

How Horse Training Made Me a Better DBT Therapist

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I AM A DBT CLINICIAN AND A NASCENT equestrian. I rode as a child and this is important, because as a child I rode with a pathological amount of confidence.

Months ago I was on a young horse that I had ridden before. Horses, like many of our patients, can be very different across encounters. So, on a brisk morning, this familiar horse was out of control at the walk. Fear grew inside me and the worse I got, the worse she got. She refused to go forward, resisted my attempts for upward transitions, swished her tail, threw her head, pinned her ears, and engaged her hind end (these are all behaviors that communicate “no”). I knew something was wrong but I didn't have the skill or the confidence to fix these problems while on her back. I was reminded of my patients who often have this experience. I also was brought back to the years when I was a psychologist in training; I knew enough to be dangerous but not enough to be effective. A year before, I had attempted to fix just one of these problems on a different mare and she kicked out so many times, I threw my back out and couldn't ride for months. I made things worse, again like my patients. I did not want to experience that again. I made it through the ride without her throwing me off her back, then immediately called my riding coach and got on another horse the next day in order to calm my fears and move forward.

Something was missing. I knew I needed more knowledge, more skill, more something. I went to my online riding site, but nothing helped. So, of course, I went to YouTube. I found this Australian horse trainer, Warwick Schiller. This guy is a DBT specialist for horses! I couldn't believe what I was seeing . . . he retrains horses that are overly fearful (spook easily), have behavioral problems (can't be clipped, rear up), have been abused or neglected, or just plain old rude behavior (barging into people). Sound familiar?

For any of you who are true behaviorists, you know how animal training works. Dogs respond to positive reinforcement. Horses, being prey animals, respond to

release of pressure (negative reinforcement). I started showing my colleagues at work some of these videos and one in particular stood out: worming a horse that had refused oral wormer for years. In less than 15 minutes, Schiller successfully worms a horse through negative reinforcement. This horse apparently used to duck her head or flip over backward for years in order to avoid the oral wormer. We were so enchanted with the ease of seeing the best of behaviorism. We now use this video in our basic DBT skills groups to begin teaching our patients behaviorism.

It is so easy to see success in animals. This was the first moment in time where I paused. The second time occurred when I was talking with the mother of one of our teens and she was telling me about the subtle changes she saw in her son after only two groups. My response to her was, “Well now you see why that commitment period took so long before he entered group; he needed time to hook on to the therapist and the therapy.” I walked out of my waiting room and realized I had used Schiller's term, “hooking on,” to describe commitment. Hooking On in horse training vernacular is

... where a horse learns how to learn and [the process] has an amazing number of benefits including improving forward motion, bettering a horse's focus and instilling an inclination to stand still quietly which makes them easy to catch. The hooking on process will teach your horse things that will carry over to every other aspect of your relationship which ultimately makes being around your horse a much more enjoyable and safe experience. (Schiller, 2014)

This is DBT and CBT at its best—teaching our patients how to use the therapy and take what they've learned into their world. Renowned horse trainer Ray Hunt says, “. . . you ask [your horse]; you offer it to him in a good way. You fix it up and let him find it. You do not make anything happen,

no more than you can make a friendship happen” (Hunt, 1991, p. 1).

And then we enter the paradox: If a young untrained horse wants to be near you, move away. If it wants to run from you, move toward it. The dance of trainer and horse is similar to that of therapist and patient. One strives to create a sense of safety and control within the organism while building trust and rapport. The result is a horse who is in control of itself, allows the human to catch it in the paddock, and can stand within a safe and healthy boundary from its handler. Again, so familiar.

After the YouTube adventure, I, of course, join his video training site (Warwickschiller.com) and am amazed at his ability to teach these concepts. He videotapes his sessions and explains his theory. There are skills to learn once hooking on takes hold. There is lateral flexion and bending to a stop, disengaging the hind end, riding on a loose rein in walk, trot and canter, and riding with contact. All of these horse training skills are consistent with DBT skills: mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills. They all must be mastered for a rider and horse to communicate and for the horse to function in the equestrian world. And they must be done in a language a horse understands. The language of the herd. Same for DBT, we establish a language our patients need in order to get what they want in healthy ways. Ray Hunt discusses the importance of observation, honesty, and effectiveness. Observation about what the horse can teach you about where it is psychologically, honesty about your shortcomings, and effectiveness in carrying out training with each horse.

Schiller addresses the relationship with horse and rider. In training a horse, he is often heard saying, “It's not my problem. . . I leave emotion out of it . . . they have to figure it out.” I often find myself saying these things in my head when confronted with difficult patient experiences. These words help me create a healthy space to allow for mistakes so we can correct them. Schiller is excited when a horse makes a mistake. So many equestrians think they can control their 1,200-pound steed and prevent mistakes. I learned that, for a horse, like with humans, mistakes are an important part of learning and only in that space can learning and change occur. So, when a patient arrives to my office, head held low and says, “You're going to be mad . . .,” my response is “Great! Now we have an opportunity to learn.”

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"...in so far as attention is a state favoring discrimination of stimuli, it is involved in that part of an animal's behavior which is derived from individual experience, since pure instinct discriminates but roughly ..."

—Margaret F. Washburn (1936)
The Animal Mind
 New York, Macmillan

As I watch more video, I wonder, Does this guy have some training in human therapy? Is his wife a clinician? He often refers to horse training theory books but sometimes he refers to concepts such as love language and mindfulness. Okay, I'm hooked! One of the reasons I ride horses is to engage in a truly mindful activity. Riding and training as I am now seeing takes all of one's cognitive and physical engagement. It is a true "participate" exercise. Like learning how to ride a bike or play an instrument, one has to learn a new language. How to engage one's body on horseback or on the ground in order to have effective communication. Horses have incredible memories and attend to the subtlest behaviors. We may be reinforcing the wrong behaviors without even knowing it and they will remember. Often, as a DBT therapist, I have had to disengage and review to see my part in an unhealthy behavior. And then comes the metaphor for wise mind . . .

My goal with a horse is for us to someday be in perfect harmony. It's like a candle light at the end of a long tunnel. It gets brighter and clearer all the time. Even though I realize I will never hold it in my hand, working for this goal is very real and rewarding. Each step along the way is its own reward (Hunt, 1991).

Schiller is also known for his saying, "Make the wrong thing hard and the right thing easy" (Schiller, 2014). "As a rider, you must slowly and methodically show your horse what is appropriate. You also have to discourage what's inappropriate, not by making the inappropriate impossible, but by making it difficult so that the horse himself chooses appropriate behavior. You can't choose it for him; you can only make it difficult for him to make the wrong choices. If, however, you make it impossible for him to make the wrong choices, you're making war" (Brannaman, 2001, p. 201). For example, if a horse gets locked up or is attracted to the gate (which means, home, food, and friends), the trainer will annoy his steed with tapping or kicks in the area close to the gate. When they move in the other direction, he leaves the horse alone. This is similar to the process of chain analysis. My patients hate them. They make the mistake, we chain it (annoying) and when they stop engaging in the wrong behavior, I leave them alone.

Balancing exercises are akin to dialectics and distress tolerance. A trainer will sensitize a horse (wave a flag, swing a lead rope to get the animal moving). Then he will desensitize (throw the rope over the horse's back or rub on the neck) in order to

repair any damage from sensitizing exercises (Acceptance and Change). These exercises help a horse to act in the world without being overly sensitive or overly numb. Schiller calls this "mental collection" (Schiller, 2015).

Recently, in a horse-assisted therapy training, the equine specialist said to an arena of 50 mental health professionals and horse trainers mixed in with three loose horses, "the horses know how to take care of themselves in a herd, it is your job to figure out how to keep yourselves safe" (Lytle, M., personal communication, September 16, 2015). Trust, respect, and faith. I trust my training, respect my patient's level of commitment and have faith, even during the most difficult parts of the therapy, that my patients will create a life worth living.

"In life, we don't know why things happen. I believe God is not responsible for the bad things that happen to you. Sometimes I think He's responsible for the good things, but sometimes it's something you shape up for yourself" (Brannaman, 2001, p. 260).

Happy trails.

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