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EAP with Couples and Families in Crisis: A Relational Approach

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Introduction

Expanding on the extensive use of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) with at-risk adolescents (Burgon, 2011; Ewing, MacDonald, Taylor, & Bowers, 2007), clients struggling with addictions (Dell, Chalmers, Dell, Sauve, & MacKinnon, 2008) eating disorders (Sharpe, 2014) and trauma (Adams, Coady, & Yorke, 2008; Coleman, 2012; DePrekel, 2012), equine models have increasingly been utilized with couples, families, and groups to improve relationships, highlight strengths, normalize concerns, and enhance the overall therapeutic process (Green, 2017, 2014, 2013; Masini, 2010; Trotter, 2012). This chapter describes a relational, strength-based approach to EAP when working specifically with couples and families. As Lipchik (2002) observes, “The importance of relational ties is a powerful resource for therapy” (p. 127). Incorporating a strength-based, relational stance that honors client solutions offers unique opportunities for the enhancement of couple and family relationships through EAP.

Description of the Problem

Couples and families experiencing high conflict or crisis present challenging dynamics that can at times exhaust the resources of even the most resilient therapist. Traditional talk therapy may not always be the most effective or powerful tool and may even exacerbate troubling patterns of interaction and communication. EAP, with its experiential focus, can be used as a means of disrupting repetitive patterns of interaction and offering clients an opportunity

to notice and experience these interactions in a different context. Through their interactions with the horses, clients can attempt new behaviors in the moment, and effective processing of client interactions with the horses can allow translation of these new behaviors into their everyday lives.

Rationale for Equine Assisted Psychotherapy

EAP sessions offer the opportunity to assess and gather information about clients' patterns of interaction while simultaneously strengthening relationships. Integrating horses into clinical work with couples and families allows clients to experience the development of stronger relationship connections, greater trust, and enhanced ways of communicating (Hayes, 2015). Hayes highlights EAP's fit with relational work when he notes, "The success, contentment, and well-being of every human are all directly tied to the quality of their relationships with themselves and others. To have successful relationships, humans, just like horses, must learn and have modeled for them qualities that will create and establish mutual love, trust, and respect" (p. 93). Equine assisted activities can highlight themes such as love, support, connection, trust, and respect. When clients find ways to partner with a horse during session, they create a relationship with the horse, and may learn about their own capacity for relationship-building, connection, and trust. This relationship can mirror many of the qualities that characterize a familial or couple relationship, making their time with the horse relevant to the clients' lives outside of the session.

Theoretical Approach

Therapeutic approaches to working with couples and families that are informed by a relational focus view the couple or family exclusively in terms of their relationships to one another, allowing the therapist to pay attention to the patterns of human interaction, rather than to specific deficits or inadequacies of the individuals (Green, 2011). This focus allows the therapist

to attend to mutual, reciprocal interactions in relationships occurring in a recursive process (Fish, Weakland, & Segal, 1982), minimizing attention to blame and individual notions of deficiency, and allowing clients' unique solutions to become apparent. From a solution-focused approach to therapy, it is believed that a small change in the behavior of an individual can have far-reaching effects on the behaviors of others involved (de Shazer, 1985). By honoring clients' solutions, EAP with couples and families focuses on exploring exceptions to the problem, highlighting strengths in the relationships, and building on what is already working.

Relational Ethics

EAP requires careful attention to ethical concerns, relevant with our clients and also in our relationships with the horses, who are our partners in this endeavor. A Relational Ethics perspective (Pollard, 2015) prioritizes respect, engagement, embodied knowledge, and responsibility for the other. Within this framework, all actions must consider our interconnectedness, and thus, the impact of our actions on each other. The clinical work described here¹ is informed by this relational understanding of ethical decision-making. As Pollard observes, "Engagement requires an understanding of the complexity of each situation, each person's perspective, and each person's vulnerabilities" (p. 366). This framework informs all of our decision-making and interactions with clients, with horses, and with each other.

Case Example—Couple

Our work with couples is informed by the brief, systemic, relational principles described above. We offer a non-pathologizing, strength-based approach that highlights our clients' unique resources while acknowledging their struggles. In the case study that follows, we illustrate a

¹ All clinical work described here was conducted through a partnership with Stable Place Equine Assisted Therapies and the Nova Southeastern University (NSU) Family Therapy Program. All therapists are trained at NSU and abide by the AAMFT Code of Ethics; all equine specialists are trained at Stable Place and are certified through PATH, Intl., and adhere to PATH ethical standards.

single-session intervention that we conducted as a component of an intensive couples' therapy program; the ongoing intensive work was conducted by our colleagues at Couples on the Brink (couplesonthebrink.com). As the session began, we learned that Meredith and Greg², both in their late 30s, had been married for 10 years and shared a passionate, creative, synergistic relationship inspired by their common ground as artists. When they met, each had been committed to never marrying, but they fell in love deeply and quickly, and married each other 3 weeks after. They described many years of intimacy, connection, and passion, but were both devastated by the recent conflicts that seemed to threaten the stability and future of their relationship. As they said, "How could we be so in love and so miserable?"

We discussed content very briefly, and then began the equine session, inviting the couple to simply meet and greet the two horses they would be working with, noting what they observed about each. Almost immediately, the couple were entranced by the horses, in-tune with their behavior and responses, and eager to connect, although Meredith was a bit more reserved. At one point early in the session, the mare that they had chosen to call Do-Little became very interested in Greg, attempting rather forcefully to engage him by rubbing her head up and down his side and crotch. Meredith observed carefully, and when asked what she was noticing, commented that Do-Little was "trying to get Greg's attention the way I do—by demanding it—and he hates that." The other horse, Sanchez, she noted, was standing close by, quietly concentrating her gaze on Greg. Meredith commented that this is the style Greg would prefer, and would be open to receiving.

² Pseudonyms are used in both case examples to protect client confidentiality. For an in-depth theoretical discussion of this specific case, please see Green, S. (2014). Horse sense: Equine assisted single session consultations. In M. Hoyt and M. Talmon (Eds.) *Capture the moment: Single session therapy and walk-in service*. Williston, VT: Crown House Publishing.

As the couple became increasingly comfortable and engaged with the horses, we asked them to find a way to catch a horse and take it for a walk; we provided no direction regarding how they were to do so, what tools they should use, whether they should work together or independently. As the session progressed, we observed Greg and Meredith’s very different styles of engaging with the horses (Meredith animated, directive, and frustrated, and Greg patient, quiet, and careful). They worked independently, although Meredith frequently asked for Greg to come and help her, which he chose not to do. When asked about this, Meredith described similar interactions in their relationship, in which she repeatedly requests Greg’s help and he refuses. Greg did not disagree, and stated that he often felt afraid that if he were to give in to her requests, he would be overwhelmed by her needs and not be able to remain productive as an artist. He also noted that Meredith frequently asked him for help with practical issues, but rarely for “matters of the heart,” which would be much more important for him.

At this point in a typical 2-hour session, we might have asked the couple to construct an obstacle course or a safe space to help us further make sense of their struggles and their responses. However, Greg and Meredith’s interactions with the horses had been so intuitive, and their observations so metaphoric and thoughtful, that we chose instead to use the following intervention, described and analyzed below:

Transcript	Analysis
<p>Shelley: Greg and Meredith, what we would like for you to do now is take the halters off the horses, and to and array the horses, and yourselves, in a way that represents how you would like for your relationship to look right now.</p>	<p>Our team’s rationale and intent: This request was intentionally vague. We made no suggestions as to whether they should work together, discuss a plan first, or simply proceed. Consistent with our focus on client strengths, we wanted to respect this couple as artists—creative, synergistic individuals who had a history of collaborating to develop beautiful works of art. We also wanted to find a way to engage their passion for each other, for freedom, and for connection.</p>

Greg and Meredith did not respond verbally to our request, nor did they speak to each other at all. Instead, within 15-20 seconds, they had arranged the two horses nose-to-tail, with themselves in the middle, arms outstretched, fingertips lightly touching the sides of each horse. Initially, they were in a “spooning” position (See Figure 1), with Meredith’s back to Greg. However, she quickly turned to face him, and they gazed silently into each other’s eyes, tears streaming down their cheeks. The horses stood quietly in the position the couple had created with them.

Our team’s observations: We watched this interaction with awe, as this couple had struggled for over half the session to decide how to catch a horse and take it for a walk, utilizing halters, lead ropes, balls, and hula hoops. The horses had been very clear in their disinterest and reluctance to cooperate. However, within an incredibly brief amount of time, Greg and Meredith managed to silently convey their wishes and create the synergy they needed to orchestrate this beautiful tableau. The horses responded quietly and immediately, and stood in the desired position until the couple broke their intense gaze and embraced, crying. At that point, the horses moved out of the position but remained close by, with their noses within our circle as we processed what had just occurred.

Figure 1



Transcript	Analysis
<p>Shelley: We are just wondering if you can tell us what is happening for you both right now?</p>	<p>Our team’s rationale and intent: We did not exclaim over what happened nor attribute any meaning or value judgment; instead, we left the</p>

	palette clean for the couple to bring to life in the way that was meaningful for them, thus honoring their solutions and their understandings of the encounter.
<p>Greg: In just this moment with the horses, we connected in a way that filled me up, instead of draining me. I have thought in the last few months that if I let Meredith in, her constant demands would deplete me and I wouldn't be able to do my work. But just now, I felt filled up, instead of needing to fill her up. I didn't think that could happen in a such a brief, powerful moment.</p> <p>Meredith: I felt so connected to you, and so fulfilled, and so strong. And the horses stayed by our sides the whole time. They were in this with us.</p>	<p>Our team's observations: We too were surprised that this couple could have created such a powerful and connected experience that could transform how they thought about need, desire, demands, and connection. We were also deeply moved personally, and wanted to acknowledge the power of the moment while maintaining our focus on what had just occurred rather than on our own responses.</p>
<p>Shelley: If you could give a name to what you two have created here with the horses, what would it be?</p> <p>Meredith: I would call it our "cradle," as I felt cradled by these horses and by our connection. I hope that we can return to our cradle when we need to in the future. I hope we will always have it.</p>	<p>Our team's response: Shelley had taken a picture of the couple in their "cradle" with the horses, as it had seemed so powerful and intense. She showed them the picture during this conversation and they asked for it, so she texted it to them as a reminder of their ability to connect even when struggling.</p>
<p>Shelley: How do you believe you will each find ways to return to this beautiful place you have created together, when you experience difficulties in the future?</p> <p>Meredith: We are going to frame this picture and display it in our home, as a reminder of how we learned to embrace our "heart connection." Of all of our life and therapy experiences, this time with the horses has been the most powerful. We will never forget it.</p>	<p>Our team's rationale: Consistent with our model, we wanted to simply honor this couple's unique solution to their conflict and distress, and to invite them to consider how this brief but powerful moment could enhance their responses in the future, when they felt challenged and disconnected.</p>

We don't see any session or event, regardless of how powerful or compelling, as a "fix" to the problem. Nor do we privilege the therapist's story about how the couple should respond when conflicts arise. Rather, we see that couples will always have struggles to deal with, but that

they can find ways to access their unique strengths and connections so that those struggles don't overpower them. We believe the experiences that happen with the horses are "embodied" ones, and that the image and memory of these embodied experiences can remain in the couples' repertoire and enhance their resilience when they have challenges in the future.

Case Example—Family

We engage the families we work with in a strength-based manner that highlights their abilities and taps into their resources, placing the family at the center of the therapeutic process. In the case study that follows, we will discuss an intervention that was utilized during a five-session family intensive case at Stable Place (stableplace.org). Prior to the first session, we learned that Zachary, 16 years old, had been living with his former foster parents, Betty and Robert, for the past 2 years. This move back to his foster parents was prompted by unfit living conditions at his adoptive parent's home. They described the move as difficult, but necessary, for Zachary, who expressed his at-home struggles during a weekend visit with his former foster parents. At our first interaction, they described themselves as a loving family who cares deeply about their relationships with one another, and are hopeful to move forward with officially adopting Zachary in the near future.

The parents, Betty and Robert, arrived at the first session with Zachary eager to get started. They explained how their hope was to use these sessions as an opportunity to bring their family together in a way that focused on improving their trust, communication, and relationships. As their first equine session began, we invited the family to meet and greet the two horses they would be working with, paying close attention to what they observed about each horse. With both horses, Zachary was the first to approach and pet each. Betty was close behind, while

Robert stood at a distance until the rest of the family invited him to come closer. Once the family was comfortable with the horses and acclimated to the barn, we invited them to choose one horse to work with in today's session. We asked the family to halter this horse as a team without communicating with one another verbally. After the halter was comfortably adjusted on the horse by the family, we asked the clients how they were able to get the halter on without talking to each other. Betty mentioned they needed to trust in the process a bit more than they usually would, and Zachary explained how he was noticing the family communicating with their eyes in order to let each other know what they needed. Since these interactions seemed to be exceptions to what usually happens with the family, we were curious how today they were able to so quickly and confidently try something they were not accustomed to when it involved trusting the process and communicating with each other in a different way that works.

We used this opportunity as a comfortable segue into our ensuing activity that highlights themes of trust and communication. In this single-session activity, called *Lines of Communication*, we invited the family to affix two lead ropes onto the halter they already adjusted on their horse of choice. Once the lead ropes were connected to the halter, we asked the family to lead the horse with both lead ropes wherever they would like without verbally communicating with one another. Outside of asking the clients to take the horse for a walk while refraining from verbal communication, we provided no indication of how they were to complete the activity, where they could lead the horse, and whether they should work individually or as a family. How this intervention transpired is described and analyzed below:

Transcript	Analysis
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<p>Michael: Now that the horse is ready to go, we would like for you all to figure out a way to walk with the horse using both lead ropes and no verbal communication.</p>	<p>Our team’s rationale and intent: This request was intentionally vague. We made no suggestions as to how they should work together, where they should lead the horse, or if they should explore other means of communication. Consistent with being client-centered, we wanted the family to work through these uncertainties together in a way that fits for them. We also wanted to find a way to engage the family by highlighting their communication skills and methods of working together (i.e., who takes the lead, who tries to communicate differently, who, if any, disregard the guidelines, etc.)</p>
<p>Betty and Zachary were the first to attempt the activity. Zachary took one lead rope and immediately started walking forward while Betty stayed beside the horse with the other lead rope. After a few steps forward, the horse planted its hooves and remained stationed in one spot. After a bit of tugging from Zachary while Betty stood quietly beside the horse, he eventually turned around and signaled something with his head and eyes. This signal seemed to mean, “let’s go,” as the three of them began moving as one. Once they began moving, the three of them walked as a group with Zachary leading the way until they decided they had gone far enough.</p>	<p>Our team’s observations: We noticed Zachary and Betty were quick to go first while Robert observed. As each of them grabbed a lead rope, it seemed as though Zachary was ready to create movement immediately. However, it did not take long for Zachary to shift his immediacy and turn around toward Betty and the horse to communicate something. Once this moment of connecting back with one another occurred, the horse and Betty’s demeanor seemed to shift in a way that indicated they were ready to walk. This quick shift in their approach and communication was something we noted and were interested in asking about.</p>
<p>Michael: We are wondering how you guys created movement and how you decided where to go once you got that movement?</p>	<p>Our team’s rationale and intent: We did not explain what occurred from our perspective nor attribute any meaning to what happened; instead, we encouraged the family to explain what happened from their perspective and explore their own meaning they attributed to their approach and style in this activity.</p>

<p>Betty: It seemed like once Zachary turned around and checked in with me and the horse, we were able to begin moving. It felt like we all got on the same page in this moment. Once we got on the same page, there was literally and figuratively no looking back.</p> <p>Zachary: When we weren't moving I decided to turn around and communicate with my eyes to Betty and the horse. I wanted them to start walking forward with me but knew I couldn't say anything. I think we just went with it once we started moving and didn't worry about where we were going. I just wanted us to keep moving forward.</p> <p>Robert: I noticed Zachary being very quick to get started and get moving. I think once he slowed down and checked in with who was behind him, they all were able to get ready to move together.</p>	<p>Our team's observations: We also noticed how movement seemed to occur as soon as all three members of the group, Zachary, Betty, and the horse, were able to get connected in some way, and, in turn, become comfortable with moving ahead together. It appeared all the connection that was needed transpired from a shift in Zachary's approach where he slowed down, turned back to the others in his group, communicated to them in a different way how he was ready to proceed, and began walking as soon as he noticed the other two were ready to go together.</p>
<p>Michael: Zachary, would you like to attempt this again, and this time with Robert?</p> <p>Zachary: Sure. Should we use the same horse and hold the same ropes?</p> <p>Michael: I'll leave that up to you two.</p>	<p>Our team's rationale and intent: Michael offered Zachary and Robert an opportunity to work through this activity together. We purposefully left the specifics up to the clients as a way for them to problem solve and manage through these decisions in a way that challenges them to work together. As a new group attempts the activity together, we pay close attention to any similarities or differences in the approach or completion of the activity that may be worth inquiring about.</p>
<p>Zachary and Robert were able to create movement quite quickly. Again, Zachary appeared to take the lead as Robert and the horse followed closely behind. They walked along the outside fence of a large paddock until they made it all the way to the other side before stopping.</p>	<p>Our team's observations: In our work, we pay close attention to any similarities or differences within, or across, activities that might be worthwhile to point out. In this case, we noticed how Zachary quickly decided to take the lead on each occasion without first checking in with the others. We wondered how this might relate to the way the family communicates, or attempts to communicate, outside of the barn and how this works for them.</p>

<p>Michael: Zachary, I noticed you took the lead and began moving forward without checking in with anyone again. Does this relate at all to how you work with your family in your everyday life?</p> <p>Zachary: Yes, I tend to just go for it and see what happens.</p> <p>Robert: Yes, Zachary does tend to take the lead and run with it at home without checking in with us. We are hopeful that he will check in with us more often prior to forging ahead without much plan or perspective on how we feel about it. We are always here looking out for his best interest, but I'm not sure Zachary always notices that or thinks we are there to help him. Instead, it seems like he thinks we are trying to hold him back from what he wants.</p>	<p>Our team's rationale and intent: At different points in a session, we do our best to help the client make sense of what is going on for them in the moment and how this might relate back to their everyday life outside of the barn. Our hope is these connections might help a client make better sense of their situation and/or give them the opportunity to explore different ways of approaching what hasn't been working for them.</p>
<p>Michael: Now, I'd like to invite all three of you to work together this time to create movement.</p>	<p>Our team's rationale and intent: We hoped this invitation would allow the clients an opportunity to work together as a family. We also were interested in the dynamic that might transpire with three participants and only two lead ropes.</p>
<p>Zachary, Betty, and Robert placed themselves in a way that had Zachary on one side of the horse and Betty and Robert on the other side. Zachary was holding one lead role while Betty and Robert were both holding the other lead rope. It appeared as if they all took a moment to look at each other, check that they were ready to go, and proceeded with Zachary taking the first step. The family walked two full times around the paddock before stopping with Zachary a step ahead at all times, Betty close to the horse without much slack, and Robert at the end of the rope Betty was holding.</p>	<p>Our team's observations: It appeared as if the family intentionally was letting Zachary take the lead in this activity. We wondered what sort of meaning this had for the family and what their hope was by letting Zachary make the first move and stay one step ahead throughout.</p>

<p>Michael: We noticed you all were able to create movement with some ease. How were you able to figure out who was doing what and where you were going?</p> <p>Betty: Well, I think Robert and I let Zachary take the lead in this activity, as we have been trying to do more of this at home recently as he gets older. We hope Zachary can continue to show us that we can trust when he takes the lead, and he won't just move ahead without checking in with us or considering how we feel about it.</p> <p>Robert: We waited for the indication from Zachary that he was ready to go, and followed close behind him. Betty and I decided to go on the same side of the horse and hold the same rope in order to let Zachary have full control over the other rope. For us this represents us giving Zachary more freedom and control as he gets older, yet staying close beside to encourage him heading in the right direction or getting him back on track when he is headed in the wrong direction.</p>	<p>Our team's rationale and intent: We hoped by inquiring about the way they worked together and how they decided to do so, we could approach their collaboration in a more indirect way that does not place our judgement or value on the process they used.</p>
<p>Michael: How did you know what direction to head when you were all together?</p> <p>Betty: I'm not sure we knew exactly where we were going but we did stay along the outside fence in order to use it as a guideline to keep us on track. Getting us on the right track can be difficult at times, but it is even more difficult for us to stay on track once we get something that's working.</p>	<p>Our team's rationale and intent: We hoped to end our first session with the family in a way that left them thinking about the direction they were heading when they were all together. For us, this is synonymous with moving ahead together into the future and how they would like to do so. We hoped this would set a strong foundation for the sessions, themes, and conversations to come.</p>

At the conclusion of the activity we invited the family to reflect on what they noticed in their communication and their work with one another that indicates individual and familial strengths they would like to carry with them into the future. We also asked the clients to think about what this outside fence, or track, might represent for the family when it comes to guiding their communication, trust, and work together. We encouraged the family to take note of any moments prior to our next session where they notice their strengths, and what might be different

in these situations that allow them to communicate and work together in a way that fits for them.

We invited the family to four more sessions, which we utilized as an opportunity to highlight strengths and weave themes together surrounding communication, trust, and coming together as a family.

STABLE PLACE, INC.

Initial Session Case Note

Client Name/ Client #: Betty Smith/2017-000 (Family)	
Date, Time, and Duration: 07/01/2017 9:00 am 1.5 Hours	Session Participants: Michael (Therapist), Valerie (Equine Specialist), Betty, Robert, and Zachary
Problem Definition: Betty described a unique family situation that has put her and Robert, Zachary's former foster parents from when he was an infant, as the guardians for him now as a teenager. She mentioned he has been back with them for the past two years and they have been struggling with trust, honesty, and bonding as a family. Betty mentioned currently Zachary strongly opposes being adopted by them, as he expressed interest in being with a younger family, but they are hopeful his perspective will shift as they begin to improve as a unit.	
Desired Solutions: Betty discussed initiating therapy for her family with the hopes of improving their trust and communication while strengthening their familial relationships. She mentioned a desire to focus on bonding as a family and being honest with each other about what they are hopeful for when it comes to getting more settled as a family. They also hoped to use these sessions as a means of bonding and exploring what each person needs from the others.	
Equine Activities: For our first session, we started with a simple meet and greet with two of the horses we would be working with throughout the week. After the clients became comfortable with the horses, we proceeded into our first structured activity called "Lines of Communication." This activity has a theme revolving around communication and working together where two lead ropes are affixed to one haltered horse with the objective of taking the horse for a walk together without using verbal communication. Our hope was to elicit some therapeutic conversation pertaining to the family's communication style, as well as highlight what they do well when it comes to working together and negotiating where they would go and how they would get there.	
Therapist Notes/Observations: The therapist noticed a number of occasions during the session where the family was able to communicate their needs to one another in ways that allowed everyone to get on the same page. When the family seemed to be on the same page, they appeared to work well together. They established roles, created movement, and identified their path by communicating in new ways and trusting in each other's process during the activity.	

Date of next session: 07/02/17

Amount Paid: N/A

Balance Due: N/A

Michael Rolleston, M.S.

Therapist Name

Michael Rolleston, M.S.

Therapist Signature

Dr. Shelley Green, LMF1

Supervisor Signature

[Your Logo/Organization Here]

Initial Session Case Note

Client Name/ Client #:	
Date, Time, and Duration:	Session Participants:
Problem Definition:	
Desired Solutions:	
Equine Activities:	
Therapist Notes/Observations:	

Date of next session: _____

Amount Paid: _____

Balance Due: _____

Therapist Name

Therapist Signature

Supervisor Signature

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