

MSW student practices equine therapy at practicum site

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Drayton Doyle

Drayton Doyle may have loved horses as a child, but they never thought equine therapy could be a career path. When their practicum placement advisor recommended Equine Healing Collaborative in their hometown of Monterey Bay as a [Master of Social Work \(MSW\)](#) practicum placement site, everything changed.

“I stepped onto the ranch, and I was like, this place is incredible,” Doyle said. “It's 56 acres, with over 40 horses and donkeys, chickens, pigs, and goats. There were goats bleating while I was doing my placement interview. It was just perfect for me.”

A far cry from the case management job they had been hoping for, Doyle says the experiences they've had at the ranch – from hosting support groups to practicing equine-assisted psychotherapy – have made them a better social worker and broadened their horizon.

“Equine-assisted psychotherapy is essentially therapy with a horse as your co-facilitator. It sounds super hippie, but the horses are very intuitive creatures,” Doyle said. Prior to starting their practicum placement, they say they had heard of the technique but never seen it in action.

At Equine Healing Collaborative, no one rides the horses. Instead, clients interact with the horses on the ground through exercises like grooming, feeding, or leading them around the pasture. In one of Doyle's therapy groups, parents use interactions with the horses to contextualize their relationships with their children and families.

“Horses have personalities and a strong sense of community. Some are a little bit more emotional and sensitive, and some of them are really playful and goofy, but they all respond to humans' emotions.”

Recognizing how an animal's behavior responds to emotional signals and body language can develop a person's sense of self-awareness and ability to identify certain feelings. Even simple interactions with horses can be conduits for bigger realizations.

“I'll take the harness off the horse when it's in a round pen, and I'll ask the client to walk the perimeter of the pen while repeating some sort of mantra. It can be positive or neutral – just something the client believes,” Doyle said.

The horses stay at the edge of the pen, so the person will have to decide to go around or move the horse. The choices the client makes, Doyle says, can lay bare anxieties, frustrations, or self-esteem issues.

“Are they going around the horse? Are they asking the horse to move? How are they asking the horse to move? Do they feel respected by the horse? Are they scared to be assertive with the horse? Did they remember their mantra? We talk about all of

that.”

Even simple maintenance tasks can be used as therapeutic tools on the ranch. Grooming can teach patients to connect with another being and to care for others and themselves. One of Doyle’s favorite activities is to have a patient imagine that a spot of dirt on the horse’s hide is a specific problem. Then, they give a simple instruction: Tackle that problem.

“You can choose anything out of the grooming box. You can use your hands. What the person chooses to do can tell me a lot about them,” Doyle said. “People will come to a rhythm, or they’ll get frustrated and throw stuff down and not want to do it anymore. Sometimes, they won’t pick one spot but will instead go all over the horse. It’s really telling.”

Not all the patients at Equine Healing Collaborative participate in equine-assisted psychotherapy. Doyle primarily works with children, which they say is their dream in life. But many children are intimidated by the horses – which average 1,200 pounds – and instead opt for modalities like sand play therapy.

The opportunity to experience both equine and more traditional therapeutic techniques is part of what has made Doyle’s practicum experience so positive. Pushing past discomfort and making the most of every experience, they say, is what social work is all about.

“We’re in such an amazing program at Tulane that we’re blessed to be a part of, so we should all be pushing our boundaries and trying our best. That’s all you can do.”