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Ensuring Excellence and
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TRAUMA ISSUE

Creating an Emotionally
Safe Center

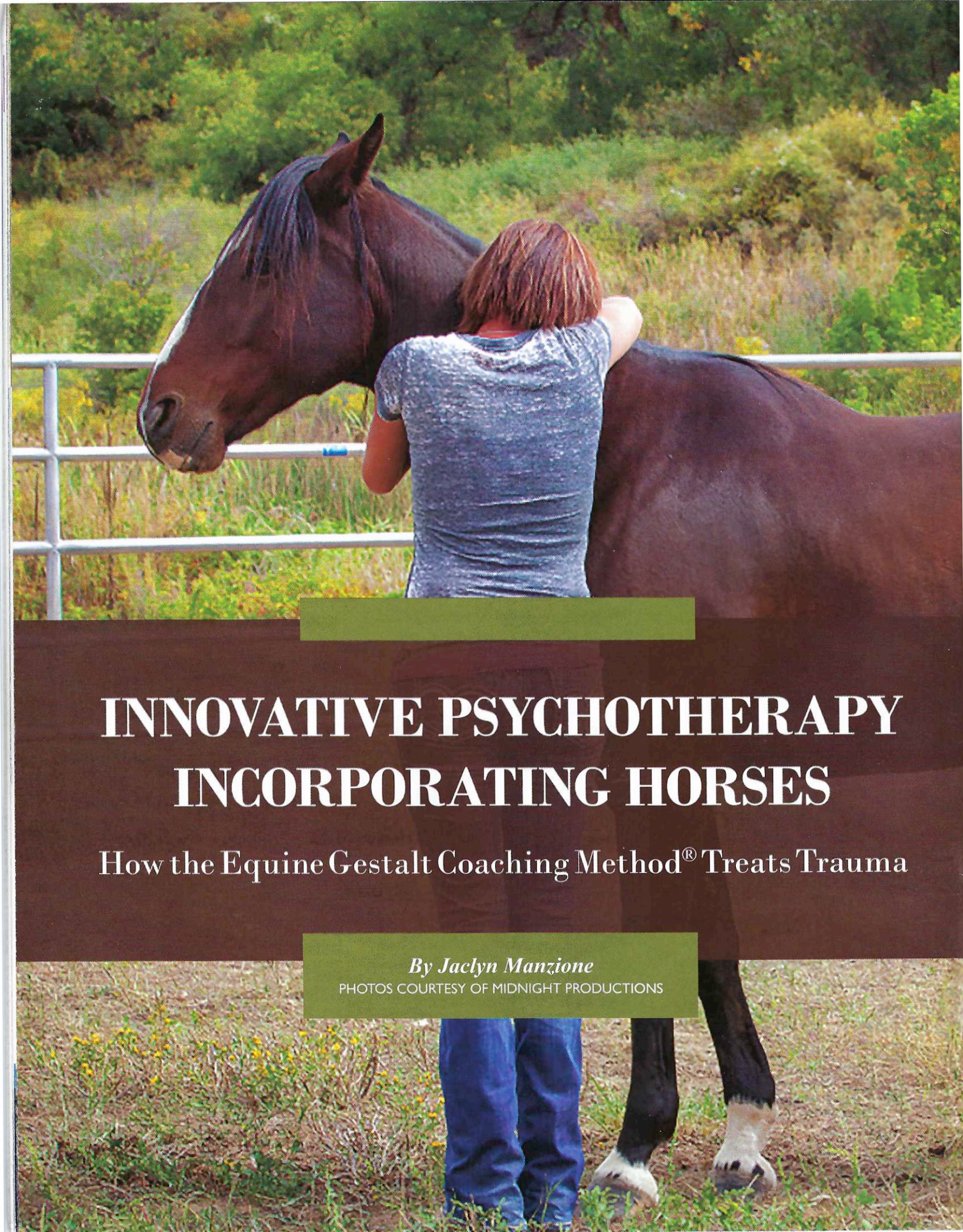
A Longing in the Soul—
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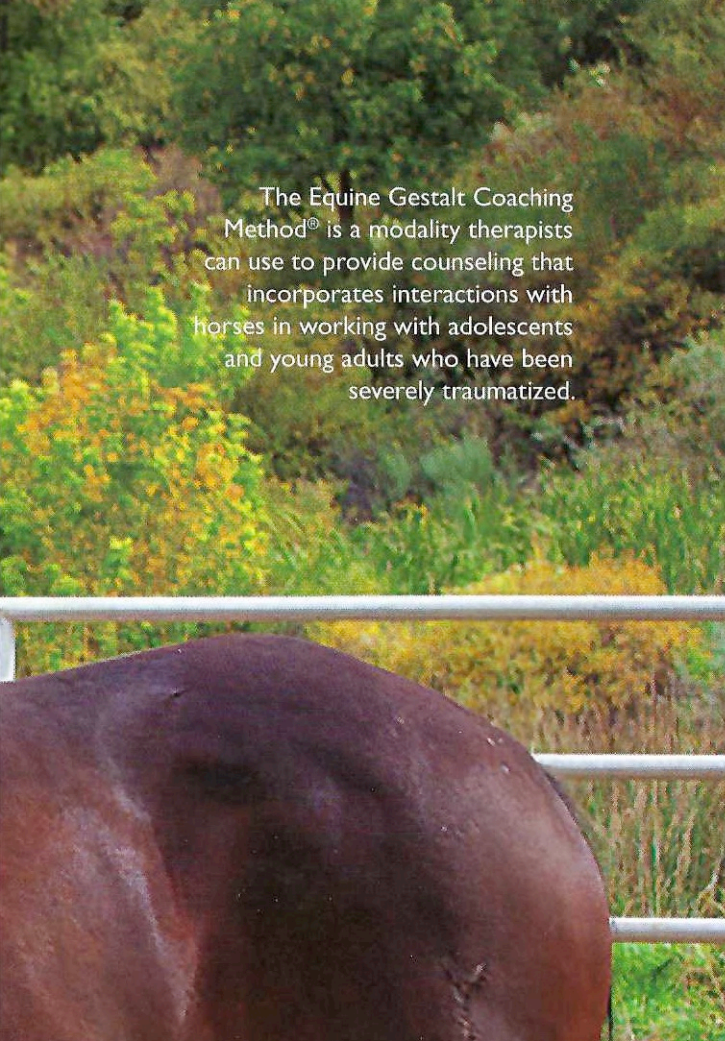


INNOVATIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY INCORPORATING HORSES

How the Equine Gestalt Coaching Method[®] Treats Trauma

By Jaclyn Manzione

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MIDNIGHT PRODUCTIONS




The Equine Gestalt Coaching Method® is a modality therapists can use to provide counseling that incorporates interactions with horses in working with adolescents and young adults who have been severely traumatized.

While EGCM® can be very effective for educators to coach people in equine-assisted learning (EAL) to further their personal development, those skills can also be used as a psychotherapy intervention by mental health therapists who incorporate interactions with horses. In this case, psychotherapists would work with, or be credentialed as PATH Intl. Equine Specialists in Mental Health and Learning (ESMHL) in partnering with horses to address treatment goals, which they would set with their client.

While volunteering at a local PATH Intl. Member Center, the author saw firsthand the power of horses to help heal people physically, mentally and emotionally. As a registered psychotherapist in Colorado, who wanted to make healing with horses her life's work, Jaclyn Manzione became certified as an EGCM® coach and a PATH Intl. ESMHL.

A therapist who is trained in this method engages a client in a process that leads them to the realization that each person experiences both healthy and less than healthy reactions and responses to the world around them. The therapist encourages a person to fully acknowledge these responses and reactions and how they operate within them and then asks where these systems of responses took root in their life. Once aware of these systems, choosing what to hold onto and what to abandon is up to the client. During

The Equine Gestalt Coaching Method (EGCM®) was developed by Melisa Pearce, a psychotherapist and pioneer in the field of human/horse healing. Unlike most traditional counseling practices, this method does not involve diagnosing. Instead, it applies a gestalt approach by focusing on what is happening in the moment and finding solutions in the present time. Horses are seen as sentient beings and equal partners in the EGCM®, which is ground-based work. As an integral part of the team in this process, horses bring their own unique capabilities to provide feedback in the present moment to the client.



an experiential groundwork process, the therapist partners with the horse to expand the client's awareness. This often leads to clearing up residue from a client's past encounters and interactions. As a result, the person gains a sense of peace and feels free to be who they really are.

Pearce states, "Being fully present to our own life and the manner in which we move through it is at the center of

gestalt. It is a way that brings forth the here and now. The focus is placed on being in contact. This is a state in which a person is fully aware of their own existence, their body and their emotions in the present moment. As we expand our awareness to include our present environment, we are then able to exchange that awareness with another being as both people are in a state of contact at the same time.”

CONNECTING WITH EMOTIONAL TRUTHS

When the author initiated her practice, she knew she wanted to offer psychotherapy incorporating horses to adolescents and young adults who had been severely traumatized. Many of these individuals shied away from conventional therapeutic settings, but the invitation to interact with a horse reduced their conditioned reluctance to the process. After Manzione gave a demonstration of the method to a nonprofit organization, which serves youth who are disenfranchised and homeless, their administration immediately saw the benefits, and a partnership ensued that remains in place to this day. The young people referred to Manzione, aged 12 to 24, all have a history of trauma, some having suffered mental illness and substance abuse.

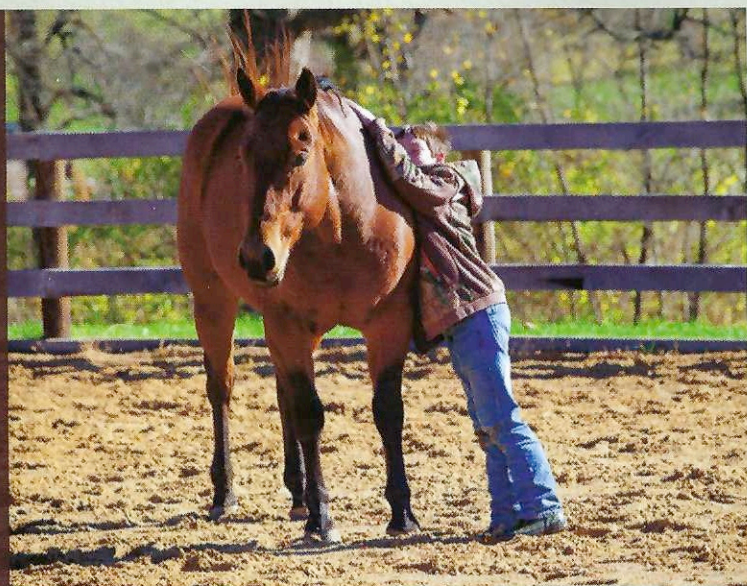
Most often, these young clients are afraid of their feelings and will consciously avoid connecting with their emotions. In

that facilitates the healing of the trauma. Pearce says that the clients “leave the session feeling truly seen and heard, not only by the facilitator but also by their own self.”

As a person begins to release the emotional and physical energy of past wounds, they can become more “responsive” instead of “reactive” to their world. When they respond from a reactionary place, their interaction with others and the world often leads to regret. In contrast, when the person responds from an aware and fully present place, they are free and clear.

“Horses are well suited for gestalt experiences that facilitate connectivity and demand genuineness from the person,” added Manzione. “The client’s engagement with the horse, and subsequent contact, is what facilitates the healing of the trauma. As a result, the client who has been emotionally fragmented by trauma becomes integrated and whole.”

Given the inherent nature of homelessness, a single session per person is a common occurrence. Manzione incorporates mind-body energy work, neurolinguistic programming, breathwork, guided imagery and body/somatic awareness into her psychotherapy sessions, so that her clients are able to embody the changes within them. “Many clients experience positive and permanent change and can reference and connect with this experience whenever they choose,” said Manzione. Participants



an equine gestalt session, the therapist partners with the horse to create a secure, supportive, nonjudgmental space where the client can feel safe to both connect with, and express, their feelings. The therapist interprets the feedback they receive from the horse in the moment to engage the person in the experience and show them how the horse responds when they access their truth. It is this experiential nature of gestalt

frequently state that the EGCM[®] session is an occurrence they will never forget!”

ACCESSING THEIR INNER WISDOM

Anecdotal information abounds as to the efficacy of the method. However, it is difficult to find the words to represent the emotionally charged process that occurs

during sessions. The events unfold dramatically in the moment, as each respective individual confronts their history of abuse, intense fear and the lack of self-esteem that comes with homelessness and other trauma.

When confronted by the horse during a session, one client was able to admit to engaging in self-harm by cutting on her forearms. The horse repeatedly nuzzled the sleeves on the client's forearms, directing attention to that area. When asked why the horse would have an interest in those body parts, the person admitted to cutting in those areas. Then, the horse gently lipped the person's index finger. When asked what that meant, she stated that the last memory she had of her biological mother was the mother breaking the fingers on that hand. "I created a gestalt experience where the client could safely express their repressed feelings toward their mother achieving both clarity and closure," said Manzione. "The horse stood in support of the client as they released the energetic burden of the traumatic parental abuse."

In this humanistic approach, the client gains awareness of their emotions and behaviors without having them interpreted by the psychotherapist. Instead, they listen to the foreground, in this case the horse lipping the client's finger, and permits the background of that content, in this case the last memory of her mother breaking that finger, to emerge.

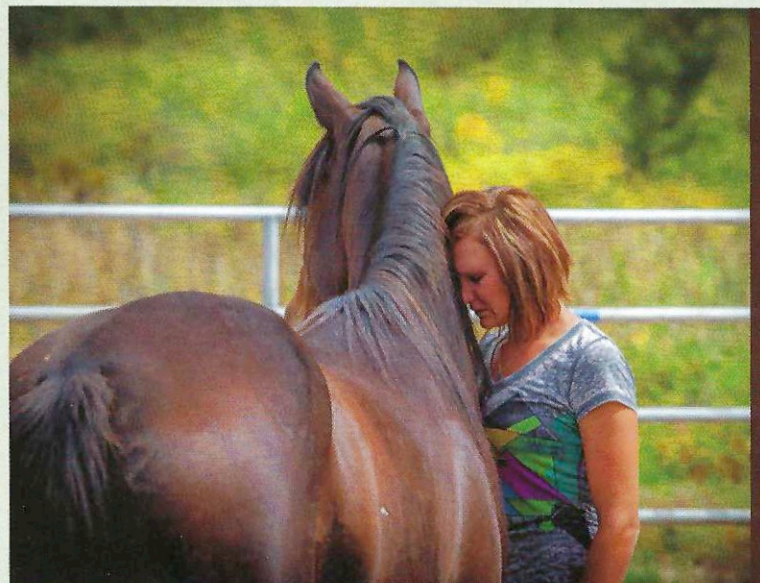


Another client with a history of physical abuse was struggling with boundaries. During a session, the horse came into that person's personal space uninvited. With the therapist's support, the client was able to set a boundary with the horse. The client later experienced inviting the horse into their personal space and being rewarded for their courage to set a boundary with a big equine "hug."

During a session, the therapist is watching two parallel processes concurrently: the client's and their own. As the therapist encounters the client's energy of resistance, overlapping or intersecting with their own energy, they remain attuned to the client's internal process and the external expression in the moment. Being conscious of the fluid nature of this energy dynamic enables the psychotherapist to be able to uncover impediments and interruptions in the flow and support the person's choices as the client explores their feelings and actions.

In this case, Manzione was able to energetically stay in touch with the client's hesitancy and fear of setting a boundary. By being in genuine contact with the client in the present moment, the author was able to support the person in developing a healthier way of handling boundaries and discovering their own truth.

In another equine gestalt session, the horse playfully nudged the client while bobbing its head, causing that person to giggle and laugh. When asked about their expression of lightheartedness, the client reported realizing that the trauma of homelessness had extinguished all joy from their life. "In response to this newly discovered awareness, I created a gestalt experience where the client was able to recognize their self-worth despite their homelessness, play with the horse and connect with feelings of joy and happiness," said Manzione.



In a psychotherapy session using EGCM® the focus is all about awareness rather than an intellectual understanding of one's self. The therapist supports a client in fully experiencing themselves, recognizing that each person has inherent wisdom although this wisdom might be outside of their present awareness.

EGCM® STUDIES

In 2017, Manzione initiated a year-long study, with the assistance of her spouse Dr. G. Thomas Manzione, to examine the relationship between the EGCM® and the changes that occurred in the feelings/emotions of the clients during a psychotherapy session. Specifically, they looked at the clients' self-reported changes in feeling better about themselves (self-esteem) and being more hopeful about their future (hopefulness). Data was collected at the conclusion of each session, using a Likert item questionnaire that represents each client's responses to scaled questions. The sampling method used for the study was a simple random sampling (N=72). The demographics of the population studied included adolescents and young adults between the ages of 12 to 24, who were homeless with a significant history of trauma, mental illness and substance abuse.

The results indicate that the EGCM® is effective for improving the emotional feelings of increased hope for the future and improved feelings of self-esteem and self-worth in children, adolescents and young adults represented in the homeless population studied. Also, the findings infer that partnering with horses, an integral part of the method, contributes to the well-being and emotional health of the clients. Subsequent studies replicated the effects of the method on other diverse populations and also validated the efficacy of the method as trauma-informed.

A 12-month research study (2019-2020) by Manzione examined the EGCM® to determine if this modality contained the requisite elements of a trauma-informed practice. This study demonstrated that a psychotherapist using the method anticipates, and responds to, potential triggers that may be perceived or experienced as re-traumatizing. The therapist is then able to identify new ways to engage the client in this challenging element of treatment that does not cause distress or mirror the traumatic experience. Also, this study verified the presence of the following five guiding principles of trauma-informed care within the method: safety, choice, collaboration, trustworthiness and empowerment.

"Each time I partner with my horses, Fyre, Apollo, Phoenix and Artemis, I am reminded of the selfless contributions they make to humans," said Manzione. "And, of the great courage the clients demonstrate in pursuit of healing. The synergy among the therapist, the equine specialist, the horse and the client create a sphere of supportive energy; a safe place for a person to confront their fears, release themselves from the bond of trauma and complete the healing process. Clients go from thinking to feeling about their experiences to rescripting them."

Jaclyn Manzione has a master of science degree in clinical physiology, is a certified Equine Gestalt Coaching Method® Practitioner, a PATH Intl. Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning (ESMHL) and a Registered Psychotherapist (NLC) in the State of Colorado. She is the founder and chief executive officer of the Xanthus Equine Gestalt Center, LLC, housed at SkyFyre Ranch, in Golden, CO. She provides counseling that incorporates interactions with horses at a nonprofit organization to youth in crisis who are displaced and homeless. She has conducted two studies on the EGC Method® Quantifying Outcomes of the Equine Gestalt Coaching Method® 2017, and Validating the Equine Gestalt Coaching Method® as Trauma Informed 2019. As the secretary of the board of directors for The Right Step Inc., a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center in Littleton, CO, she contributes to its fiscal and operational governance. She can be reached at jmanz762@hotmail.com.

PHOTO CAPTIONS

Pages 24-25, left to right:

- Many youth who have been traumatized and have difficulty trusting shy away from conventional therapeutic settings but could often find solace in the presence of a horse.
 - In one session, the horse playfully nudged the client, who started to laugh, which led them to connect with feelings of joy and happiness.
 - Horses facilitate connectivity and demand genuineness from a participant.
 - In counseling sessions with horses, equines can create a secure, supportive, nonjudgmental space where the client can feel safe to both connect with, and express, their feelings.
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