

Three Pillars of Equine-Facilitated Activities

By Allan J. Hamilton, MD

The world of horsemanship finds itself at a dangerous and exhilarating juncture with respect to equine-facilitated learning and therapy. The last century has led us through the revolution of natural horsemanship and brought equine-facilitated activities to the awareness of the public and professional communities. However, there is a great danger we will lose the trust of the public if we do not get our own house in order with respect to credentialing therapists, educators, and horse professionals engaged in horse-related activities.

The market is flooded with people offering services for equine-assisted experiential learning, hippotherapy, and equine-facilitated therapy. Many of these experienced and accomplished professionals but others are well intentioned but untrained quacks. We need to separate those individuals who are qualified to offer equine-facilitated activities and those who are not.

One essential component of all equine-related services is the presence of a qualified horse professional. In the past, there was little need to put a premium on establishing credentials for horse professionals. Largely, the designation of a ranch hand or wrangler as a “qualified equine professional” was left up to the owner of the horse facility offering services to the public. However, this has now become a shortsighted policy that can undermine the future of equine-facilitated services. Standardized credentials need to be established. One reason is that the insurance industry is beginning to require more in-depth review of qualifications of horse professionals in order to ensure safety standards and reduce liability. In this regard, insurance premiums will probably serve as substantial incentive for horse facility owners to endorse the establishment of national standards for the designation of an equine professional. One would also hope that the numerous organizations in the United States and around the world offering equine-facilitated training would attempt to establish one global, universal standard of credentials to facilitate this transition. Not only will this be good for the industry, but it will also help establish a more professional standing for those individuals who find themselves charged with managing the livestock and overseeing the safety of participants in the equine-facilitated activities.

The same logic applies to the designation and certification of individuals who carry out equine-facilitated learning and therapy. I understand there may be substantial controversy amongst the various groups competing to offer education and certification in the fields of equine assisted learning and therapeutic services. But, in the end, all organizations must strive to reassure the public that people who are offering and advertising services in the immersive environment of equine-assisted activities are qualified to do so and meet professional standards and ethics. While there may be some controversy as to what techniques are useful or effective, I do not think there is any disagreement that we are better off ensuring that the best people are offering those services.

There is no doubt that those people who are offering equine-assisted learning experiences should be qualified educators, first and foremost. These are individuals who possess the credentials that allow themselves to be called “educators”—namely, a

teaching license¹. The same holds true for therapists: they are duly licensed by each state in which they hold themselves out to the public as qualified therapists. There is no limitation as to whether or not these professional services can or cannot be offered in conjunction with horses. What is constrained by statute is that one cannot call oneself a teacher or a therapist without the legal authority to do so.

There is also a great deal of confusion about the notion of “therapy.” Many of us have moving moments in our own lives such as time spent with our children or grandchildren, instances where nature's beauty overwhelms us, or music moves us. These are all “therapeutic moments” but they do not constitute therapy. By the same token, those of us who feel close to horses often have moments of epiphany when we are relating to them. Just because horses move us does not mean that we are undergoing therapy. The only requirement for making an equine-facilitated activity into a therapeutic one is the presence of a licensed professional. It is their presence and their presence alone that moves the powerfully emotional interactions with the horse into the realm of a therapeutic relationship. However, the therapeutic relationship exists between the client and therapist, not between the horse and the client. In precisely the same way, the horse does not teach the individual mathematics during an equine facilitated learning experience aimed at engaging the student in mathematical principles, such as adding or subtracting.. It is the teacher who takes the moment and makes it into immersive, engaging instruction. We cannot afford to continue to confuse the horse with the professionals who offer those services with the horse.

For all these reasons, we must strive to establish universal standards that help define a horse professional, a licensed therapist who uses horses as a tool for therapeutic intervention, and credentialed educators who use equine-facilitated activities for learning objectives. Without establishing the standards for these three “pillars” of horse-related services, we will continue to see more and more self-designated “therapists” and “educators” who do not meet the public's expectations. We will fail to provide professional status to those qualified individuals who safeguard the safety of clients and students when they are engaged in equine activities. The more stringent and objective we make our standards for credentialing and designating individuals in these three categories, the better we will serve the needs of our clients as well and provide the best for our horses.

¹ I will not deal with the issue of academic appointments at universities. First, many people get themselves designated for all kinds of shady and poorly regulated “universities.” I will say that tenure as a faculty member at a qualified academic institution where there is rigorous oversight of credentials and performance is a suitable alternative to state licensure for the designation of an “educator” in most states.

About the author:

Dr. Allan Hamilton is Harvard-trained brain surgeon and well-known horse trainer and has worked in equine-assisted experiential learning for fifteen years. His first book, *The Scalpel and the Soul*, won the 2009 Nautilus Silver award for spiritual non-fiction that changes the world “one book at a time.” Previous winners include Eckhart Tolle, Deepak Chopra, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. His latest book, *Zen Mind, Zen Horse, The Science and Spirituality of Working with Horses* (Storey Publishing), just came out. Dr. Hamilton holds four professorships at the University of Arizona and also works as a script consultant for the ABC TV series “Grey’s Anatomy” and “Private Practice.” He raises Lipizzan horses on his ranch in Tucson, AZ