

Megan's mini-herd:
Dazzling Jade, Westbound
and showjumper Six-Or-Nix

The Way Of The Horse

Personal transformation has become a buzzword of late. Now horses are being used to help people overcome their stumbling blocks

Aware of how my body was feeling, I approached the horse. This time was different. I was looking for clues from the mare as she invited me into her space. A flick of her mane, a shake of her head or a swish of her tail brought me to a halt. I could feel the push-pull of her energy field as I slowly made my way toward her. As she welcomed me in, she turned to follow me and I could feel the strength of the connection between us. Everything melted away, and as I stood before her I felt like her equal. I took a deep breath and she sighed in return, lowering her head into my chest.

For a horse person, which I am, this would seem like an ordinary event which could take place in our daily interactions with horses. But today I am participating in a workshop titled *The Way Of The Horse*, and I am here to discover what limiting behaviour is keeping me from reaching my true potential. The purpose of this particular exercise is to recognise the importance of boundaries. What I have discovered is that horses sense and respond to the human energy field from a considerable distance. This allows them to assess our emotional and mental states and make decisions about us before

we even reach them. Ever wondered why your horse won't allow you to catch him when you're in a bad mood?

Horses as teachers

However, this is not a workshop about how to catch a horse. Rather, it explores the idea that horses can teach us about ourselves. If you consider that horses have evolved alongside humankind through the ages – from hunting to agriculture, from war to sport – the next logical step sees them as active participants in a therapeutic setting. They have gone beyond being mere vehicles for the physically challenged,

to facilitating human-self development. Equine Facilitated Experiential Learning (EFEL) is a relatively new concept where horses are the key ingredient in the learning processes of the people involved. The Way Of The Horse is an aspect of The Epona Approach which was developed by Linda Kohanov, author of the *The Tao Of Equus*, *Riding Between The Worlds* and *The Way of the Horse: Equine Archetypes for Self-Discovery*. This particular brand of EFEL focuses on the development of emotional intelligence, self awareness, leadership skills and identifying self-limiting beliefs.

You might wonder how horses could be more useful than a motivational speaker or an obstacle course at a leadership camp... Despite the fact that horses have been domesticated for thousands of years, their natural instincts to flee from danger are still wired into their nervous systems. This makes them useful 'tools' in human development. Always alert to potential threat in their natural environment, even while grazing, horses can assess subtle changes in the heart rate, muscle tension and breathing of the horses around them, as well as that of any approaching predator.

These finely honed survival skills come into play during a therapy session, as horses reflect what human body language is telling them. Unlike people, a horse's emotional state is congruent with his behaviour. In other words, they don't pretend to be in a good mood when they're not! As human beings, we have become proficient at hiding behind masks which are kept firmly in place by social expectation. Eventually we forget the difference between what we really feel and how we are expected to behave. Horses are accurate mirrors of the human condition, tuned in as they are to how we feel on the inside.

The Epona Approach is now facilitated in South Africa by Megan Jackson, an Epona Approved Instructor. Having completed the Epona Apprentice Programme, Megan describes this work as profound and powerful, and says that despite the fact that she organises the workshops and explains what the work is about, it's the horses who

facilitate the incredible transformation that so many people experience. A horse lover since childhood, Megan followed her passion into the showjumping arena. A day job in the corporate world of IT supported her horse habit. It was when her mare, Westbound, went lame that she began exploring alternative therapies for a possible solution. She discovered the Tellington TTouch and completed the necessary requirements to become a TTEAM Practitioner. Spending time with her horse in a different context proved to be invaluable. Insights gained during this time were confirmed when she picked up a copy of *The Tao Of Equus*.

Horses as healers

Unable to compete with Westbound, the two of them spent hours together under the trees, defining a new horse-human relationship. Suddenly Megan saw horses in a different light. The idea that they were

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Body awareness is important when working with horses. They will respond to any feelings we have suppressed, and reflect that in their behaviour. A body scan (above) encourages the participant to focus on her body before she interacts with the horse. Megan looks on, ready to assist if necessary.





Boundary work: a dressage whip is used to demarcate a boundary on the ground in front of the participant. From top to bottom: Note the subtle changes in the body language of both individuals. When transgressing a horse's boundary, they will turn away, or maintain their boundary with a flick of an ear or shake of the head. Notice how the horse moved towards the participant when he acknowledges her presence.

more than mere pets, or tools of the trade – the fact that they were sentient beings – resonated with her. She realised that they had more to offer than a willingness or ability to jump.

This prompted a significant shift in her perception, where analytical thoughts about horses gave way to a more holistic, right-brain approach to her relationship with them. She felt her connection to them was more authentic

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now that she acknowledged each individual for their unique character. Westbound has taken her new job in her stride. No longer able to fulfill her role as a showjumper, she now encourages participants towards their own 'a-ha' moments.

Participants leave having had a new, sometimes profound, experience. Instead of insisting the horse obey my orders as usual, I felt like an equal, and sometimes like a student. I enjoyed the fact that there was no judgment on the part of the horses or the facilitator. I allowed myself to experience what it was they had to teach me. I began to recognise the give and take, the ebb and flow of the relationship. Surely those are the dynamics of a well balanced relationship - where two individuals, on equal footing, each with their own talents and insights meet halfway, to co-exist in a mutually satisfying experience?

This is not about allowing the horse to walk all over you, but rather recognising their built-in ability to take on a leadership role when required. Although safety around the horses is always a consideration, the traditional 'show the horse who's boss' mindset is challenged in this approach. What you experience in these workshops can be applied to real life situations, so that skills gleaned here are used in your day-to-day existence.



Megan and Westbound - the horse proved to be a catalyst in Megan's personal journey

No horse experience necessary

"When we shift our awareness to what horses are telling us through their body language, a world of information becomes available," Megan says. "Horses use non-verbal communication among themselves, and this rich tapestry of movement is a reflection of what is happening in their environment," she explains.

"They are masters when it comes to defining their personal boundaries and processing emotions, and can teach us to develop ours with self awareness. When we use our body as a tool to gauge external influences, we hone our own non-verbal communications skills." You needn't have any horse experience to benefit from EFEL. It is the nature of your own interaction with the horse that is important.

But what about equestrians who have years of horse experience – how can this benefit them? Essentially, horses are always providing opportunities for us to be more congruent emotionally. Once we look past the labels we use to describe their moods and behaviour (and when we participate in a relationship without an agenda), we allow their true nature to come to the fore and we can see it for what it is.

As we begin to recognise horses as sentient, intelligent beings, we will grow in understanding, realising their inherent value is far deeper than merely being something to ride. 🐾

Contacts

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