



Helping hooves

In Withyham, a free-ranging herd of horses are helping humans achieve their full potential via a form of therapy called Equine Facilitated Human Development. NIONE MEAKIN meets Sun Tui, founder of IFEAL



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Sun Tui and her free-ranging herd at Hale Court Farm, Withyam

HIDDEN away at the end of a long track in the east Sussex village of Withyam, Hale Court Farm is a sun-dappled sprawl of red brick and rolling green fields. In a yard next to the central farmhouse, a group of horses nuzzle at straw, tails swatting away flies. Yet, despite outward appearances, this is no ordinary farm and they are no ordinary herd.

Hale Court Farm is the home of IFEAL, leaders in a form of therapy known as Equine Facilitated Human Development. Alongside owner Sun Tui, who founded IFEAL ten years previously, the horses play a key role in helping survivors of unimaginable suffering begin to live happier, more fulfilled lives.

While it may sound eccentric, equine therapy is a recognised and burgeoning field. Horses, renowned for their sensitivity, are

adept at ‘reading’ human emotions and the unconscious signals that may be undermining our interactions. Some believe this makes them an ideal support in human-led therapy.

“A lot of the damage that is done to humans is done by other humans,” explains Sun, a lifelong horsewoman and trained Jungian and psychosynthesis counsellor, whose interest in helping others is informed by the huge personal challenges she has faced, including her experiences serving in the military, the death of a child and a near-fatal car accident. “We learn to put on facades and different faces in our dealings with other people; we learn to behave in the way we think other people expect. The horses don’t care who you are or what you’re saying, they will only respond to what you’re really feeling.”

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM HOLDEN

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Mon to Fri 7.30am to 6.30pm, Sat and Sun 9.30am to 4.30pm



Many of IFEAL's clients are high-functioning people who outwardly appear to have everything yet feel they have nothing left to live for. "Many are ex-forces and are often suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from their time in combat. Others are business people – senior execs, leaders. Some clients have had very extreme backgrounds starting in childhood. Generally they will all have learned to adapt and to present a socially acceptable 'front' but actually, they are lonely, depressed, sometimes even suicidal."

There is no contact between client and horse at first. Instead, Sun will lead people through interpersonal exercises in the yard, and provides guidance on appropriate ways to interact with the animals.

Later they will be invited to observe the herd, quietly and from a distance. This is when a natural bond first begins to form between animal and human. She points out Lozen, an impressive-looking black mare with a watchful gaze who has been part of the herd for a decade. Many of Sun's ex-forces clientele connect with her.

"Lozen seems to inspire an understanding with former servicemen and women. She used to have a lot of fear in her, a lot of spook. She was sold as a jumping horse yet when I asked her to walk over a trotting pole, she went over it at full speed and fell over. That told me she was jumping out of utter terror. It took about a year for me to help her understand she could even go near that pole in a self-soothing drive rather than in fear.

"Now she has the ability to notice something like a helicopter overhead and calm herself. I often ask veterans to notice the helicopter then notice her and notice what she's doing. To be with both the distress they feel from the helicopter noise and the good feeling of being with her."

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Sun Tui pictured with one of her therapeutic horses

In other instances, an animal might serve in a role-play to help a client negotiate a challenge they are facing in their professional life. Sun will set up a course of items that represent particular 'obstacles' the client may feel are in their way and then ask her client to walk with the horse around the course. Often,

the horse will not follow the course and the client will begin to deliberate what they can do to change that. "It's then that I'll question them and say, 'What are you actually thinking right

now?' They might say: 'I'm thinking how important it is I get this job.' When I ask them how they're *feeling*, they might say: 'That last time I didn't get it and actually, I really don't feel good about myself because of that.' The horse is usually picking up on those mixed messages – that what they're saying isn't what they're feeling – and so it's unsure.





“It’s likely that this is what’s also going on in their human interactions. But role-playing with a horse is safer, it’s more objective.”

No prior experience of horses is necessary and no riding takes place during the course of therapy. Instead, sessions focus on building trust between animal and client, and helping the client to understand how their unconscious behaviours may be interpreted, and how to better manage the trauma they have suffered. The horses are untethered and are encouraged to roam freely. This means that they interact willingly and naturally with clients, says Sun. Only certain horses are capable of such intense psychological work. “They have to be emotionally fit themselves,”

she explains. “I can tell immediately if a horse is capable of it but sometimes it will take two or three years to get them to the point when they are ready. They need to be able to think their way through difficulties, not to panic. As we’re bringing them on, they often get a sense of self and a sense of security. Often they will have been mistreated by humans and many of them will be developing alongside our clients. With help, they go back to just being a horse and our clients go back to being the people they once were.”

*IFEAL, Hale Court Farm, Beech Green Lane, Withyham, East Sussex.
www.ifeal.me*

