



# Can a Horse be a Therapist?

BY WENDY GOLDING

They call it serendipity – that magical occurrence when you make a delightful discovery by accident. For me, the accident was literal – a serious fall from a horse and the discovery was Facilitated Equine Experiential Learning (FEEL) – now one of my life's passions.

I played polo with my husband for many years, but had to give up the physically challenging sport after a fall left me with a persistent neck and back injury. Although I couldn't play polo anymore, I knew horses had to remain a central force in my life.

Horses have been a compelling presence throughout my life and have been part of all of our lives since history was first recorded. Since the beginning, a bond was created between humans and horses that has never ceased – a mysterious promise of an ancient freedom. The horse helps us recover the beauty, power, and nobility of our own spirit – that elusive Presence so easily lost in our civilized lives.

Knowing of my fascination for horses, a friend gave me a book to read called *The Tao of Equus* written by Linda Kohanov. I was captivated and immediately bought her second book *Riding Between the Worlds*. Linda discovered that horses are excellent therapists in aiding people with learning new life skills.

Facilitated Equine Experiential Learning (FEEL) is not a new field or one that can be practiced only by 'horse whisperers'. Human-horse relationships, in which the horse is the teacher, have existed for centuries, but it is only within the last fifteen years that this has been formalized into an actual therapeutic discipline.

This was my calling! I went down to Arizona and participated in a 7 day workshop where I received an introduction to the Epona Approach. I knew this healing modality was where I wanted to be – I could use my love of horses with my own healing as well as helping to heal others. I saw with my own eyes and heart how often a horse was able to dislodge a deep emotion, secret, or unconscious destructive behaviour pattern in participants and assist them in discovering a new path and way of being in the world.

Over the next year and a half, I studied and learned how horses can become 'healers'. Horses possess a keen sense of perception and intuition. As prey animals, they have



developed a heightened sensitivity to their environment, a necessity to protect the herd. Horses see through the slightest incongruities in emotion and intent – and this makes them consummate facilitators in human development work. Epona training provides a natural way to empower and reinvigorate our lives by connecting with the animal kingdom and tapping into its vast spiritual resources.

I am not alone in my conviction that horses can help us grow, manage crises, and develop our sense of 'authentic self'. I've learned that emotions provide valuable information, so instead of ignoring them, we should acknowledge them, feel them, learn from them, and then let them go.

Horses help encourage this process. These sensitive creatures mirror the emotions and energy of the people around them, providing instant, non-judgmental feedback. 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. Horses detect everything from a broken heart to an injured knee – and then provide a compassionate space for healing. Always honest and direct, the horses show people how to create new possibilities for their lives.

People don't always honour their 'gut' feelings. Ignoring this inner knowing can create negative patterns of behaviour,

repression, and illness. Horses don't feel one thing and do another – they are always true to themselves – and they can help us do the same.

### Horse Spirit Connections

After a great deal of training and an extensive apprenticeship, I am now an Epona Instructor. I use the methodology to aid people in finding emotional balance and problem resolution by using the wisdom of horses.

Nestled in rolling hills 45 minutes north of Toronto in Tottenham, Ontario, my co-facilitators and I bring horses and humans together at Horse Spirit Connections. Our nine horses are a mixture of breeds – thoroughbred, Arabian and Paso Fino. Horse Spirit Connections uses FEEL to help participants learn how to reconnect mind, body, and soul – no easy feat in today's hectic world.

Working with the human-horse connection has opened my heart to the joy that life offers.

For more information, visit [www.HorseSpiritConnections.com](http://www.HorseSpiritConnections.com) or call 905.936.4450.

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