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***CAN WE CONSIDER EQUINES TO BE THERAPIST BEINGS?***

**PODEMOS CONSIDERAR OS EQUINOS COMO TERAPEUTAS?**

***¿PODEMOS CONSIDERAR A LOS CABALLOS COMO TERAPEUTAS?***

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**Abstract**

Equine assisted interventions are becoming very well-known lately but we need to understand how equine can truly help us! So many people sustain they are fascinated by horses... it's obvious that due to the fact they have been domesticated since 4000 B.C, the figures and images of horses, reproduced in mankind's myths from the beginning of the species and from the initial contact between Man and horse are the symbolic expression of psychic phenomena. Nonetheless, how is the equine going to produce an effect on us within a holistic framework? How equines can become powerful guides to our transformation? They are animals endowed with exceptional qualities to help the human being improve his physical, mental, emotional and spiritual qualities. But can we really say they are therapist? This article will point out those diverse subjects.

**Keywords:** Equine assisted intervention; Holistic framework; Symbolic.

**Resumo**

*As intervenções assistidas por equinos estão se tornando muito conhecidas ultimamente, mas precisamos entender como os equinos podem realmente nos ajudar! Tantas pessoas sustentam que são fascinadas pelos cavalos... é óbvio que pelo fato de terem sido domesticados desde 4000 aC, as figuras e imagens dos cavalos, reproduzidas nos mitos da humanidade desde o início da espécie e desde o contato inicial entre o Homem e os cavalos são a expressão simbólica dos fenômenos psíquicos. No entanto, como o equino vai produzir um efeito sobre nós dentro de uma estrutura holística? Como os equinos podem se tornar guias poderosos*

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*para nossa transformação? São animais dotados de qualidades excepcionais para ajudar o ser humano a melhorar suas qualidades físicas, mentais, emocionais e espirituais. Mas podemos realmente dizer que eles são terapeutas? Este artigo irá apontar esses diversos assuntos.*

**Palavras-Chave:** *Intervenção assistida por equinos; Perspectiva holística; Simbólico.*

### **Resumen**

*Las intervenciones asistidas por equinos se están volviendo muy populares últimamente, ¡pero debemos entender cómo los caballos pueden ayudarnos realmente! Tantas personas sostienen que les fascinan los caballos ... es obvio que debido a que han sido domesticados desde el 4000 aC, las figuras e imágenes de caballos, reproducidas en los mitos humanos desde el inicio de la especie y desde el contacto inicial entre el Hombre y los caballos son la expresión simbólica de los fenómenos psíquicos. Sin embargo, ¿cómo nos va a afectar el caballo dentro de un marco holístico? ¿Cómo pueden los caballos convertirse en guías poderosos para nuestra transformación? Son animales dotados de cualidades excepcionales para ayudar al ser humano a mejorar sus cualidades físicas, mentales, emocionales y espirituales. Pero, ¿podemos realmente decir que son terapeutas? Este artículo señalará estos diversos temas.*

**Palabras-clave:** *Intervención asistida por equinos; Marco holístico; Simbólico.*

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## **1. Introduction**

The earliest evidence on the domestication of horses dates from 4,000 B.C. and for centuries equines have been our faithful partners in warfare, in travel and in agriculture. We can safely declare that they helped us build the modern world. Nowadays, they were replaced by the engines of our vehicles and the only arena where they can shine is the equestrian world. But what if equines had much more to give us in a little-known area? In the world of therapies, of personal development and of connection between species. Everyone that has had contact with horses claims to have been changed by that contact. However, no one can say exactly how this "spell" happen. Consequently, what occurs in this powerful encounter? And can we also wonder if equines are therapists?

When I asked (and sometimes I still do) people who declare "horses changed my life", what was the horse's role, invariably the answers are the same: "I learnt to ride"... "I enjoy brushing him"... "It feels good to take care of him and feed him"... "I love going for a ride".. "I participate in horse jumping or dressage competitions". All these answers reflect what people do with the horses. They do not explain how the horses changed their lives. When pressed to explain how, they are left without answers but visibly surprised and confused. Sometimes I sense that they do not understand my question because it compels them to go beyond "doing" into the level of "feeling". Often, it is "feeling" that leads us towards our inner spaces, although a larger number of people dread going there or simply do not



know how to access it. They do not know how to get there. When I am able to get answers they have a common thread: horses make them feel happy, more relaxed, more alive, freer, empowered. Some people even state: “I know they make me feel good but I cannot explain either why or how”. Well, my friends, the truth is that horses lead us to places within ourselves, into hidden spaces that can be disturbing. They have the ability to stir what many people prefer not to understand, and for others it is difficult to comprehend how it works. Sometimes I say:

*“Beware of the horses, they might lead you into the depth of your psyche!”* This internal journey is never easy because it touches upon difficult subjects that we are aware of and other issues that reside in the unconscious. It is a journey of initiation. For that reason horses are sacred beings, as in the Celtic and Native American cultures.

The fascination we project onto horses (or any other being) was considered by Carl Gustave Jung a characteristic of the mana personality (word derived from anthropology, of Melanesian origin). The term refers to the archetypal image of an impersonal supernatural force. The modern equivalent is charisma, from the Greek charisma or touched by the Divine Spirit. The mana personality acts like a transition or transcendence conduit towards a superior state of consciousness, being of huge value for the initiation stage and contains great tension between opposite dichotomies: matter/spirit, good/evil, yin/yang, male/female, life/death, earth/heaven, etc. In fact, if we explore the dictionary of symbols, we'll find ten pages in lowercase which describe the

symbolism of this extraordinary being. Here is an excerpt:

[...] In conclusion, it indicates that the Horse is one of the fundamental archetypes inscribed in mankind's memory. Its symbolism extends the two poles – above and below – the Cosmos, which makes it completely universal [...]

Etymologically speaking, the word “Archetype” is composed by the Greek radical “arche” meaning beginning, origin and “type” that means slash, engrave, mold, conveying the impression of a model. Archetype is the initial model of something that we might call “primordial image”. They are the invisible structural tendencies of symbols. Archetypes create images or visions that correspond to some aspect of conscious state. Jung deduces that the “primordial images” originate from the constant repetition of the same experience along many generations. They function as autonomous centers that tend to produce in each generation the repetition and expansion of those same experiences. Archetypes are isolated from one another, although they might coalesce and mix.

When analytic psychology refers to the primordial image or to the horse archetype, it is not referring to an objective image in time and space, but to **a pre-existing image operating in the human psyche**. The figures and images of horses, reproduced in mankind's myths from the beginning of the species and from the initial contact between Man and horse are the symbolic expression of this psychic phenomena. The emergence of this archetype can be observed all along the history of Mankind since it has



always been present in rituals, myths, symbols and also in dreams, fantasies and creative endeavours of modern men both healthy and sick.

For example, Pegasus, a winged stallion, is present in Greek mythology. In this myth, we discover the hero, Perseus fighting Medusa, a woman with snake hair and eyes able to petrify those who stare at her (symbol of the dark feminine). When the hero Perseus has the courage to behead her, protecting himself from her eyes with a shield given by the goddess Athena, Pegasus is born from Medusa's blood. Then, Perseus climbed on the back of the winged stallion to go on to the next step of the hero's journey. Pegasus represents here the transmutation and the release of Perseus's shadow who had to confront the dark feminine remaining in his unconscious.

Through this myth and others, we can see that equines would act as psychopomp, from the Greek *psychopompós*, joining *psyché*(soul) and *pompós* (guide) meaning a being whose function is to guide man's perception between two different significant events. The psychopomp, the inner guide, can take a human, animal or spiritual nature and is expressed through the collective unconscious. Consequently, we can determine that being in contact with horses will never be a trivial experience because it "touches" and "messes around" with our inner life, forcing us to acknowledge, bring into awareness and transform forgotten or repressed material, stored away in the depth of our Being. Supervising this inner work, with the participation of horses, should be done by people who are in contact with this dimension. Otherwise, the experiment could be superficial. That

is, it would be an experience far from the depths of the human spirit. Also, this monitoring must be done by a person who has great experience with horses in terms of their wholeness, that is, a holistic vision of the equine species.

The holistic vision is the belief that a fact or a being should be considered as a whole and not through a fragmented part of reality. The holistic approach is based on the premise that all elements of a human being, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual form a whole. Thus, to achieve complete balance, this being has to integrate its totality. How is the equine going to produce an effect on us within a holistic framework? We have to approach this question from the standpoint of the four holistic aspects:

**THE PHYSICAL:** how the horse operates on our physical body;

**THE MENTAL:** how the horse operates on our mind;

**THE EMOTIONAL:** how the horse operates on our emotions;

**THE SPIRITUAL:** how the horse operates on our spiritual and energetic body.

**The physical:** Let's talk now about the real live horse! The one that weighs approximately 600 Kgs, that neighs, walks, trots, gallops, spends most of the time eating, kicks, bites, jumps, runs away, plays, defecates, urinates, copulates, lives in a community and in freedom when lucky. In the food chain they are considered a large, non-ruminating herbivore, non-aggressive with a small capacity for defense against predators. They are preys, very vulnerable animals that need fine-tuned senses to recognize the enemy and flee as fast as possible. They are highly perceptive to the slightest sign of danger.



Thanks to their speed, flight is always the best defense. Getting in touch with him through his powerful body, either walking side to side, riding him or grooming him generates an atypical body experience. The horse provides humans with great holding and facilitates a highly healing body-mind mediation because he forces us to connect with our physical body.

**The mental:** Just like humans, horses have a well-developed neocortex that is responsible for learning, reasoning, and the correlations between multiple pieces of sensorial information. These hypersensitive animals have an extraordinary gift for immediate learning, thus, it is very easy to teach them incorrectly, namely because the human being who is generally incongruent and has little awareness of himself, might pass on inaccurate information while teaching. Every horse that comes in contact with us has three questions: – Who are you? – What do you want? – How do you function? These are complex questions even for us humans (who knows who they really are, what they want and how they function?!) that represent equines' modus operandi of interaction with another being (human or not). For his survival, the horse needs to be totally congruent, unlike human beings that are so often misaligned between what one thinks, feels and does, horses cannot afford the luxury of "lying". The famous ethologist Lucy Rees often says that: «a predator that hesitates loses "lunch", a prey that vacillates LOOSES LIFE!!!». Therefore, to be in contact with such a genuine being, we must align ourselves with our thoughts, feelings and actions. That means to ditch our lying mind in order to seek the truth within our being.

**The emotional:** Equines, like humans,

have an extremely well developed limbic system in addition to the hypothalamus, the central nervous system structure located in the encephalon. One of the functions of the hypothalamus is to connect the nervous system to the endocrine system through the pituitary gland, also called hypophysis. This part of the brain is fundamental in organizing emotions and memories (just like in human beings) and regulating heartbeat, blood pressure, breathing and the interaction among all these systems. This explains, for example, the connection between an emotional reaction and a faster heartbeat. His senses are extremely sharp; they are naturally curious and have the ability to select the information vital to their survival. And frankly, we must recognize their intelligence in adapting as 55 million years have gone by since their ancestors appeared on earth. These large herbivores, have a social life that is very well developed and organized, they are social animals following herd codes developed millions of years ago. To this day horses have survived due to the strong bonds of affection among them. They seem well equipped to read the emotions of their peers and of other species, namely predators, including human emotions, the greatest predator on the planet. We can declare that equines are the real experts in emotional intelligence. To interact with them in a healthy way, we have to get in touch with our emotions, identify them, trust them and perceive them as allies of our existence to finally develop a greater emotional intelligence.

**The spiritual:** In spiritual terms, I pointed out in the first part of the article how the horses "is alive" in our collective unconscious as an archetype so powerful that influences us well beyond our



consciousness. Currently, a lot of research is being conducted about the "Transpersonal power" of the equines, in particular in areas such as interspecies communication. The scientific Rupert Sheldrake has researched for a long time an area that allows to scientifically link all earthly species in cellular terms in the framework of archetypes. He presented the theoretical foundation of a new, holistic explanatory vision of morphological genesis, that is of the emergence of forms in the organic and inorganic worlds. He studies the telepathy between animals and humans, which led him among other things to develop the theory of morphogenetic fields. In fact, communication with animals is a fascinating subject that is gradually developing although I believe there are "frauds" in this field. One must be vigilant. Intuitive communication with horses finally has the potential of placing the animal at the same level as the human being! We should listen to what they have to say and we would be surprised by the great wisdom they have, much more than most humans. It is also an opportunity for us to listen to the grievances. It makes people realize how they are treating their furry friends; I know we might think we are doing the best from a human perspective but maybe not from the animal's viewpoint.

As we can see, horses are animals endowed with exceptional qualities to help the human being improve his physical, mental, emotional and spiritual qualities. But can we really say they are therapies?

The founder of France's horse assisted therapy, Dr. Renée de Lubersac, said something very important for those who think that in order to do therapy with horses knowing about horses is enough: «*A therapy in not just defined by a person experiencing difficulties in contact with a horse. A third*

*element is needed: the therapist.*» And this therapist will have to be part of a team knowledgeable in various areas and furthermore, he must be well trained in equine ethology to be able to translate equine behaviors.

For example, the mainstream opinion is that the horse has a non-judgmental therapeutic action and that he is present empathically. I do not agree. This observation that the equine's relationship is allegedly unconditional derives from hippotherapy, riding therapy and equestrian activities. These activities are mostly done in riding centers with stabled horses that have no options, no choices. These horses spend their lives in a box, only coming out to be ridden. During therapies they are also locked up and they also have no choices. If by some reason they decide to rebel they are punished. Obviously, they are available! They totally depend on men. I only believe in the equine's unconditional presence when he feels that there is a healthy interaction between himself and the human in question. Although I understand that in the therapeutic dynamics of hippotherapy, which deals with impairments, it is necessary for security's sake to keep the horse locked up, even if in certain cases it is against the animal's will, it will allow an affective mediation with the animal, what I call the "horse-teddy bear".

The Kiron method is the equine assisted intervention that I have created in Portugal. The intervention model is conducted exclusively with horses and ponies at liberty that live in large spaces, where I tried to recreate life most similarly to freedom in nature. They are free to choose whether or not to participate in a session depending on the customer's behavior and/or the will of the equine at that moment. Depending on the personality of each one,



we have horses that like to participate in certain sessions more than others. One likes to be with teenagers, one with small children, one does not like touchy people... Some like to be brushed, others not so much... Some like galloping, others prefer staying still... We try to respect the personality and disposition of each one. The horse or pony who is physically or emotional unwell does not participate in sessions. With horses who come to us with traumas issues, we take the necessary time so they can overcome their pain. If we sense they don't want to interact with humans, we give them the necessary time (sometimes years) that they need to regain their trust into human beings. I can give here an example of a case that illustrates this theme about the horse's freedom to interact if he wants to: I remember a hysterical lady who always wanted to be the center of the world's attention. My horse, Meiguinho is dear and very fond of being pampered. He withstood 15 minutes cuddles, talk and stroking; giving the lady his full attention until he grew tired and pulled away from her. Her reaction was to be angry with the horse and called him selfish... Good thing he had enough, for he enabled the patient to become aware of her impossible emotional demands grounded on a hyper narcissistic personality.

The Kiron method is based, among other topics, on the myth of the Centaur Chiron, the archetype of the wounded therapist. In this model, we assume that every therapist must go through a long continuous work on himself in order to help others. I consider it is necessary (and required for graduation) to go through several hours of equine assisted therapy and a few hours of supervision. It is essential that future facilitators invest in their own therapeutic process using this approach. This

way they will understand and transform their own problems, enabling them to recognize possible future counter-transferences with their patients/clients, besides certain projections on equines. To this day, thirteen monographies have been completed, signalling the graduation of their respective writers.

So far, in the past ten years, we have been working with 6000 patients, 1500 families, 600 children and 500 teenagers. Since July 2013, we have been working with more than 2000 patients with addiction issues.

In the meantime we became a non-profit association, Associação Kiron para o desenvolvimento do Ser Humano e do Equino (Kiron Association for the Development of the Human Being and the Equine). Our mission consists in carrying out support, care, and therapeutic activities as well as dissemination, research, and teaching in the following areas:

- Equitherapy (hippotherapy – education/reeducation – equine assisted therapy – equine assisted learning)
- Psychology (in all its approaches)
- Art Therapy (art psychotherapy, artistic and analytical expression – art pedagogy – educational art)
- Coaching (life coaching, corporate coaching, equine assisted coaching) - Complementary Therapies promoting personal wellbeing

It is a pioneering and innovative association in this field in Portugal, whose ultimate objective is to support and expand the wellbeing of children, young adults, adults, and corporations in the physical and mental health areas as well as organizational and personal development.



Aside from the activities mentioned above, the Association is also engaged in:

- Promoting and cooperating in organizing national and international conferences, symposiums and debates, as well as other events related to its mission;
- Promoting activities that encourage solidarity and social insertion, active citizenship and personal development consistent with the collective wellbeing and environmental and cultural sustainability;
- The protection, breeding and disseminating information on equines, as well as the defense and protection of all animals; the promotion and expansion of therapy, research, and educational spaces dealing with mental and physical health;

In January 2016 we were recognized by the Unesco-Portugal National Commission and became Kiron Club Unesco. This was a great honor that made our team feel happy and grateful. It was wonderful that after struggling for many years a well-known

international entity paid us tribute!

In conclusion, and based on our experience and knowledge of the past ten years, we can say that equines are amazing therapist partners. They are noble, sensitive and kind beings that we should treat with dignity and respect. Let's ask the proper questions regarding them, such as:

- Am I giving my horse the life he deserves?
- Can I change/improve his life?
- Is he happy?
- Does he enjoy being ridden?

And last but not least the big question:

- What does he have to teach me about myself?

As mentioned before, earlier civilizations such as Celts, Greeks and Native Americans venerated horses and benefited from them as master-therapists.

Now our time has come!

## Referência

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