

Mental Health Services Clients Benefit From Time Spent In Equine Therapy

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It's not every day that someone walks away from their psychiatrist's office with a prescription for Equine Assisted Learning, but for eight clients of the Pembroke Regional Hospital's Assertive Community Treatment Team (ACTT), it's just what the doctor ordered!

For a total of 14 weeks in 2022, as part of a special pilot program, these individuals came together from all corners of Renfrew County to receive hands-on experiential learning through horse/human interaction and non-verbal communication.

"The goals were simple," explained Kristy Melcher, Concurrent Disorders Specialist with the ACT Team and lead for the pilot project. "We wanted to build a program that would address issues around isolation not only brought on by the recent challenges of the pandemic, but also common among those who experience severe and persistent mental illness."

She added that, by facing new challenges and building new skills through Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT), it was hoped that participants would build friendships and strengthen their self esteem. To accomplish this, the ACT Team partnered with Greener Pastures Equine Programs which is hosted at Forbes Stables on B-Line Road in Pembroke and worked with Sydney Sheppard, PRH's own DBT Therapist, to tailor the program specifically to the unique needs of the ACT Team clients."

DBT therapy is a type of talk therapy (psychotherapy) that is specially adapted for people who experience emotions very intensely. Its aim is to introduce effective and practical skills which people can use when they are distressed. These skills are meant to replace other unhealthy and negative behaviours.

Those in the program participated in weekly 90 minutes sessions which began with a "check-in" process where staff and clients gathered around a fire pit to connect in a non-clinical setting. This often led to camaraderie, peer support interaction, and the best medicine of all – laughter, after which Ms. Sheppard shared the DBT skill of the day.

Participants were then partnered with one of the carefully selected horses and were invited to groom them in an effort to build a calm connection with the animal.

Each weekly session introduced a new and unique experience at the stable and including obstacle courses for the horses, therapeutic painting to illustrate a personal story using the horse as a canvas, the introduction of personal music anthems to ride to, and visits with the herd in their natural surroundings out in the pasture.

Participant feedback was positive with Jordan King thanking Greener Pastures for the experience and looking forward to having the opportunity to do it again, while Frank Lowerison said he enjoyed the trust he was able to build with his horses Keshee and Rocky!

Mental Health Services Director Mireille Delorme said that given the positive outcome of the pilot project, it is hoped that the project will receive funding to continue and expand.

“It would be a great thing if we can offer opportunities for the group to reconnect on a regular basis and explore other ways in which to incorporate this type of therapy into our clients’ recovery journeys,” Ms. Delorme said.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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ACT Team

The ACT Team is part of Mental Health Services of Renfrew County, a program administered by the Pembroke Regional Hospital. The ACT Team works with individuals 18 years of age or older who have a primary diagnosis of schizophrenia, or other psychotic disorder and severe bipolar disorder. Where mental illness interferes with many aspects of daily living, ACT will partner with the individual to develop a recovery plan that helps those affected regain more control of their symptoms so that they may focus on living their life.

Greener Pastures Equine Programs

Veteran owned and operated, and housed at Forbes Stables in Pembroke, Greener Pastures Equine Programs brings the unique qualities of the Military, as well as First Responder, and combines it with the equine environment, to rediscover confidence and community.

Greener Pastures Equine Program was created out of fortitude, healing, perseverance and connection. The business was created as a way of honoring and paying homage to the late Sean Greenfield, aka GREENER. Sean lived life big and full of vigor. He was an incredible Combat Engineer with 2CER and ultimately, gave his life serving his Country in Afghanistan. Known for his witty humor and contagious smile, Sean truly lived life. It is in his memory that we created a program that can give back a smile to others, through the atmosphere and interactions that happen on this gem of a horse farm