

BY ADELE SEVERS

“There was a way of being around horses that helped me relax.”

FINDING THAT INNER RHYTHM

Horses have an uncanny ability to act as a mirror to our inner selves, and their therapeutic value is well recognised. Equine Assisted Coaching lifts the veil on how the rest of the world experiences you – and how you experience the rest of the world.

Do you have employees that never seem to respect you? A boss that casts a shadow of intimidation the moment they approach your desk? Do you work in a team where no one ever seems to be on the same page? No matter what industry you're in, these are issues that many people deal with in the workplace on a day-to-day basis. When unresolved, they lead to staff turnover, poor productivity and stress that follows you home.

What if horses could improve the way we see ourselves and relate to others in the workplace? It might sound far-fetched, but anyone who's spent much time around horses knows they are incredible readers of body language; to work with them, you need to have a sense of self-

awareness and be in the moment. Their uncanny ability to act as a mirror to our inner selves has been the driver for the development of Equine Assisted Coaching (EAC; sometimes referred to as Equine Assisted Therapy) a treatment that uses equine activities and/or an equine environment in order to promote physical, occupational, and emotional growth.

While in its modern form EAC has only really become a recognised form of therapy in the past two decades, evidence shows that the ancient Greeks were aware of the therapeutic value of riding – so humans' therapeutic valuing of horses has a long history! This form of therapy has been adopted in many countries, from

the USA to Germany and Australia, and it has been used to assist people with a wide range of disabilities, mental health issues and also for personal and workplace development.

It is the latter that has become the central focus for Victorian therapist Jessica Liston, whose business, Inner Rhythm, centres around leadership and team-building for workplaces and individuals. Horses mirror your energy, leadership, and emotion. As such, they quickly and clearly show you how you operate in your daily life. To spend a day with horses is to learn exactly how the rest of the world experiences you – and how you experience the rest of the world.





Jess Liston, with thoroughbred Jorge and Waler Coolibah.

LIFE SPENT WITH HORSES

Horses have always been a part of Jess Liston's life. Her equine journey began at her parents' thoroughbred training facility in the Victorian Mallee district, where she rode trackwork from age eight and helped her mum rescue and retrain horses from abattoir trucks. "We'd get horses off the truck and spend time retraining them so they'd end up with better homes," recalls Jess. It was a life where horses were always there. Her dream growing up was to own a thoroughbred stud and at age 12, her parents bought one just out of Adelaide with 400 horses.

The family still had horses in training, and when her mother broke her arm Jess stayed home and rode track work flat out every morning for three months. "In that three month period, my parents

had a contract to break-in and pre-train 50 horses and get their barrier certificates. I backed each of them; I loved needing to quickly adapt my body language to get the best out of each individual horse. One would be boisterous and wanting to rear so I would need to immediately be strong in my body and use an assertive voice so he knew within less than a second that I wouldn't allow it, while the next horse would be a little nervous at going forward for the first time with a new rider on his back, so I would instinctively just need to give a gentle pat on the wither and soft words of encouragement. I still draw on these skills in my everyday life as a parent, partner, director of a business, friend or with new people I meet," says Jess.

Jess loved this period, but decided she wanted to learn more, so she went to boarding school to get the academic support she needed. Jess

missed animals and the wide-open space immensely, but her time there taught her how people act under pressure – in particular herself. "I could see back then that there was a way of being around horses that helped me relax and become calmer. I slowly started to find a way to help other people access that."

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Jess began her working career via a teaching degree, and eventually returned to Victoria where she took up a position teaching at renowned author John Marsden's Candlebark School. One of the school's philosophies is to say "yes" as much as possible – and that's what

John said when Jess asked if she could bring a few horses along to the school's 1,100-acre grounds. Naturally, many of the kids were drawn to the horses and they quickly became part of lunchtime activities!

However, the trigger for Jess's journey into the world of EAC came when she saw a documentary in 2008; she knew this was her calling, and wanted to study it. "John was fabulous and said, 'I would love to support you in doing that. Rather than go off and study it, how about you create your own program of how you want to study it, and create a school-based therapy program here?' He gave me support to buy horses, set up facilities, and find internships and people to learn from," says Jess. What followed was the first school-based EAC program in the world, which still continues today.



Learning leadership styles in the round yard.



Horse demand that we're in the moment.

The feedback in the first few months from parents was outstanding and encouraged Jess to take the dream that step further. Moving to Germany for 12 months, she undertook a masters degree in EAC; it was one of the longest and most renowned courses in the industry, and has been running for more than a decade with the input of German doctors, psychologists and scientists who have worked together to prove the benefits of this type of therapy. "In Germany, they have EAC in a lot of wellbeing centres... so they have horse stables out the back," explains Jess. "It's part of their Medicare system, and it's therefore very well recognised and easy for the public to access. It's similar to going to the physio!"

Jess was very lucky to be able to finish the last few months of her degree back home, as a live-in position became available at Candlebark

and her masters lecturer jumped at the chance. With the degree finished, Jess began to notice a need for EAC amongst the local community, and so the program was extended beyond the school. However, it wasn't until last year that Jess's current area of specialisation – workplace leadership and team-building – really came about. And perhaps surprisingly, this idea was born from the children she worked with.

"We can't have ego. We all have to laugh at ourselves."

"I realised we were putting Band-Aids on; the kids were getting it (the benefits of EAC) and learning how to apply it to themselves, but when parents are in high-stress jobs, they're

finding it hard to leave it at work. So parents come home with stress, and it means the kids might struggle emotionally and socially. So recently, I've shifted to a strong focus on executive leadership to help those leaders change their work teams' culture. The feedback is they are less stressed; people stay in jobs longer, people are happier at work," says Jess. Ultimately, this trickles down to the kids.

Jess explains that a happier workplace is about understanding how others experience you, and finding a way to "be yourself" at work. "Imagine two circles – your work self and your personal self. The more they overlap, the healthier a person is. You don't have to pretend to be someone. If you're able to be yourself more of the time, it's less exhausting." Jess's courses encourage participants to discover their own leadership style, step into it, and own it.

So how do the horses help people discover a better style of leadership that suits their personality? "Everyone is vulnerable when first introduced to the horses, and that's why it can help people build trust and develop the unspoken communication skills and body language, as horses need it," says Jess.

The best way to describe the effect of these courses in a one-on-one leadership scenario is through Jess's experiences. A few years back she ran a course in Spain, which included two executives. "We filmed them in the round yard, and the task was to get the horse to circle you at a steady pace, using body language," says Jess. "The first one had a very strong personality; the horse just galloped. His personality was strong and dominating, and he was unaware of that. He had no idea why he had so many staff unhappy at work and subsequently quitting. He didn't realise how intimidated they were from his presence; when he thought he was empathising, they thought he was criticising.

"The next executive worked with the very same horse; it wouldn't move for him and instead stood beside him and kept nudging him. So that executive learnt why, when he gave people deadlines, they wouldn't respect them. He would tell them deadlines, and they would come to him with excuses and he'd keep extending them. Work didn't get done, and he felt people didn't respect him. No matter how strong he was with words, his body language didn't match, so his staff – and even his kids – were naturally picking up on that body language and not following!"



A course participant spends a quiet moment with Waler mare Rigaletto.

During courses where Jess takes on whole teams, she says people not only learn a lot from how the horses react to them, but also by watching how the horses react to their colleagues. Often it's filmed, and Jess explains that it can be quite confronting to see it played back and to review your body language and how you go about things. "We can't have ego. We all have to laugh at ourselves. When we're in that space and can see it, that's where the growth happens," she says.

"With horses, you need to be in the moment."

When it comes to team activities with the horses, if the team members are incongruent the horses pick up on it. Therefore, for the team to work effectively, people have to be honest, transparent and vulnerable with each other. As Jess explains, the best workplaces and teams occur through overall team trust – not the talent of a team or any individual's outstanding performance.

Jess uses the example of a football team she worked with, where players completed an obstacle course while leading the horse. "Lots

of people in team sports are very driven, and can get very focused on what they need to do... but if they're not aligned with the team, things can go pear-shaped. In this exercise, some – in their competitiveness – forgot about the horse, and found it wouldn't follow. They had to let go of the competitive bit, come back and develop a whole team plan to complete the relay. They've had to be in communication with each other; once the team was clear in their direction and were on the same page, the horse followed." Jess has found that the horses pick up on distraction and lack of continuity in the team. "If people come up with their own idea, but it's not the team idea, the horse can feel that in the group; heart rates are different and rhythms are different, so they just stop. It's fun to see people learn and pick up the skills of really working well as a team and what that entails."

THE HORSES

Jess has worked with many different types and breeds of horses over the course of her career, however, at present the majority of her therapy horses are Walers. The original Australian war horse, true Walers are now few and far between – some estimate that there are as few as 200 of the original breed left.



Team activities with horses can help to get everyone on the same page.



Angela Tiede's Waler, Coolibah, is a regular at Jess's programs.

"I feel really lucky to be able to work with them," says Jess. "They're really intuitive horses and love people. I feel they are strong horses physically and mentally; they were bred to go to war." The Walers Jess works with are owned by Angela Tiede, a Waler enthusiast who is passionate about preserving the old bloodlines. "Each have different things they offer," says Jess. "Zeke (Angela's handsome black stallion) is cool, calm and collected, and requires people to be sure of themselves or he's not interested. Rigaletto (a beautiful bay mare who was virtually unhandleable when Angela rescued her from an outback cattle station) is quite anxious; she's that person in an office who's a high achiever but would find it hard to work as a team. Each horse people can often relate to

someone in their office. By developing skills to work with that horse, it allows them to better relate to someone in their lives and improve the relationship."

It's also great that via the program, so many people are meeting and learning about the history of the Waler horses. Jess says that many people she works with have stories of how friends or family members are connected to these horses through the war, for example, grandparents in the light horse brigade. "That piece of history is being more embraced now. Only one (horse) came back from war, and for the men who came home... because they needed to leave or shoot their horses... it was a really hard thing to talk about. So part of the

reason people aren't aware of the horses is because the returning soldiers just couldn't talk about it." As a side project, Jess has begun to embark on a trip to an outback cattle station in the Northern Territory in an attempt to save a number of Walers. "We have identified a herd of around 300 Walers on an outback property. An elderly gentleman is currently keeping them in the area by providing them with water during this tough drought period, however once the rain breaks we fear that the herd will quickly disperse and we will lose track of the animals forever. Time is of the essence," explains Jess.

"We believe they could be the last untouched population of the horses left in Australia. These horses literally saved the lives of Aussie soldiers on the battle field – I want to try and save them now." Jess is busy raising funds to cover the cost of the expedition and to bring 20 of the horses back to Victoria where she will re-home them with people that will preserve the breed. A number of racing people have already shown interest in taking them on and putting them to work on their properties.

"The majority of her therapy horses are Walers."

"I hope the Waler horse finds more purposes, as they are really versatile. They can teach beginners, or they can do higher level competitions across a wide range of disciplines." Alongside the Walers, Jess also uses her slow ex-racehorse turned eventer, Jorge (named after the speedy motorbike rider Jorge Lorenzo), when he's not out eventing with her mother.

"With horses, you need to be in the moment. It doesn't matter what has happened before or after; you need to be switched on to them. Horses allow you to practice being sure of yourself and they give you instant feedback," says Jess.

When you spend so much time at your place of work, it's crucial that you are relaxed and happy there. Understanding how others experience you in the workplace, and also how you experience others, is an important step towards ensuring a harmonious team environment and effective leadership. If you're ready to leave your ego at the gate, have a laugh and learn a hell of a lot about yourself, Equine Assisted Coaching may just help you find your inner rhythm. **EQ**