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It looks like a prelude to an ordinary riding lesson. A little girl strokes a beautiful white mare in a round pen, while her anxious parents look on. But this is something quite different. No one is here to learn about horses. They're here to learn about themselves and especially about the problems in their relationships with one another. And it's the horse that's going to teach them. They've come to Scotland for what's called Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP), a new development that promises to accelerate the diagnosis and treatment of a range of relationship problems and psychological disorders. First used in the United States where it had immediate success in the rehabilitation of criminals, EAP has been brought to Britain by the husband and wife team of Annie and David Tidmarsh. Their private clinic, Winds of Change, which is based on a beautiful Black Isle (actually a peninsula), just north of Inverness, is now the UK headquarters for the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA). When I ask Annie what kind of problems horses can help with, she seems bemused. "Well, it works for almost any problem," she says after a moment, as if she herself can't quite believe how it can be possible. Addiction, depression, relationships, eating disorders... nobody walks away without knowing they've got to change things about themselves."

The first task for the family with the white mare in the round pen is to make the horse go over a jump. And there are two special rules: once the action begins, they aren't allowed to speak to one another: and nobody is allowed to touch the horse in any way. It's a standard scenario in the EAP repertoire. Whether or not the horse goes over the jump doesn't matter. What's important is the way the family tackles the situation. While Annie keeps an eye on the horse, David is observing how the family members interact as they go about their task. In this case there is only the briefest of discussions before the man sets off, clearly signalling: "I'm in charge." His wife does her best to anticipate his intentions and assist him, receiving scathing looks each time something goes wrong. Their daughter isn't consulted at all. As for the mare, she easily evades the family's efforts and keeps well away from the jump. The family goes into a little huddle with David. "What do you think the horse was saying?" he asks. There's an Arab proverb: the horse is your mirror. It's a key part of EAP. In other words, if you have a lot of aggression bottled up inside you, then the horse will be aggressive. If you don't like yourself, the horse won't like you. No therapist could dare to be as outspoken as a horse.

It seems to be a kind of magic, but in fact it's all down to body language. Horses are experts at it. When somebody's exterior doesn't match what is inside them, while people are pretending one thing and acting another, horses spot it straight away. Since 2003, Annie and David have been running workshops all over the country and there are more and more EAP



facilities. Stepps in Gloucestershire was the first rehabilitation unit in Britain to introduce EAP. Mike Delaney head of treatment at Stepps, describes the results as astounding. "We've found EAP to be very effective in challenging clients perceptions," he says. It promotes change from dysfunctional patterns to successful ones" A former Stepps client says of the horses: "The way they reacted gave me a great insight into how I was behaving with them. Horse's can't tell you how they feel, but they do show you." Stepps, and more recently, The Priory rehabilitation group are using EAP as part of a whole programme, which is lengthy and expensive, costing about £2,000 a week. But the Promis recovery centre at Nonnington, Kent, has made EAP available on its own to what spokesman Robin Lefever calls "the recovering community". He says "Working with horses provides fantastic metaphors for the patients to use in a self-reflective process. They can provoke emotional responses that may not come up in other forms of therapy." Professor Raj Persaud, consultant psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital in London and presenter of Radio 4's All In The Mind, is more cautious about the benefits of EAP. "I haven't been able to find any rigorous scientific studies and, like any new treatment, it needs a proper clinical trial," he says. Just because someone feels better in the short term doesn't mean that the treatment works. The acid test is whether it improves someone's mental health in the long term."

What is not in doubt is that some powerful things appear to happen to patients when they mount a horse, especially if they are asked to lie along the horses back without a saddle. (More than 90% of EAP takes place on the ground). It's a precarious position in which people have to give themselves into the care of the horse, to be carried around in a position of maximum contact. This is the moment when many clients breakdown in tears , as I say when I was allowed to watch a teenage girl in an EAP session at Rainbow Ranch in northern Spain, which is run by Dutchman Reinard van Beek for people who usually come for an intensive weeks course in the sun. Inge Umbgrove, the psychologist in attendance, had told me: "That girl never had enough affection as a baby. Now the horse has become like her mother, carrying her in the way she always wanted to be carried." Inge looked a little sad." A client told me that in one week here he had made more progress than in all the years coming to my office. I was thrilled, but you know, it also hurt.