

STEED SIGNALS

Horse connection harbours hope

Report: Joe Clapson
Pictures: Graeme Main

AN UNUSUAL psychotherapy treatment that brings sufferers of post-traumatic stress face-to-face with wild horses is achieving surprising results.

The Dare to Live programme helps ex-Servicemen and civilians “re-centre” their minds and reduce stress levels by walking among herds and carefully interacting with them.

At a quiet farm in East Sussex, participants with no previous equine experience approach the untamed animals under the guidance of professional therapists.

Before stepping into the steeds’ domain, they are taught that horses respond best to what humans are feeling, not what they are thinking.

Sun Tui (pictured above), a former member of the Territorial Army and lead trainer at Dare to Live, told *Soldier* how her own experiences led to the idea.

“With the loss of my child I developed severe depression and, coming out of a military



environment after a divorce, the transition to civilian life left me in a mess,” she explained.

“But I noticed that when I got involved with horses the depression lifted.”

The scheme may seem quirky, with some detractors championing more traditional methods of treatment, but those involved say they are experiencing positive changes to their mental health.

“When we are being soft and relaxed, horses want to know us,” Tui said. “It’s when people are stressed in their

minds that they aren’t interested.

“We are using the animals to rewire the pathways to the brain, giving a more relaxed route.

“When people find success with this – even for just 30 seconds – it is bliss.”

Qualified in psychotherapeutic counselling and influenced by Zen martial arts philosophy, the founder of the International Foundation of Equine Assisted Learning now hopes the technique will assist others affected by bereavement and trauma.

“Soldiers who have been on the course say it’s just incredible because they are able to forget everything else,” the former Reservist with the Royal Corps of Transport explained.

“The development of neuroscience has really helped our understanding and studies are showing that when you are relaxed, and the more you stay in that state, the better your body can unwind.”

Hugh Forsyth, a former explosive ordnance disposal operator, spoke candidly about why he was willing to give a day walking with horses a go.



Animal interaction:
Ex-Royal Marine
Jay Coen (right)
attends a Dare to
Live course along
with other former
military personnel

"I saw some pretty bad incidents during my time in the Army such as six people getting blown up in a van in Ireland," the ex-Royal Engineer said.

"Also, while doing mine clearance in Bosnia I was tasked to take a load of explosives to different destinations around the country and saw a car veer off the road and go down an embankment. When I went to help, the guy put a gun to my head."

Forsyth left the Army with a spinal injury in 1997 and years later began experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

"I started having difficulties with my marriage and I tried to commit suicide twice," the veteran revealed. "I began seeing Combat Stress in 2005 and it was their people that asked if I fancied a day with some horses. I said 'why not?'"

"I was bowled over by the fact that the horses were wild and I could get them to do whatever I wanted if I reacted to them properly."

Steeds used by the project are left to run free and it is down to the humans to connect on the animals' own terms. This process helps the visitors to understand more about the impact of their actions on others.

"When you're out there you begin to think 'where is the

space that I feel okay and where is the space that the horse feels okay?," said Tui. "Through that process the body begins to calm."

Thanks to the techniques offered by the programme, Forsyth now feels optimistic about his future.

"It was like a miracle when the horse lifted its head up and wanted to engage with me," he said.

"It's a lovely warm feeling and I got a real buzz out of it – it's the calmest I've felt in years."

The project's organisers are liaising with various charities to get more people – especially those connected to the Armed Forces – to work with the horses.

By spending time with these animals, ex-Service personnel are beginning to see a civilian life ahead that they can control.

"I have learnt how to take a deep breath and centre myself without having a twisted stomach," said Forsyth. "It's worth giving it a go and those in charge of others should consider it because it will help soldiers who are trying to understand what's going on in their heads."

The father-of-four added: "I will never be cured of post-traumatic stress disorder, I have to learn to live with it, but working with horses has made me more aware of when I'm getting anxious." ■

● For more information about Dare to Live visit www.ifeal.me/dare-to-live

