



Equine Therapy for Teen Anxiety: The EAGALA Model



Many parents struggle to help their teenagers manage feelings of anxiety. Symptoms like constant worry, muscle tension, fatigue, irritability, and difficulty sleeping and concentrating can take a major toll on a teen's mental health and day-to-day functioning. When anxiety becomes overwhelming or unmanageable, professional treatment is often needed. One unique therapeutic approach that has shown great promise in treating anxiety in teens is equine therapy.

Equine-assisted therapy uses interactions with horses to help promote emotional growth and learning. Leading the way in equine therapy approaches is the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), which focuses specifically on ground-based interactions with horses. This means no horseback riding is involved. Instead, licensed mental health

professionals team up with equine (horse) specialists to create thoughtful ground-based activities with horses that address each client's treatment goals.

The EAGALA model has proven highly effective in helping teens cope with anxiety for several reasons. First, horses are large and powerful, which demands a teen's attention and focus in their presence. Hypervigilance and heightened reactivity, common symptoms of anxiety, are therefore channeled positively as skills needed to participate in therapy. Horses also act as mirrors, reflecting a teen's internal emotional states through their own behaviors and responses. This feedback helps teens build greater self-awareness of anxiety and practice managing it.

Additionally, EAGALA therapy utilizes the natural herd behaviors of horses to provide teens with opportunities to observe horse dynamics, understand herd hierarchies, or even attempt to influence herd movement. These hands-on interactions in a pasture setting take teens out of their habitual ways of thinking and immerse them in the horses' world, acting as a kind of "exposure therapy." Teens confront many of the issues that trigger their anxiety while learning how to regulate their emotional reactions.

Ground-Based Activities Used in EAGALA Equine Therapy

EAGALA therapy does not involve riding horses. Instead, it engages teens in ground-based activities with horses that require them to apply specific skills. Some of the ground-based interactions utilized include:

- **Herd observations:** Teens observe horses interacting in a herd and take note of each horse's role. They then discuss how herd dynamics relate to human relationship systems like cliques at school.
- **Relationship-building activities:** Teens engage in incremental trust-building interactions with one horse, using assertive yet friendly communication to gain the horse's cooperation.
- **Arena "design challenges":** Teens alter the shape, flow, or location of objects inside an arena to influence herd movement or isolate one horse from the herd. This tests and builds confidence.
- **Confidence courses:** Teens guide a horse through an obstacle course, practicing clear communication to earn the animal's trust and cooperation.
- **Reflective discussion and journaling:** After interacting with the horses, teens reflect on the feelings and behaviors the challenges brought up, and how they can apply the lessons learned to managing anxiety.

The unique design challenges presented by these ground-based activities combined with the powerful nature of horses deliver impactful therapy experiences tailored to address teen anxiety issues.

Why EAGALA Therapy Reduces Anxiety in Teens

So why are these ground-based, team-focused equine activities so well-suited to help teens struggling with anxiety? There are several reasons this kind of therapy works so well:

1. It builds confidence and assertiveness. Anxiety often stems from a lack of confidence and uncertainty about one's abilities. Through EAGALA activities like confidence courses and arena design challenges, teens must be assertive, decisive leaders in order to influence a 1,000-pound horse. The experiential successes build self-assurance.
2. It promotes emotional regulation skills. Horses respond immediately to emotions through changes in behavior. Teens quickly learn that uncontrolled emotional outbursts yield poor results. Regulating feelings and staying grounded becomes a necessity to accomplish tasks.
3. It helps teens face fears. Anxiety leads to avoidance of feared situations. By design, most EAGALA exercises take teens out of their comfort zones in manageable, incremental steps. Facing fears in this way retrains the brain to associate feared stimuli with positive outcomes.
4. It provides control and empowerment. Teens often feel they have little control over their lives and emotions. EAGALA activities let teens control environments and direct another being's behavior, helping establish internal locus of control, higher self-efficacy, and empowerment.
5. It builds trust through relationships. Horses are honest yet forgiving. They form no judgments or opinions, offering unconditional positive regard that allows teens to develop trust—an area where anxiety holds them back.

While medications or individual counseling help some anxious teens, others struggle to make progress with these options alone. The experiential nature and novelty of equine therapy complements other therapies nicely in a multidimensional approach. The success teens find through EAGALA work can transfer over into better management of anxiety in school, with peers, and within the family context.

What to Look for in an EAGALA Equine Therapy Program

If you are considering EAGALA therapy for your teen's anxiety struggles, be sure to look for these markers of a reputable center:

- Licensed mental health professionals on staff collaborating with horse experts in delivery of services
- Association membership in EAGALA, which requires staff certification and oversight of standards
- A focus on ground-based interactions only, for safety
- Appropriate horse selection and herd management protocols
- Customized treatment plans with ongoing evaluation of progress

The life lessons teens learn through teaming up with horses under the EAGALA model delivers breakthroughs in functioning and outlook that directly combat anxiety. By building confidence and emotional skills in this experiential way, equine therapy offers families hope and teens a path forward, one powerful hoofbeat at a time.