare is paramount. Terri told us, "We are really careful as to when and how much they participate in sessions which also limits how many people we can help."



NHS group at Parkfield Equine Solutions in Hurstpierpoint

Training the horses takes up to a year. I asked Terri what sort of characteristics these horses should have. "They must all be safe around people and each other and have a friendly outlook. That said, they all have different personalities, so a couple are cheeky and playful, a couple are timid and shy of new things, and one is real diva! This helps our participants identify with the different strategies we use with each horse to either help the horse remain calm, or be more confident and motivated. The participant begins to understand how they can use the same strategies for themselves. For example, we believe calmness is a skill that can be taught and rehearsed."

## What happens in equine therapy?

Their flagship equine-assisted behaviour change programme is called "Reset" and takes place within 10 hours over 5 consecutive days.

Participants are unmounted handlers working in partnership with specially trained horses. Terri told us, "We try to match the personality of the participant with the horse to start with, so if someone is very quiet and shut down when they first come, we will pair them with our more introverted pony. If the person is quite extroverted, we might match them with our more playful ponies."

There is no classroom content or talk-based therapy and there is no discussion of the past. The course is action-based, designed to "interrupt participants' usual thinking and emotional responses". It is effective because participants will only succeed by altering their presentation.

Horsemanship tasks teach eight key resilience skills including focus and perseverance, taking responsibility, assertiveness, engagement,



"Horsing around"

The horses will respond positively to calm and clear instruction from the handler and 'feedback' by successfully performing the desired actions – such as kicking a large gym ball or stepping onto a platform. The aim is that by the end of the course, the participant has learned all the core resilience skills to be able to play with the horse or pony that has an opposite personality to theirs. They should be able to regulate their emotions to be calm and work empathically and

communication, analysis and planning, calmness and relating to others/empathy. Terri: "The horses respond to body language and intent or energy, (we don't use voice commands), so the participants learn to regulate their emotions in order for the horses to respond."

slowly with a timid horse or have serious confidence and leadership skills to play with a cheeky pony that may challenge their boundaries. These skills are transferrable to their "outside" life.

### Who can benefit?

Individual THC participants often have serious problems including self-harming, aggression, victims of bullying or abuse, ADHD, ASD, risk taking behaviour, eating disorders, suicidal thoughts, domestic violence, social isolation, not in education, employment or training (NEET or at risk of NEET).

They are referred to Parkfield Equine by mental health, social work or education professionals because they are 'stuck' or have disengaged from talk-based support. Harriet Laurie: "We work with people who are struggling with mental health or behaviour, maybe having difficulty at school, but we go right from eight years old to adults and whole families." In addition to the 5-day course, Parkfield Equine run regular workshops aimed at helping individuals to better understand their own emotions as well as front-line professionals managing clients, and parents managing children. ▶

## Impressive Success Rate

Success is constantly monitored. Participants are scored, pre, during and after the course to assess how their behaviour and attitudes have changed. A study by Bournemouth University is tracking the outcomes for young people at 2 months and 12 months post-course. Participants and families state that the course has been 'life changing'. Bournemouth Uni results show that over 80% of participants report long term improvements

and demonstrate more confidence and reduced problem behaviours. They feel less anxious, have improved attendance/engagement at school, enjoy better relationships and have increased self-belief. Actor and THC Patron Martin Clunes: "These horses are great teachers. Seeing people getting a horse to do something for them simply by controlling their own moods is incredible."

Terri told us, "It is not unusual for people to be unable to engage with us when they first come. They may be too anxious to leave the house and



have become socially isolated or have not been attending school, in some cases for two or three years. In these situations it is often the horses that get the participant to engage, not us!"

## The future

April 2024 sees the charity celebrate its 5-year anniversary. Terri tells us that although Covid-19 massively impacted funding and grants, they continued to operate face to face throughout the pandemic. Going forward

they would like to offer more courses especially the free 'Body Language & Strategy' training sessions for parents and referrers so they can continue to support participants. Terri tells us that any donation no matter how small is very gratefully received and there is a Just Giving page on their website. They are also looking to grow their Facebook following so please search "Parkfield Equine Solutions" and like and follow them for updates, photos and more details about their work.

[www.parkfieldequinesolutions.com](http://www.parkfieldequinesolutions.com)