

FEATURES A

- ▶ [Activists Celebrate Victories for Human Health](#)
- ▶ [Preserve the Fall Harvest: Dried Fruits and Vegetables Make for Tasty Winter Meals](#)
- ▶ [Does Pollution Cause Diabetes? The Disease/Environmental Toxin Connection](#)
- ▶ [Fragrant Fennel: A Culinary and Medicinal Wonder Plant](#)

FEATURES B

- ▶ [News Briefs](#)
- ▶ [Earthwatch - The Green Approach to Organizing and Decluttering](#)
- ▶ [Book Reviews - October 2007](#)
- ▶ [Curing The Blues - TCM Treatment Of Depression](#)
- ▶ [Lasting Relief from PMS with Chinese Medicine](#)
- ▶ [Horses as Healers](#)
- ▶ [Healthy Product News](#)
- ▶ [Traditional Thai Yoga Massage](#)
- ▶ [Restaurant Review - Niagara Street Cafe](#)
- ▶ [Homeopathic Medicine For Anxiety Disorders](#)
- ▶ [Tune Up Your Lower Chakras](#)
- ▶ [Letters to the Editor](#)
- ▶ [Classifieds - October](#)

Horses as Healers

October 2007 [Features](#)



Equine Assistants for Emotional Balance

By Henry Golden

When is a riding accident a blessing in disguise? A serious fall lead to a shift in everything Wendy Golding thought she knew about horses and healing, and subsequently to a life-enhancing career.

Wendy felt devastated when she was forced to give up polo after sustaining a back injury, but she is now sure that everything happens for a reason. The accident coincided with her blossoming interest in the ground-breaking work of Linda Kohanov and Kathleen Barry Ingram at the Epona Centre in Arizona. Gaining certification as an Epona Instructor after an extensive apprenticeship has enriched Wendy's connection with her horses and deepened her resolve to create a healing centre with an equine focus.

Epona, historically the name of an ancient Celtic horse goddess, has burst into the contemporary world as a philosophy and practice centred on innovation in the field of Equine Facilitated Experiential Learning (EFEL). The 'Epona Approach' encourages people to find emotional balance by using the wisdom of horses to uncover an 'authentic self.'

Horses have always held a magical fascination for me, so on this cool, bright morning I am thrilled that my path to healing follows a long driveway to a beautiful old farmhouse. Here, nestled in the rolling

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COLUMNS

- ▶ [Kim Elkington](#)
Everyday Sacred Journeys
- ▶ [Julia Woodford](#)
Letter from the Editor — Uncut
- ▶ [Jollean Schaffer](#)
Sun Sign Predictions
- ▶ [Conscious Living](#)

WEB COLUMNS

- ▶ [Viki Mather](#)
Up North and Off the Grid
- ▶ [Natural Pet Care](#)
Advice for Your Four-Legged Friends
- ▶ [Ask the Doctor](#)
Dr. Zoltan Rona Answers your Questions
- ▶ [Astrology By Robin Armstrong](#)
- ▶ [Dreamspeak](#)

GUIDES

- ▶ [Calendar of Events](#)
- ▶ [2007 Ontario Getaway Guide](#)
- ▶ [2007 Guide to Organics](#)

LINKS

- ▶ [WHOLE LIFE EXPO](#)

hills near Tottenham, Ontario, is the home of Horse Spirit Connections. Wendy has co-founded this equine-based therapeutic practice and co-facilitators workshops with Samena Jeffery and Andre Leclipteux. They offer the opportunity to experience first-hand the healing powers of the horse.

Over the next two days our group of six participants will learn how the histories of horses and humans have been intertwined over thousands of years. Their influence has been profound, but in the past seventy years technological advances in the Western World have made their role as helpers in agriculture, hunting and transportation redundant. Horses are now largely relegated to the fields of sport and recreation, but the story does not end here. In recent years they have taken on new roles as guides in teaching and healing as humans struggle to find emotional stability.

Through a series of teachings, discussion and exercises, our group learns the perils of wearing a mask of social conditioning which teaches people that emotions are messy, awkward or just plain uncomfortable. Wendy, Samena and Andre counter these beliefs by encouraging participants to get to the heart of what they are really feeling. They connect healthy emotional expression with a life in balance.

Wendy emphasizes that emotions provide people with valuable information; "Instead of ignoring them, acknowledge them, feel them and let them go." Her statement seems radically simple, but putting this into practice is the real challenge for many women and even more so for the average man. Andre is quick to provide valuable insights and strategies from his masculine perspective.

For horses, emotional fluidity is a natural trait. It reaches back to a time before domestication, when wild horses evolved complex adaptations for survival as prey animals in nomadic herds. They are sensitive, intuitive and highly aware of the energies around them.



The horses' ability to pick up on the subtlest clues of breathing, heart rate, posture and body language make them highly attuned to any incongruity humans may exhibit between internal feelings and external expression.

Samena explains "Horses don't feel one thing and do

another, they are authentic in their behaviour and they can teach us this skill." In contrast, humans have freewill and the ability to make choices that don't always honour gut feelings. Ignoring this inner 'knowing' creates negative patterns so powerful that people repress true feelings. Before long, they can get used to being who they are not. At this point it is easy to even lose consciousness about this lack of authenticity in words and actions. Ample evidence suggests intense emotion ignored over a period of time can physically manifest in the body and has the power to change physiology.

My group is eager to learn, discuss and experience. Time passes quickly in the cozy meeting room and soon we head out to the barn. Amongst the mingling aromas of hay, horses and well-oiled leather we meet the herd: Aria, Papillion, Lady, Dusty, Angelina, Mystique, Dancer, Monty and Contender. Our new knowledge of horse language is put into practice as we spend some time discovering the unique characters of these four-legged individuals.

After grooming exercises, we move to the large sandy arena to experience 'Reflective Round Pen Work.' This is one of the most unique tools of the Epona Approach. The horses are not ridden as all the work takes place on the ground. To begin, each person does a 'body scan' to aid a sense of being in the moment. Before joining a horse in the circular pen, Wendy invites our group to view this animal as metaphor for life and to ask ourselves "How do I engage with life?" Individuals then step into the large circular pen for a direct and free communication with their sleek, hooved teachers.

Within the enclosure, the interactions that unfold often have a magical quality. The horses might express themselves by running, perhaps skidding to a stop with the spirited toss of a head, rolling with pleasure in the sand, standing quietly or following their human partner. Their expressive ears may be pricked forward to catch the tone of a voice, occasionally pinned back as a warning, or comically splayed as they let out a deep snorting breath of relaxation. It is nearly impossible to capture the essence of these encounters in concrete terms. Imagine the energy of a fire, the power of a fierce wind, the stillness of a summer lake or the grounding of an ancient oak.

Processing after each experience is important and takes place with facilitators, the group and individually. This proves to be a valuable way of gleaning information and gaining different perspectives.

So, can horses really heal people? The proof is here at Horse Spirit Connections. As two days of intense learning draw to a close, workshop participants, facilitators and horses are energized, open and eager for more. I thought I knew about horses before I arrived here yesterday. What I have discovered is their natural understanding of energy and their

willingness to engage with emotional authenticity. I understand why Wendy, Samena and Andre are thrilled to be part of a fast-growing field of Epona practitioners and enthusiasts. Across North America more people are choosing horses to aid their journey to emotional balance and healing.

Horse Spirit Connections

<http://www.horsespiritconnections.com/>

The Epona Center

www.taofequus.com

EAGALA

Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association

www.eagala.org

EFMHA

Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association

www.narha.org

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