

**FRDI INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS**

**AUGUST 2009 – MÜNSTER, GERMANY**

**Horses and Mindfulness:  
How meditation and relationship with horses  
can teach us about healing and serenity**

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Introduction:

Mindfulness takes its roots in the meditation practices in Buddhism tradition. It has been defined as a specific state of mind, resulting of "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Mindfulness practice, introduced 25 years ago by Kabat-Zinn in the behavioral medicine, is nowadays widely spread among hundreds of mental health programs. It is also the subject of a great amount of scientific research.

Mindfulness practice involves to intentionally maintain attention on specific present stimuli (physical sensations, cognitions, or emotions). At the same time, people experience their mind that tends to wander. Every time they realize it, they just need to notice what took them away and then, bring their attention back to the stimuli. Such an attitude helps to create a distance with thoughts and emotions, and to consider them just for what they are: thoughts and emotions, and not reality.

In our practice as equine assisted therapists, we invite people in the situations with horses to focus on the experience that unfolds moment after moment, independently of the obtained results. We are confident that such an opened and non-striving perspective gives rise to a more fruitful and respectful experience. We classify these situations with horses into four categories: the horse as a model, as a stimulus, as an interlocutor, and as a mirror.

In such experiences, the relation with horses may sustain various benefits similar to those of mindfulness practice: serenity and calmness, being present, nonjudgmental, greater awareness of internal experience, and better coping with negative emotions.

According to the similarity between the processes involved in the mindfulness training on the one hand, and in the relation with horses the way we practice it on the other hand, it became obvious to us to combine these two approaches into one program. Our program is particularly relevant as it offers people more interested by the relation with horses at first, access to new skills to increase their well-being.

We hypothesized that participants would report:

- an increased well-being after the program;
- increased effects compared to the mindfulness traditional program;
- decreased drop-out and absence to classes.

Method:

After an information session, twelve participants joined the program. We extended the initial Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy protocol (MBCT; Teasdale, Segal & Williams, 1995) from 8 to 10 sessions. As in the MBCT initial program, in each class, a time was devoted to a 45-minute meditation, to sharing experiences with the group, and to the introduction of a specific theme with new exercises. We added a time period with horses. The class ended with the assignment of exercises to practice at home until next class.

Participation in a mindfulness program requires participants a strong commitment to practice for 45 minutes the formal techniques on a daily basis for a period of at least ten weeks.

We built the "horse program" to be progressive and linked to the meditation classes. The horse program was also the opportunity to focus on the "seven attitudinal factors" that Kabat-Zinn (1990) identified as being the major pillars of mindfulness practice: non-judging, patience, beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, letting go.

### Results and Conclusion:

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire before and after the 10 sessions. It aimed at assessing effects of our program, and to compare our data with results obtained from a traditional MBCT protocol.

According to previous studies (cf. Baer, 2003 for a meta-analysis), we predict that participants would report greater mindfulness skills (i.e., observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judgment, and non-reaction). We also predict lowered depression and anxiety scores, increased self-esteem, and a lowered general psychopathologic symptomatology. In addition, we hypothesize that the experience with horses would increase these benefits.

After presenting our results, we will discuss the relevance of adding a specific program with horses to the traditional MBCT program, as well as applying a mindfulness training program to people working with horses.

**Authors credentials:**

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**Personal data**

- Gwénola Herbette:

Ph.D. in Psychology, cognitive-behavioral therapist; private consultation (emotional disorders, chronic pain, mindfulness groups); secretary of the french-speaking "Association pour le Développement de la Mindfulness"; spends an unreasonable amount of time being with, working with and observing horses.

- Patrick Guilmot:

Equine assisted therapist, director of "La Ferme Equestre de Louvain-la-Neuve", Belgium, (equine assisted therapy center). His work is nourished by several approaches of the movement and of the relationship (Tai-Chi, body-and-mind structures, dance therapy, non-violent communication).

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**Form of presentation**

Workshop

**Length of presentation**

60 minutes

**Title of presentation**

Horses and Mindfulness:

How meditation and relationship with horses can teach us about healing and serenity

**Topic category**

Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy

**Target audience**

Therapists, researchers, horses trainers, interested people

**Desired technical aids**

Standard (laptop with beamer and laser pointer)

**Desired date**

August, 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup>