



RAC SADDLE CLUB EQUINE WELLBEING

HORSES THAT HEAL: THE COURSE

Details: A one-day 10-4pm course to be held at the RAC Saddle Club, Bovington, Dorset. A light lunch and refreshments will be provided.

Essential kit: Hard hats will be provided. Participants (children, teens, young people) to wear trousers, trainers or boots, and a warm, waterproof coat. Although we will be working mostly indoors, some elements of the course take place in an outdoor arena.

Basic elements: Animals such as horses can help lift the spirits of any one of us, particularly those suffering from post-traumatic stress, anxiety, social withdrawal, anger management, and lack of self-esteem.

This course aims to help young people interact with horses and subsequently improve their mental wellbeing. Participants will typically be children, teens and young people that do not ride (the course will not involve ridden work and no previous experience with horses is necessary). The aim is to teach children how to work with horses on the ground in a round pen, stable, arena or field. Throughout the course, participants should become more aware of their emotions, learn how to control them, and ultimately practice coping mechanisms useful in real life situations, enhancing their relationships with other people.

NB: Trainers are qualified first aiders and are DBS checked. They are not psychologists and are on hand to listen and ensure that participants work safely with the horses.

No formal qualifications will be awarded.

What's involved?

1/ Meet & Greet

For those who have NOT been up close to a horse, or handled one before, we will use a calm pony and explain how to safely approach them, how to move around them, how to settle and connect with them, and how our energy and actions affects them and their behaviour.

2/ Walk and talk

Participants will lead the horses for a stroll around a field or to a stable where they will be given the opportunity to groom a horse or pony. Participants will be encouraged to talk to the ponies and listen to their body language. Trainers are there to assist and listen to those who wish to chat. When leading the horse, participants will learn to be a positive leader, that the horse must walk by their shoulder, not in front of them, and that they should mirror their actions, following any change of direction and speed. Leaders will have to maintain clear and positive energy, to think ahead, and remember that personal space and boundaries are to be maintained to establish trust and respect.

3/ Lead by example

Participants will be required to lead a horse over and around obstacles in an arena. This could be a piece of tarpaulin, scary objects such as flags, or simply ground poles in an L shape. Trainers will enlighten participants on how many of the 70 horses have had issues when they arrive (scared of clipping, being tied up, mounted or hacking alone) and how these have been overcome. They will learn that horses and humans don't learn when distracted or frightened. Moving a horse requires positive leadership – they will need to be in control of their feet, backing them through shapes made from poles, precision stopping with front feet over poles and learning how to calm a horse that has become worried!

4/ Ground work with a horse or pony in a round pen

Where safe, participants will be taught how to enter the round pen alone, unclip the horse and send the horse away, loose in the pen. The participant will then have to create a bond of trust and respect, to get that horse to accept them as the leader.

In a group or herd, the dominant horse will move the other horses around by using a combination of body positioning and gestures before inviting them to make an emotional connection. In the pen, participants will be taught how to mirror the dominant horse and move the other horse

around. They must also control their own anxiety and heart rate — horses will not trust a human or seek connection with someone who is angry, anxious or stressed. The participant will be taught to look for signs of communication from the horse, such as head lowering and licking and chewing before inviting the horse to follow them and make a connection. Sometimes the scenario will not go to plan and they will have to think on their feet, adapt their behaviour, negotiate, be patient and try again.

Why do humans relate to horses?

A quick guide to the 'Flight & Fight' response

The sympathetic nervous system (SNS) prepares the body for intense physical activity by the 'fight or flight' response (also called hyperarousal or the acute stress response), a physiological reaction which releases hormones and occurs in response to a perceived harmful threat to survival. Horses, like humans, are fight and flight animals and most participants on the course relate to them.

Whilst in the short term, the response (triggered by a real or imaginary threat – physical or mental) can help us in a positive way to help us focus for exams, play competitive sports (with exercise often helping to bring people out of depression), in the long term, a constant state of arousal can also promote negative and aggressive behaviours or withdrawal from social situations.

Understanding the response can help us deal with it.

The parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) relaxes the body and inhibits or slows high energy functions ie rest and digest. Stroking our face, or a pet or horse, can be calming and can help people explore new ways of dealing with their natural reaction to stress.

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