

Equine Personal Wellness for Military Veterans and Their Families

Don Middleton M.A. (Prairie Therapy Services) & Candice Kontzie (Roycan's Country Haven)

A True Story from the Barn

Peter will acknowledge, to those he trusts, that his thoughts and emotions have been forever shaped in ways civilians, including his close family members and friends, can never truly understand. The 'invisible wounds of war' have led Peter to have intense feelings of isolation and alienation; anger outbursts; zero tolerance for social game playing; and a general mistrust of the civilian world in which he now must function. Military socialization, beginning with boot camp, transformed Peter into the ultimate team player where all of the members of his unit survived because they functioned as one. However, on his return to civilian life, he found the very skills that had kept him alive were now no longer valued and, in fact, his direct 'call it as I see it' and 'a no bullshit approach' led him into major work and interpersonal conflicts.

Peter is currently on his journey to personal wellness. One evening last fall, Peter was in a session in the heated indoor arena at Roycan's Country Haven, a private equestrian centre located minutes north of Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. Present with us was Harry, one of our program horses. While large in stature at 16.2 hands high, dark chestnut in colour, and weighing about 1200 pounds, Harry is the epitome of gentleness. For the next ninety minutes, Peter groomed, spent time with and learned to communicate nonverbally with Harry while walking and trotting with him around the arena. Afterwards, when asked to comment on the session, Peter expressed: "I was able to enter and maintain a state of calmness. I felt no agenda or judgment from Harry. I felt that if I projected any sense of negativity I would have done a disservice to him because he didn't deserve it. Harry lowered his defences to let me in and in return I wanted to treat him well. As I drove home that night, I came to understand at a deeper level the importance of the horses as part of my healing."

[* Peter is thanked for allowing us to share his story and words for the benefit of others.]

Equine Personal Wellness for Military Personnel is NOT A THERAPY PROGRAM. Rather, it is a targeted educational program to assist military men and women to re-learn the social and emotional skills they need to successfully process and manage life in a civilian environment. The horses are the teachers. Working with our specially

selected horses allows clients to experience profoundly important 'life metaphors' that would otherwise be non-accessible. As another of our military clients so eloquently put it, "While people may attempt to get you to lower your guard by pretending to lower theirs, with the horses, emotional manipulation did not and could not exist."

The co-facilitators of the EPW program are Don Middleton, M.A. (Psychology) who has over thirty years of clinical experience, and Candice Kontzie, a Human Resource Consultant; a life-long equine breeder, rider and trainer; and BodyTalk practitioner. Over the past four years, their work has reaffirmed the power of horses to heal those who have experienced trauma; endured prolonged stress; and survived the other horrific situations that serving our country can bring. Through the Equine Personal Wellness program, Don and Candice help their military clients to overcome feelings of alienation and anger before they lead to depression, substance abuse, divorce, excessive risk taking, violence and even suicide.

The 'lessons learned' working with military personnel have also led Don and Candice to broaden their Equine Personal Wellness for Military Personnel to include family members whenever possible. They have found that that the spouses and children of military personnel pay a terrible price when there is instability within the family. Their goal is to strengthen the family unit and thus reduce the possibility that the 'invisible wounds of war' will make the family a collateral victim.

In delivering the EPW programs, Don and Candice are supported by a highly trained team. Darcy Reynolds, BMR PT, FCAMT (Orthopaedic Manual Therapist, Acupuncture Certified); MCISc (Bachelor of Medical Rehabilitation Physiotherapy); and Masters of Clinical Science in Physiotherapy brings his extensive expertise to the program. He is available to ensure each client's program is tailored to their physical abilities. A cadre of 'horse handlers' who have undergone extensive training with us are also present to ensure each client receives the support they require.

The horses, specially selected and trained for use in the program include: Leo (a Morgan); Jazz (a Morgan); Bora (a Thoroughbred); Annie (a Quarter Horse); Prince (a Morgan) and Gryffin (a Paint).

The welcoming physical environment of Roycan's Country Haven ensures a safe, peaceful and positive experience for all clients who participate. The primary facility includes a heated indoor arena and a thirteen stall full service stabling area for the horses used in the programs. A rustic cookhouse with cooking facilities is available with seating for up to 24 persons. When the weather warms, a large outdoor corral is also close at hand.

Don and Candice welcome both current and retired military personnel to join them on an exhilarating and life changing experience in our Equine Personnel Wellness for Military Personnel program.

For further information, please contact us.

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