

A photograph of two horses grazing in a grassy field. The horse in the foreground is a brown and white pinto, with its head lowered to the ground. The horse behind it is darker brown with a white blaze on its face. The background is a soft-focus green field.

# **From Surviving to Thriving to Resilience: The Path to Healing Through Horses**

with Shannon Knapp  
and Elizabeth Corbett



WELLER COUNSELING



HORSE SENSE  
of the Carolinas

# Today's Objectives and Assumptions

- *Understand the science behind equine-assisted therapy*
- *Identify the benefits of equine-assisted therapy for first responders*
- *Understand the differences and similarities between the barriers and needs of veterans & first responders*



# Today's Objectives and Assumptions

- *Understand how **neural pathways** are **formed** to support learning a regulation skill*
- *Learn how to **practice and implement a skill** to heal trauma and build resilience*



# We'll also

- *Define terms: EAP, EAL, TI-EAP*
- *NOT be training you to do equine-assisted interventions*
- *WILL leave you with a regulation skill (or two!) to use in an office session*





# Defining Terms

- *EAP: Equine-assisted Psychotherapy or EAT: Equine-assisted Therapy*
- *EAL: Equine-assisted Learning*
- *TI-EAP: Trauma-informed*





## How it's done

- *Licensed Mental Health Professional*
- *Horse Professional*
- *1 or more Horses*





# Our Training

- *Natural Lifemanship.com*
- *Eagala.org*
- *Polyvagal Equine Institute.com*
- *EMDR, ACT, Natural Horsemanship or Parelli Natural Horsemanship*







# Understand the science behind equine-assisted therapy

- *Polyvagal: about ANS regulation*
- *Bottom-up regulation: rhythmic, patterned, repetitive input*
- *Co-regulation & connection: oxytocin*
- *Rewiring neural pathways*





# Similarities between veterans & first responders

- *Traditional “talk” therapy often falls short*
- *Somatic/body-based needed*
- *Not “touchy-feely”*
- *Pacing is different*



# Benefits for veterans & first responders

- *Outside, non-traditional environment*
- *Not people first, but animal first*
- *Shoulder to shoulder*
- *Normalizes physiological and psychological reactions to trauma*
- *Psycho-ed teaching how horses react to trauma*



# First Responders Special Considerations

- *Deployment isn't over (unless retired)*
- *Vicarious Trauma as part of daily life*
- *Physical impact of chronic stress*
- *Stigma*
- *Real risk of Job Security*





**Understand how neural pathways are formed to support learning a skill**

**OR**

**Building a dirt road into a superhighway**



# Building New Neural Pathways (i.e. building muscle memory) by increasing...

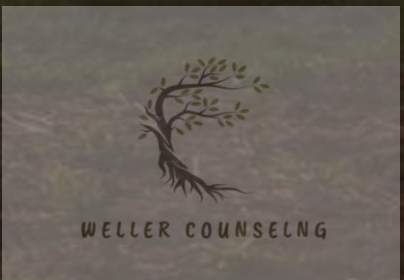
- *awareness of & connection with self*
- *awareness of others (people and horses)*
- *tracking ability in self and others (horse)*



# Learn how to practice and implement skills to heal trauma & build resilience

- *Horse Breath*
- *Glimmers*
- *Thresholds & Transitions*
- *Other Breathing Techniques*
- *Beginner's Mind (not teaching)*
- *Grooming (rhythmic, repetitive, patterned)*

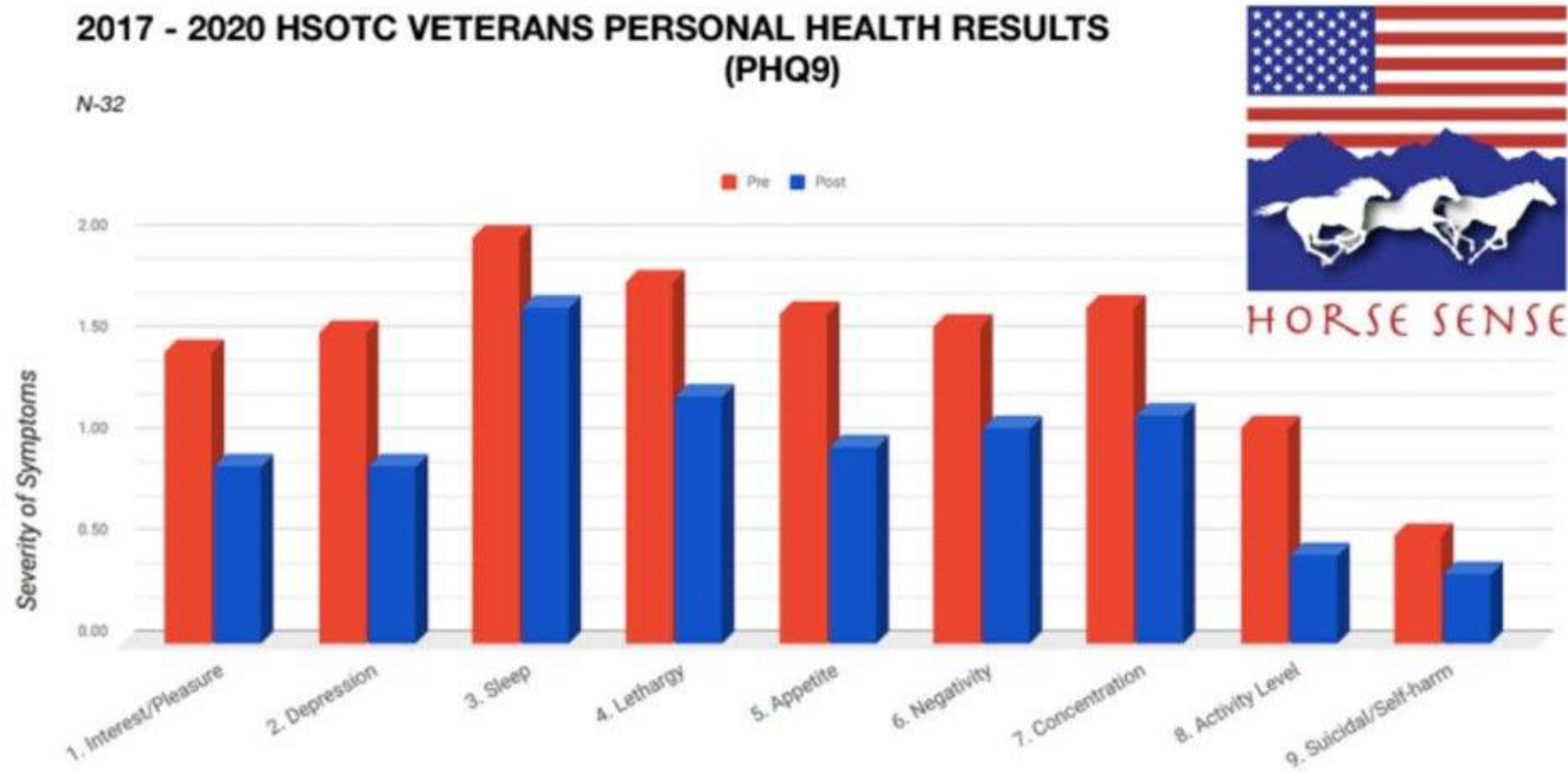




# Does it work?

## 2017 - 2020 HSOTC VETERANS PERSONAL HEALTH RESULTS (PHQ9)

N-32

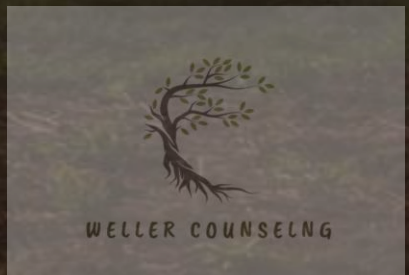


42% Decrease in Depression  
36% Decrease in Suicidal Ideologies and Self-Harm



# Services Offered

- *Weekly Individual Psychotherapy*
- *The Intensives Program*
- *Group Learning: monthly recurring and ad hoc groups*
- *Whispers with Horses and similar*
- *Volunteer*



# IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS

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**108**

Groups received  
mental health services

**498**

Total group  
participants

**42%**

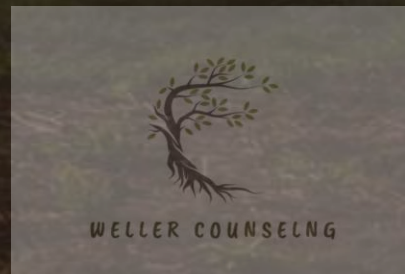
Increase in groups  
served

**444**

Hours of individual  
therapy

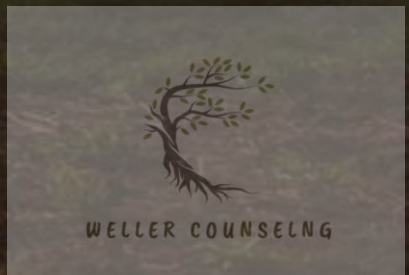
**230**

Veterans served



# Case Study: GB

- *Theme: Thresholds—recognizing, honoring & responding to*
- *Session 1: Observe seizure; thresholds*
- *Session 2: Self-compassion; non-verbals*
- *Session 3: In-vivo regulation, impending activation, and activation*
- *Follow up opportunities for GB & his wife*



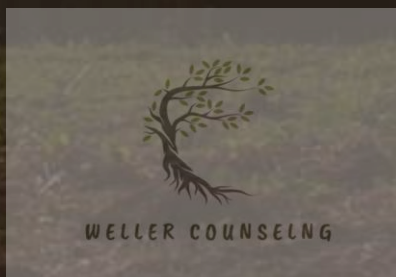
# Q & A

*What questions do you have?*

*[Shannon@heartofhorsesense.org](mailto:Shannon@heartofhorsesense.org)* (services and referrals)

*[Shannon.Knapp@horsesenseotc.com](mailto:Shannon.Knapp@horsesenseotc.com)* (becoming a professional in the field)

*[elizabeth@wellercounseling.net](mailto:elizabeth@wellercounseling.net)*





## The Plunge: EAP Biz Owner, ES and Horses

- *Can we handle change now?*
- *Run the numbers: is it possible \$?*
- *Run the numbers; time?*
- *Start with “deepest” horses first  
(Wise ones)*
- *Trust in the therapist and the clients*



# Special Issues: Insurance Considerations

- *Note: What's most vital is to determine YOUR comfort level in working with insurance concerns. Once you have clarity, develop an elevator speech and practice it until it feels natural and true to your values!*



# Ideal Clients

- *Identified specific focus for therapy*
- *Existing support system*
- *Possess emotional regulation skills*
- *Able to commit to extended sessions  
(mentally, emotionally, and logistically)*



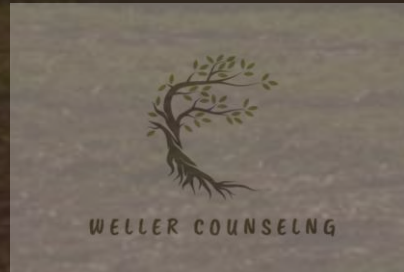
# Non-ideal clients

- *Clients with multi-faceted challenges*
- *Limited support system*
- *Unfamiliar with concepts of emotional regulation*
- *Unable to commit to extended sessions (mentally, emotionally, and logistically)*



# Overall Screening Process

- *Pre-screening: Client Interest form sent by organization*
- *Screening call by MH or Intake Coordinator*
- *Intake session with MH and ES*
- *Intake paperwork, including client history form and assessments*



# ROLE OF EQUINE PSYCHOTHERAPIST

## Therapeutic Use of Horses

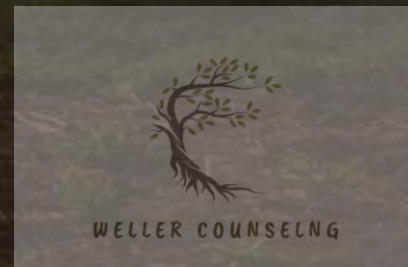
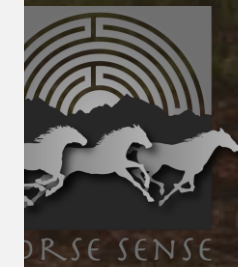
Equine psychotherapists incorporate horses in therapy to foster mental health and emotional well-being. Horses support meaningful client breakthroughs.

## Building Trust and Communication

Sessions focus on building trust, self-awareness, and improving communication skills by interacting with horses in a supportive environment.

## Collaborative Interventions

Equine psychotherapists work as mental health professionals to tailor interventions for anxiety, trauma, and behavioral challenges.



ADVANCED CASE  
VIGNETTE:  
SCOPE, HORSE  
WELFARE &  
CONTAINMENT

- Scenario:

A 38-year-old client with known trauma history begins grooming.

- She shares a childhood memory of sexual abuse in increasing detail.

- Observations:

- • Speech slows. Eyes fixate beyond facilitator.
- • Grooming pressure increases without awareness.
- • Horse leans into her as she shares

