

Therapy Chat Episode 330



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[00:00:00] **Laura Reagan:** Therapy Chat Podcast Episode 330.

[00:00:04] **Announcer:** This is the Therapy Chat podcast with Laura Reagan LCSW-C. The information shared in this podcast is not a substitute for seeking help from a licensed mental health professional. And now here's your host, Laura Reagan LCSW-C.

[00:00:37] **Laura Reagan:** Today's episode is sponsored by Trauma Therapist Network. Trauma Therapist Network is a platform for finding a trauma therapist, learning about trauma, and understanding about how trauma shows up in our lives and what the healing process can look like. Go to www.traumatherapistnetwork.com to learn more.

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[00:01:18] And now for all you prescribers out there, Therapy Notes is proudly introducing e-prescribe. Use coupon code, "CHAT," or click the link in the show notes to get two free months at therapynotes.com.

[00:01:31] Hi, welcome back to Therapy Chat. I'm your host, Laura Reagan, and I hope you heard last week's interview with Mary Sue McCarthy, LCPC.

[00:01:41] I love talking with Mary Sue about her equine work. My personal experience with interaction with horses has been deeply meaningful and life changing, really. So this week I'm replaying an episode that I recorded a few years ago [00:02:00] when I had a profound experience interacting with a horse. And I was so inspired afterwards that I just immediately needed to write down how I felt. It was so powerful.

[00:02:15] So I wrote it down and I recorded it for a podcast episode that I wanted to share with you. So it's very vulnerable, but maybe listening to this will help you get like a felt sense for what can happen when your interacting with horses. And really, even if it's not a therapeutic setting, just when you're in a mindful space and you're in their space. It can be so powerful. So I'd love to know what you think about this. If you've ever experienced anything like that. And we're going to be talking a little bit more throughout this month about equine work. So I hope you will enjoy [00:03:00] listening to my thoughts on how I found heart and soul connection in a barn.

[00:03:08] Hi, welcome back to Therapy Chat. I'm your host, Laura Reagan, LCSW-C. And I'm back to talk to you about an amazing experience I had that I just had to share. Now, if you've been listening to Therapy Chat for awhile, you hopefully caught episode 24, where I was talking about vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress. That is the occupational hazard that we helping professionals face. And if we don't take care of ourselves, mind, body, and

spirit, we will not be able to take care of anyone else. Whether you're a nurse, a doctor, social worker, counselor, pastor, police, officer firefighter, lawyer, anybody who works with [00:04:00] people in a helping capacity- we have to take care of ourselves and it's an ongoing process.

[00:04:06] So one of the things I talked about in episode 24 is that I had been saying for literally 10 years that I had two things I wanted to start doing, take horseback riding lessons, and learn ceramics. It's almost like a joke in my family because I've been saying that for so long and I never do it.

[00:04:29] So at the end of that episode, I vowed that I was going to start the horseback riding lessons sometime soon. Now this is episode 55, 21 episodes after that. And I'm here to tell you that I still haven't started horseback riding lessons. It's going to happen. I am researching barns and finding where I can go for lessons. I've got something set up. So it's in the works. It's actually happening. But in the [00:05:00] meantime, I've also been hearing for years, at least since 2010. So six years I've known that research has pointed to the benefits of working with horses for therapy and personal growth. And because I went to grad school in a program that was very focused on evidence-based practice, truthfully, I dismissed the benefits of equine-assisted Therapy as I didn't at that time, think that it had been shown to have an evidence-based proving its effectiveness. But there are certain things that you just have to experience for yourself. So in this episode, I'm going to talk about my experience of finding heart and soul connection in a barn. I just feel like this is too special not to share with you all. And I hope that you'll be inspired by my [00:06:00] experience. So let's get started.

[00:06:01] Last Saturday, I had a new experience. It was a total game changer. I have been saying that I was going to take horseback riding lessons, and I've really only ridden a horse in my life maybe five times. All between the ages of 10 to 13. When I was a little girl, I was obsessed with horses. I had horse posters on my wall. I had horses for my Barbie dolls to ride. I had a cowgirl Barbie who rode horses. Many children have that interest. I did grow up in a city, but we have rural areas near enough to us that there was a horse farm where people would go and take lessons, or occasionally there would be birthday parties there.

[00:06:42] So anytime I ever was on the back of a horse, somebody was holding onto that horse with a lead and walking with it and I was on top. I wasn't doing anything more than that, but recently, as I've learned more about equine assisted therapy and the benefits of spending time with [00:07:00] horses, which has now more scientific support for its effectiveness, I decided that I am going to

increase the amount of time I spend with horses. Basically, I'm going to stop ignoring the part of myself that says you want to do this. I'm 44. and definitely there's some fear with it because my body has changed quite a bit since I was 13. There's more of me. I feel more fragile and I don't want to get hurt.

[00:07:27] And I don't necessarily have muscle memory for what it's like to sit on a horse and to ride. So it's going to be a brand new experience. But even though my body's changed a lot since I was 13, my heart hasn't changed much if at all, and this experience really showed me that. So before I tell you more about what happened on Saturday, let me give you some information from EAGALA, which is the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association and you can read about their work at [00:08:00] www.eagala.org, E A G A L A. I'm also going to put that link in the show notes. So I took this information from their website. First of all, how does equine-assisted learning and growth work? While horses are bigger and stronger than us they're powerful creatures and being around them can feel intimidating, which creates an opportunity to get up close and personal with our own fears, hint, vulnerability. Like humans, horses are social creatures who live in herds.

[00:08:27] They have a social hierarchy in terms of how they relate to one another in the herd, working on how we relate to horses is a way for us humans to work on how we relate to other humans, as well as our relationships with ourselves. Because horses are prey animals, they rely on nonverbal cues to stay alive.

[00:08:45] Their lives depend on accurately reading these cues and humans are predators, but for some reason, horses are willing to interact with us anyway, if we let them know we're safe. I don't know if that would be true of undomesticated horses, probably not, but [00:09:00] the horses that we would have access to are willing to give us a chance.

[00:09:04] Horses know when, what we're saying and doing don't match what we're feeling and sensing, even though we might not know, they reflect back to us what we're feeling and sensing or the incongruence between our feelings, sensations, words, and actions even, or especially when it's outside of our own conscious, awareness.

[00:09:25] To me, this is a really important metaphor because I was explaining today in a therapy session that children read nonverbal cues, children watch our faces to see if our words and our actions and our non-verbals match. And children don't feel safe when the adults in their lives tell them I'm happy, but they're crying or nothing's wrong, but they look sad.

[00:09:51] Or when they say I love you, but they're cruel to the child. That's what leads a child to feel unsafe when [00:10:00] the nonverbal cues don't match with the words. So it's the shadow again. Yeah, once again, the shadow plays a part in this story. Horses can bring our shadow to our awareness. And I think that happened with me on Saturday.

[00:10:15] So someone once told me, and I know they were right. Once the shadows out in the light, you can't ignore it anymore. I'm just finding that to be true again and again. And if you have no idea what I'm talking about, when I say the shadow, check out past episodes of therapy chat episode 53, when I talked about secrecy, shame, and the shadow episode 38 with Rainy Beck, LMFT episode 40 with Lourdes Viato MFT, PhD and episode 42 with Kerri Nola. Those will be in the show notes too.

[00:10:51] So here's what happened over the weekend. I want to spend time with horses and I want to get to know myself as best I can. So I went [00:11:00] to a workshop on learning with horses. I gathered in a barn with a group of two other women, the instructor and the horse trainer. I really didn't know what to expect because I haven't done anything like this before.

[00:11:12] Although I have heard about it from fellow therapists. So I guess I had a little bit of a headstart on knowing what the experience might be like, but I felt very uncertain. The whole thing was on the ground. We didn't mount the horses at all, thankfully because I still don't know how too. We were introduced to two horses, a darker colored one and a lighter colored one.

[00:11:31] I felt super vulnerable and nervous. I wanted to know what to do and what not to do, and how, and what was going to happen. I told myself, just sit with the discomfort. I know this is where growth happens. Part of me wanted to relax, be in the moment, let go, and just see what happened. And part of me wants to know to check whether or not I was doing it right, if I was okay. To understand, and to know why. These parts of myself battled for [00:12:00] that entire two hour period of the workshop. When we walked up to each horse, I had lots of thoughts. I wondered how to touch the horse, if it was okay to touch him, and whether he would hurt me. I was acutely aware of how large and heavy he was and that he could kick me, bite me, or step on me if he felt like it. . Then I went a little deeper into my emotions instead of just my thoughts. I suspected that he didn't like me. I felt self-conscious about being uncomfortable. And I worried who could tell. I was pretty sure the horse could tell, although he didn't say anything. I felt his soft velvety coat and tangled mane. I noticed that he was beautiful and he looked like he had been through some things. I decided

maybe he wasn't judging me as harshly as I was judging myself. All that took place in about two minutes.

[00:12:47] Feeling a little softer towards myself, I approached the other horse. One of the other women of the group was standing with the horse and I felt protective toward her time with him. I held my hand out to him, wondering if he was okay with me, petting his nose. [00:13:00] I don't know how to be with a horse, so I just did what you would do with the dog. I just let him like sniff my hand. He gently nuzzled my hand. I didn't know if this is what they always do, or if he liked my touch. I awkwardly stood there for a few seconds, continuing to let him smell my hand and nuzzle it.

[00:13:15] Then something surprising happened. He tilted his head towards me and sort of snuggled up to my neck. I don't even know what to call it, but immediately tears spring to my eyes. I felt seen and understood, probably better understood by the horse than I was understanding myself in that moment. And I had the strange experience of a felt sense when you just know something that's coming from within your inner wisdom, your soul, your wise itself, whatever you want to call it, it tells you something from within yourself.

[00:13:44] It's more than just a thought. The felt sense told me he knows I'm sad. One of the reasons it was so weird is because I had not known, I was sad until that moment. I felt apologetic toward the other woman standing there because the horse was giving me more attention. And because [00:14:00] I was fighting back tears, which is pretty uncomfortable anytime, but especially in front of a stranger and we were very close to each other. At the same time, I felt incredibly grateful to the horse.

[00:14:12] Running a group private practice has been a challenging and rewarding experience and one thing that has made it so much easier is Therapy Notes. Therapy Notes makes billing, scheduling, note taking, and tele-health incredibly easy.

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for two months, absolutely free. Just click on the link in the show notes or enter the promo code: "CHAT," at therapynotes.com.

[00:15:13] As Brene Brown says vulnerability is courage. And boy did I feel vulnerable. All of that happened in the first 30 minutes of this experience. After that we alternated between activities with the horses and seated in group in chairs. But more strange things happened. During the time we receded in our chairs as a group, the horses were free to roam this indoor space where we were, it was a big barn that was enclosed on each end, so they couldn't leave, but they were they started out at the opposite end from where they were and they kind of crept over towards us. Well, they didn't creep. They just walked over on their own time.

[00:15:52] So in the group we were talking and I was continuing my struggle between the parts of myself that wanted to avoid the discomfort of this new [00:16:00] experience and the parts that were trying to be open and just let it unfold. I'll point out that while this experience was new, that struggle is not, it's quite familiar to be honest. I practice mindfulness by checking in with myself many times throughout a given day, I notice what I'm thinking, what I'm feeling, what my body is holding. I frequently asked myself what I need or what my body wants me to know. There's always an answer, if I listen. What I often notice is this struggle to know, to have the answers. It's something that pops up when I'm in situations where I feel uncertain and it's a way to attempt to avoid discomfort. I don't do it consciously. It's a defense that I'm sure developed quite early. I know when I was a child, I was always praised for being smart and no matter how much I may have criticized myself throughout my life there's one quality I have that I never doubted and that's being smart. I received much attention, love, and acceptance, for being smart when I was a child. Being smart was the one thing I could not get [00:17:00] wrong. But when I was a child, I felt very uncomfortable much of the time. So this defense, intellectualization, it's called, served me very well back then.

[00:17:10] And it's helped me many times since. But it does get in the way. I'm grateful for my intelligence yet I need to ask the part of myself that wants to know to step aside quite frequently so I can stay in the moment. It's okay to be curious, as long as it doesn't take me away from the present moment. So now I'll tell you about the most powerful part of the experience in the barn.

[00:17:31] And this is, this is vulnerable to talk about, but after the horse snuggled up against me, while we were sitting in the chairs as a group, the horses moved around the barn and slowly, they moved towards us, like I mentioned. Eventually both horses came to stand behind me. While our group

talked in a circle one by one, the horses slowly moved forward until both horses were standing with their heads over me.

[00:17:56] And it's hard to explain how this was, but to the people [00:18:00] who were facing me, they couldn't see my face. They could only see each horse's head over each of my two shoulders and their heads were crossed in front of me. So they were blocking me from seeing the other group members and they were blocking the other group members from seeing me, it was, it was strange.

[00:18:18] I don't know what they were doing, but the group leader noted the horses could have stood anywhere they wanted. And for some reason they chose to stand over me that way. They remained that way until we stood to do another activity. And then when we returned to sitting, they did it again, just as gradually as the first time.

[00:18:34] I don't know what was going on. I can't say why they did that. Other than the horses knew I needed something, I guess. I don't know what I needed, but maybe they did. And you know, it's not like I could have been the only person out of that group who was having emotions, but for some reason they gravitated towards me.

[00:18:56] And I'm really thankful that they did. I think the leader [00:19:00] was suggesting in a cryptic way that they knew either I needed comfort, protection, attention, something. She didn't come right out and say it. I think she just wanted me to figure it out myself. And I've been thinking about it ever since, but all I can tell you is this I was in love with these horses. Like I said, about being seen, heard and understood. I felt like they get me, we have a connection. It's so silly, but I still am like longing to see those horses again, because I feel like they know me deeply. Part of me right now is saying, yeah, right you go see those horses they don't remember who you are, but while we were together, they were looking into my soul. I really felt that way. And today's Tuesday. This happened on Saturday, so it's been four days, three days since I did this. And it's still feels so powerful and I've actually had more experiences of self-discovery what I [00:20:00] call shifts since doing this on Saturday.

[00:20:03] I'm so eager to do more work with horses and see what happens because this was a magical experience for me. In fact, I want everyone to go and spend time with horses now. Maybe you should spend time with horses. I feel like recommending it to every client I have, but, honestly it was such an

intense experience, I wouldn't recommend it to everyone because it could have been overwhelming. But it was beautiful.

[00:20:26] So you might be wondering why I wanted to share this on Therapy Chat. Well, there's a few reasons. First, I want to document this experience because it was special and I don't want to forget. But I want you who are listening to know that spending time with horses can be incredibly powerful.

[00:20:44] It's almost unbelievable how powerful it can be. And it's really hard to describe. There are some things you really do just have to experience for yourself. And I hope this episode will encourage some of you who are listening to try equine assisted learning and growth. [00:21:00] So the last reason why I'm sharing it here on Therapy Chat is because I believe it's important as a therapist that I live the way I encourage my clients to do. I've been on a journey of personal growth for intentionally only maybe two years, but probably my whole life. I believe we never stopped growing and learning unless we refuse to try and we must continue pushing ourselves outside of our comfort zones because that's where growth happens.

[00:21:25] I can't take my clients anywhere that I haven't been. And the more I allow myself to be vulnerable and expose myself to new experiences, allowing me a deeper connection with myself, the more capable I become of walking alongside my clients as they're on that journey. I've seen this to be true and I know as my connection with myself deepens my skill as a therapist will deepen as well.

[00:21:45] Next week, I'm taking time to venture deeply inward as I spend time with an intuitive coach in California to reflect on the direction of my business in the year ahead and do more shadow work. I, I know that's going to be intense. [00:22:00] This is also going to be a reunion with some beautiful souls who I know only online who live all across the country and I'm so honored that I'll be able to spend time with them there. And soon after that, I'll be heading to the beautiful Hudson Valley of New York in November for a retreat with horses and fellow therapists and other healers. I can't wait. I can not wait. Honestly, I've been bitten by the horse bug and I can't wait for my next opportunity to spend time with these creatures.

[00:22:29] And part of me says it has to be the same horses that I spent time with before, but that intellectual part of me knows it doesn't have to be, it's any horses. And yes, I am still planning to take horseback riding lessons. I'm going to visit a barn this weekend to see if that's the right place for me to do my lessons.

[00:22:50] And I could just choose the first place, but I'm not being, I'm not doing analysis paralysis here. I actually want to [00:23:00] be sure that I find a place that's going to feel right and not rush into it because this is a new arena for me, literally. And in Brene Brown's work, she talks about these arena moments.

[00:23:12] This is where I say, can I do this, I'm 44. Can I start horseback riding now? You know, I'm not this, I'm not that I'm not this, I'm not that, am I going to be able to do this? But I'm going to try. So I'm daring greatly. And if you're not sure what I'm talking about, check out that book Daring Greatly by Brene Brown.

[00:23:32] So that's the story of how I found my heart and soul connection with two horses and with myself in a barn last weekend. I hope it's somehow inspired you to get more connected with yourself. Let me know, I'd love to hear from you. And if you're interested in walking together on your journey of personal growth and you live anywhere near Baltimore, Maryland, just get in touch with me.

[00:23:53] Send me an email at laura@laurareaganlcswc.com, or just go to my website [00:24:00] and find the contact me tab. Thank you so much for listening to therapy chat. I hope you've been inspired to step into a new arena in your life. Listen, in the weeks ahead for my interview with Charlotte Easley, LCSW of Kentucky who's going to talk to us more about equine assisted therapy and her model she uses with survivors of sexual assault and other traumatic experiences. I can't wait to share that with you and please remember to go to iTunes and leave me a rating and review. Let me know what you like and what you don't like about Therapy Chat. I'd love to hear from you.

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[00:25:05] **Announcer:** Thank you for listening to Therapy Chat with your host, Laura Reagan, LCSW-C. For more information, please visit therapychatpodcast.com.