

To whom it may concern,

My name is Chris Sciberras, a Registered Provisional Psychologist, who has worked extensively with individuals and families that have suffered major trauma, mental health challenges, abuse, and substance abuse disorder. I was the Program Director for the Calgary Dream Centre (CDC), a residential treatment program, for 5 years, and currently the Director of Mental Health Services for Christ the Redeemer School Division. I am reaching out to the policy and decision makers, to inform you more about the benefits of Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) in improving mental health, building connection, reducing recidivism, supporting individuals in recovery, and increasing self-worth for our societies most vulnerable individuals.

The benefits reach far more than the individual who gets to partake in the Equine Assisted Learning (EAL). It also has an ability to impact the communities of those that experience such powerful programming. My experience with EAL began 4 years ago when the CDC connected with Carolyn Charles and Kari Fulmek at Equine Connection. We established a partnership, which resulted in the participants of the 49-day treatment program attended EAL programming for 3 weeks throughout the duration of treatment. By far, this was the highest rated part of program since its inception. It added a value to what we offered those escaping homelessness and addiction that I couldn't even fathom.

So, I send this message to those in a position of power to explore what EAL programming can do for your communities, in creating a positive ripple effect of change that is creative and out of the box. What I have learnt in my personal and professional life is, as the nature of addiction and mental health changes, so should our approach. We cannot continue to use the same systems to support a wide array of individuals when the landscape is continuously changing.

I could talk all day about the benefits EAL had on the population I served, however I will give you the highlights:

- It provided many participants to step outside their comfort zone and build the confidence to take courageous steps in conquering the fears they have in their life,
- Mindfulness is such an important part of living in the present, what I teach my participants is, no amount of guilt can change the past, no amount of fear can change the future. When you are working with a horse, it is concentrated mindfulness. It is difficult to worry about your financial or relationship issues, cravings etc... when you are in front of a 1,500lb animal,
- It taught communication and leadership skills - I have worked with many individuals that have a learned stubbornness and aggression. This does not work with the horses, so participants learn different ways in working towards things they want, in a healthier, less forceful manner,

- Working with horses promoted vulnerability – the Wednesday afternoon EAL class allowed our participants to reflect, cry, and find meaning in a non-judgmental and caring environment. The benefits of animal therapy cannot be underestimated,
- There was a spiritual component to working with the horses. The participants were able to connect with nature, their Higher Power, or something greater than themselves. There was this unspoken sacredness about the Equine space where bravado or differences were suspended, and a high level of respect was created.

For me, the major difference that could be seen was on the ride to and from EAL. On the way there, particularly if it was a participants first time, there was an immaturity that was hard to tame, however on the drive home, the conversations, the behaviours, the outlook was completely different. They were changed men. There was a believe, a hope that they may not have sensed before, but work with the horse was able to tap into a part of themselves that had built a fortress of protection. However, it was false protection. It had prevented them from taking risks and seeing their potential. At any given time, we had a capacity for 24 guys in the treatment program, out of 130 men that lived in our facility. For those not part of program or alumni of the program, there was a high demand to want to go or return to this phenomenal program, which spoke volumes to the impact it had in our community.

It is my wish to be a voice of support to any community around North America or beyond, in having EAL programs reach as many vulnerable populations as possible. My vision is that it can also be used as an early prevention program in supporting “at-risk” individuals, but I just know that the societal impact on communities that already have access to these programs has been overwhelmingly positive. Just imagine what could be achieved if there was collaborative by in. We must stop treating addiction and mental health as an individual problem and start making it a societal responsibility and I believe EAL programming assists in this step forward of progression.

If you have any further questions, please don't hesitate to reach out at:
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