

Healing Through Horsepower

Equine Program Reflects
and Transforms Human Emotions

BY BRETT WILBUR
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARC HOWARD





In a paddock shaded by Sycamore trees near the Carmel River, four horses peacefully greet a pair of human visitors. Graziella, an Andalusian and the herd leader, allows her neck to be petted, then chews and licks her lips, signaling she is processing information and connecting with the humans around her. She gently nudges the visitor with her face and inspects their hand.

Standing slightly further back are Valentina, a French Warmblood and the only stallion, Vincenzo, a Lipizzan.

Bella, a Quarter Horse who had been mistreated by previous own-

ers, decides to inspect the visitors as well. She greets with a thunk of her head to the visitor's chest, and allows gentle petting. Her ears are slightly back, more wary, but soon she is being pushed off by Graziella and taken to a far corner of the paddock.

In the midst of it all, with a loop of rope over his shoulder, stands Dr. Robert Magnelli, wearing jeans, boots and a friendly smile.

"Graziella is the alpha, and she was telling Bella, 'This is my human, and you need to back off,'" he explains. "She had already connected with you."

Magnelli, a clinical psychotherapist formerly at Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula, and in practice for 40 years, has spent the last 13 of them dividing time between his office in Carmel and out in the sunshine with the horses through his Horsepower Program.

"Being with the horses is like breathing in oxygen," he says.

Magnelli's wife Nancy, a psychiatric nurse, and daughter, Vanessa Howard, also work with the therapy program, and the Magnellis wrote a manual on the program that has been published in 49 countries.

Certified through EAGALA, or Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, Magnelli assists everyone from parents to couples to children and teens with issues ranging from post-traumatic stress disorder



Nancy Magnelli (above right), a psychiatric nurse, helps run the Horsepower program with husband Dr. Rob Magnelli and daughter Vanessa Howard.

perfect fit. Horses are particularly sensitive to emotions: the largest part of their brain is the limbic system, the emotional center of the body.

To survive from predators, horses developed a keen awareness of danger and Magnelli explains, emotional congruence. For example, a person plastering a smile on their face but with malicious intent will send a horse into high alert. When it's time for someone to come face to face with their

to anxiety.

"We cover the whole spectrum of psychotherapy," he says. "Many times we rapidly address the emotional struggles. We have statistical data that shows significant change as a function of five two-hour sessions. Stress... distress and somatic concerns all improving in 10 hours."

Exploring therapeutic issues alongside the horses is, Magnelli says, a per-



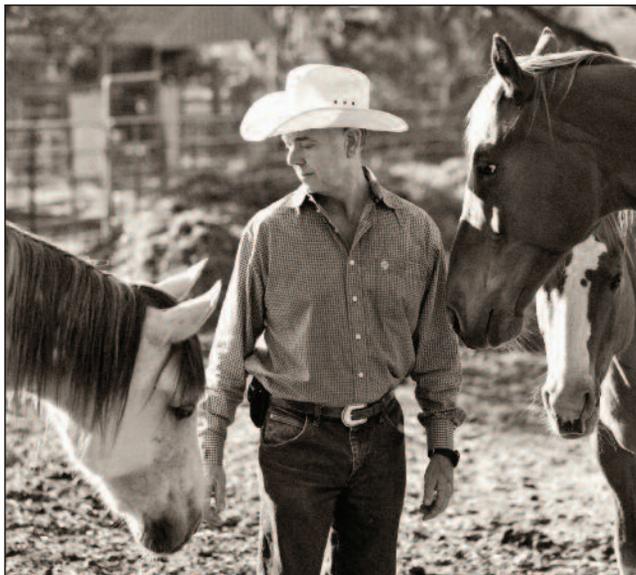
Dr. Rob Magnelli, a clinical psychotherapist in practice for 40 years and a lifelong horse enthusiast, runs Horsepower, a psychotherapy program that assists all ages with identifying and releasing negative emotions. Participants interact with but do not ride the horses.

issues, putting on an emotional mask will be quickly unveiled by the horses, who react by balking (no longer following a human who is leading them) or other behaviors.

"They are social animals who have survived for millions of years," Magnelli explains. "They communicate constantly. They need to have a sense of order and direction to survive. They are extremely alert and keen to nonverbal communication, and 85 percent of human communication is nonverbal. They feel and resonate with emotion."

Magnelli may start with a simple process, such as having a client lead a horse around some trees while discussing an issue in their life. Horses quickly sense when a human is becoming anxious, angry, upset or covering something up, and may refuse to follow the human any longer or retreat.

"The process is connecting with the horse, beginning the relationship, starting to feel what they feel in a safe environment, and having it reflected back to you like a giant IMAX movie screen mirror," Magnelli says.



Dr. Magnelli, formerly of CHOMP, is certified through EAGALA, Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association.

"Horses feel intent."

Horses also do not tolerate some-one dwelling on the past or future, and demand presence. And in the paddock, there's not much opportunity to check out and fool around on your cell phone.

"You are with 1500 pounds of an animal that has the fastest reaction time of any domesticated animal," Magnelli says.

Not a riding based program, the EAGALA-based program requires

that a mental health expert be present. Magnelli has a proposal to bring the training program to all the Boys and Girls Clubs in the United States, and is looking for a corporate sponsor.

"We are able to use what happens with the horses in a therapeutic way, reach the heart and make changes."

For more information on the Horsepower Program, including attending an Experiencing Horses Workshop, or to donate, please call 831/625-9005 or visit www.horsepowerprogram.com.



The elegance, sensitivity and beauty of horses is healing to be around, Magnelli explains. By being in their presence while working through issues, clients can release patterns of trauma and addiction, with the guidance of a mental health professional.