

VAULTING WORLD ²

**Gold
at the
WEG!!!**



The FACE Team earned the gold medal at the World Equestrian Games.

Photo: Carole Dwinelle

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Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy Using the Surcingle

Judy Weston-Thompson, M.A., MFT, CEFIP-MH

Introduction

In my work as a Certified Equine Facilitator Interactive Professional-Mental Health (CEFIP-MH) and a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist for more than 20 years, there is always room for expansion. Fairly recently I began using one of my horse facilitators, Star, in offering classes in the therapeutic use of the surcingle. My program is similar to traditional therapeutic vaulting because the horse is controlled on a longe line but it differs in that the goal is not to execute gymnastic exercises on a moving horse.

Although I also offer individual lessons, therapeutic trail riding and groups for children and adults with a wide range of psychotherapeutic issues, use of the surcingle is the newest component of my EFP program. Using the surcingle on Star, I am primarily working therapeutically. The idea for my therapeutic surcingle lessons first came to mind as I watched Carolyn Conner (head coach of Morning Star Vaulters in Novato, California) running her students through their vaulting exercises. Having had the surcingle experience myself, it occurred to me that I could develop a uniquely beneficial program focusing on the stimulation of muscles, nerves and emotions generated by Star's presence and intuition as well as his fluid movement on the longe line.

While watching Carolyn's students, I witnessed over and over how the surcingle helps balance (physical and emotional) due to the riders' lack of focus on the reins and steering. I could see quite clearly the possibilities for using the surcingle to work on anxiety, self-esteem issues, control issues, fluidity and somatic experiencing.

For this work it was important to give the rider the experience of bareback riding, but with the surcingle handles and padding to further increase balance and a sense of security. The desired result was a deeper somatic experience of trusting and letting go.

Surcingle Work with Star

The opportunity for the surcingle work with Star presented itself when two of my EFP clients expressed a desire to begin riding outside of a group structure, but with the psychotherapeutic focus still intact. For Star, a well-trained vaulting horse, this work was a natural progression. Thus was born a new therapeutic experience that would fulfill many of our common goals.

In the surcingle exercise I stand in the center of the ring holding Star on a longe line while the rider sits on Star with the surcingle. As I move Star through the three gaits – walk, trot and canter – in a circle approximately 20 meters in diameter, the client experiences the physical positioning of riding. My therapeutic observation was that Sally, the least experienced rider of the two women, began surrendering her body into the motion in all three gaits. She actually closed her eyes and let go into her experience.

Meanwhile, Jean continued to want to “think” her position. Knowing that her therapeutic issue was about letting go of control and allowing herself to be carried in life, I asked her to also close her eyes and enter into her body. I felt increasingly empowered and grateful to Star for his role in the work. He and I were truly a team working together to carry these women.

Surcingle Work Progresses

From this first experience with Star and my clients, I began expanding on the possibilities of the surcingle. I commenced working with more rigid and anxious clients. One adult client who has acute anxiety and many symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) experienced immediate physical changes in breathing

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and relaxation by connecting deeply to Star's movement. During our work, I witnessed her letting go into Star, brought about by the safety of the longeing and by Star's trusting nature which she allowed to carry her.

In my work with the surcingle I have observed how reins may greatly complicate therapeutic riding. In the surcingle lessons, "letting go of the reins" is meant quite literally in reference to the work that happens when we let go of control. Steering with reins creates outward focus, while use of the surcingle encourages calming inward focus, thus alleviating anxiety and regulating breathing. Clients with Generalized Anxiety Disorder exhibit a demonstrable decrease in bodily tension and fear of riding as they relax into the soothing motion of Star's body without worrying about control. This release of tension also allows for a deeper bodily connection to one's self and to the horse.

Conclusion

There has been recent interest in the NARHA/EFMHA professional community about my work with the surcingle. It is important for me to emphasize that surcingle work has been used by NARHA professionals for years in developing coordination, balance and strength while working with an equine partner. Vaulting is an acknowledged form of physical therapy and used extensively with special needs riders. While the concept of vaulting has been instrumental in helping me develop my EFP program, my surcingle work does not include the compulsory and freestyle vaulting exercises. I work psychotherapeutically, with an emphasis on one's riding experience and connection to the horse to focus on deeper emotional work and recovery from anxiety, trauma and a wide range of psychological/emotional issues.



Photo: courtesy Judy Weston-Thompson

Judy Weston-Thompson is a Certified Equine Interactive Professional-Mental Health (CEIP-MH) and Marriage and Family Therapist (CA license #MFC 23268), licensed for 23 years. Her equine clinical background includes: Training in Intuitive Horsemanship, Horse-Power Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy Training, Certified Horsemanship Level one and NARHA Registered instructor. Judy's horse experience consists of extensive training in Western, English and dressage schooling as well as a summer spent as a trail guide and wrangler at Eaton's Ranch, Wyoming.

Judy and Caesar and Star work with children and adult individuals and groups in Judy's equine facilitated private practice in San Rafael, California. She specializes in ADD/ADHD, anxiety disorders, depression, addiction and learning disorders. Judy is a staunch believer in the inherent wisdom and unfailing intuition and honesty of the horse. She can be contacted through her website <http://www.equineinsight.net>.

