

Horses Healing Humans: The Multifaceted Role of Equines in Addiction Rehabilitation

By Sarah E. Coleman for ELCR

Those of us lucky enough to grow up working with and riding horses are intimately familiar with the tangibles equines bring us: empathy, a sense of responsibility, a solid work ethic, the ability to control our emotions, happiness, stress reduction, physical strength and a sense of well-being, among a plethora of others. But horses can provide so much more than relaxation; they can be powerful tools on the road to addiction recovery, as detailed in this article.

And for those who grew up working in barns and stables, the horses – and their caretaking -- also gave us an incredible breadth of skills: we learned how to muck stalls, run equipment, fix fences, care for living beings, pay attention to detail, understand herd dynamics and, often most poignantly, we gained security of knowing we could make a bit of money performing manual labor and be valued for our skills.



The John Volken Academy Ranch facility focuses on providing students with equine and agricultural vocational skills.

Sobering Statistics

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration estimates that nearly 15.4 percent of American adults struggle with a substance use disorder each year – this percentage encompasses nearly 39 million people. One of the most concerning addictions is to synthetic opioids like fentanyl, which can be combined with other drugs that make them many times more potent – and potentially deadly. Fentanyl now accounts for nearly 70 percent of overdose deaths in the United States.

As the opioid crisis in the United States continues to gain traction, rehabilitation organizations everywhere are seeking innovative and better ways to assist the people in their care. One newer philosophy involves shifting the focus of those in rehab from their next drug encounter to learned skills, garnering all sorts of other benefits in the process.

“Vocational training” is more than just a buzzword: this type of training offers addicts the opportunity to focus on training and skills that will assist them in finding meaningful work once they’re out of live-in rehab or transitional programming. This work then helps them feel more valued and they become more likely to continue a healthy, drug-free lifestyle. Livestock husbandry is one type of vocational training being offered by some addiction recovery programs.

Additionally, there are myriad programs across the country that are deeply vested in using horses – and the land on which they reside – to help those impacted by addiction find their way back to a drug-free path. In many programs, horses are utilized as therapeutic tools in the traditional sense, helping people learn how to control their emotions and work through trauma. Some programs, however, are using the horses in a more unique manner: to teach skills needed for employment and life.

Addiction can affect anyone, no matter their socioeconomic station or their physical location. While once believed to be an issue that affected those in the inner city and lower-income strata, it has now become clear that even those from wealthy, agrarian roots are not immune.

Being closer to land and livestock offers specific benefits to those trying to become sober. Those familiar with horses already know many of them: the horses force people to slow down, to be aware of everything from the weather to respiration patterns to surroundings. The horses all but demand that those interacting with them be in the moment.

The skills horses teach can be carried over into nearly any job, but three programs in particular focus on providing equine-centric vocational skills: the John Volken Academy Ranch, the Taylor Made Farm's Stable Recovery program, and Beartooth Men's Rehab.



Students at the John Volken Academy Ranch focus on lifestyle changes, not simply remaining drug- or alcohol-free.

The John Volken Academy Ranch <https://jvaranch.org>

With three recovery facility locations across the United States and Canada, entrepreneur and founder John Volken is dedicated to assisting those in addiction. His Phoenix, Arizona, facility focuses on providing equine and agricultural vocational skills to those enrolled in the center.

The recovery center encompasses a boarding facility that is set on 45 acres with nearly 160 horses, other livestock, and fruit trees – all nestled near the San Tan Mountain. The ranch is nothing if not busy – in addition to caring for the horses, program participants assist with running events and helping at the farm-and-fleet store housed on ranch grounds.



Students at the John Volken Academy Ranch in Phoenix, Arizona, care for horses six days a week. They clean stalls, feed, water and ensure each of the nearly 160 horses are healthy and cared for.

The location and offerings at the ranch are no accident: furniture magnate John Volken visited multiple rehab centers across North America before creating his school. Its mission is deeply personal to him: a self-made man, Volken knows the importance of belief and pride in oneself. To this end, all his facilities offer longer-term treatments. “You can’t fix behavior or lack of life skill or confidence in a short-term program,” says Matthew Lauer, program director and a graduate of the Volken Academy. “The reality is,

it's unrealistic to expect to develop the tools to stay sober and attain a wholesome, successful life in a 30-, 60- or 90-day program. Most will struggle with sobriety in the long term."

The ranch focuses on overall lifestyle changes, not simply remaining drug- or alcohol-free. Attendees in the program get up at 4:30 each morning and the men are required to shave each day. "We make our beds every day so that we start with an accomplishment," says Lauer. "We all complete our responsibilities in an 8- or 10-hour day," he explains. "We don't call it work; we call it responsibilities – everything from our appearance and hygiene to how we hold ourselves and the duties we complete."

Both male and female students clean stalls six days a week; they feed, water, and ensure that each horse is healthy and cared for. Halfway through the two-year program, students can begin educational courses to become farriers or vet techs (Volken pays the tuition for each student).

The program teaches participants to become community leaders by giving students increasing amounts of responsibility and mentorship of incoming students. This reinforces their own recovery, says Lauer. The ability to remain addiction-free requires meaningful employment. The training offered at the ranch creates quality employees who feel worthy of gainful employment and prepared to meet the challenges of the workforce.

Stable Recovery stablerecovery.net

Taylor Made Farm is an iconic, 1,100-acre Thoroughbred breeding operation and nursery located in the heart of Central Kentucky. The farm has been family-owned and -operated since 1976 and is now overseen by brothers Duncan, Ben, Mark, and Frank Taylor. The farm sells more Thoroughbreds at public auction than any other sales agency in the world.

When a family member began battling addiction, the entire Taylor tribe became intimately acquainted with the trials faced by each person struggling to become sober. Frank Taylor, in particular, couldn't help but believe that the horses – and farm work – would help pave the way to sobriety.



Thus, Taylor Made Stable Recovery was born. Stable Recovery is not a treatment facility, coordinator Josh Bryan stresses, but a sober-living community that focuses on skills training and job placement within the equine industry. Each of the 30 participants lives in Taylor Made housing, either on the farm or in a house in downtown Lexington.

With no fixed time limit on how long someone can stay in the program, Stable Recovery allows



Stable Recovery in Lexington, Kentucky, exposes students to on-farm work, as well as to the plethora of job opportunities in the equine industry.

participants to work at their own pace to gain horse-handling and husbandry skills and confidence before working elsewhere in the equine industry. This ability to tailor the program to each person's needs is what has made it so successful, Bryan says. Students in the program are not only exposed to on-farm work. Stable Recovery also brings a variety of guest lecturers to the farm each Wednesday. These speakers hold a variety of jobs in the equine industry, from veterinarians to salesmen to bloodstock agents. The key is that each of the speakers believes that the Stable Recovery participants have a place in the equine industry – and they want to help them find it.

At the end of the day, it always comes back to the horses. “These horses,” Bryan says, “I don’t know that I have the words for it. If you put someone in addiction with a horse, it’s like a lightbulb goes on: they get more motivated, happier, they get joy back. They get all that from the dedication and discipline the horses teach them – I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

Beartooth Men’s Rehab <https://beartoothmensrehab.com>

Susan and Tom George created Beartooth Men’s Rehab in 2001 and have ushered more than 1,000 men through the program since its inception. Similar to both Stable Recovery and the John Volken Academy Ranch, Beartooth Men’s Rehab is a residential program that focuses on the present and the future of its residents, giving the men skills they can take forward into successful careers and increased feelings of self-worth.



Beartooth Rehab in Powell, Wyoming, teaches students natural horsemanship principle; ranch horses are also used for equine therapy.

Set on a 50,000-acre working cattle ranch in Powell, Wyoming, Beartooth Rehab provides students with myriad vocational training opportunities, including welding, carpentry, heavy-equipment operation, animal husbandry and horse training. Students can also learn construction, auto mechanics and milling. Residents are encouraged to try their hand at all of them and then decide which skill they would like to pursue.

The Georges assist in each gentlemen’s job search, helping them create resumes and find and apply for job opportunities. Additionally, the couple are references for the men. “We have former students spread throughout the United States and a few in Canada, with about 15 who chose to remain in Wyoming and Montana working on ranches,” says Susan.

“We do equine therapy with the young men as well as teach them natural horsemanship principles. These skills can help them get jobs on ranches as well as at horse stables,” Susan explains. But Beartooth uses the horses for more than just vocational training. “From the mental health perspective, working with horses helps them to heal from trauma, become more confident and overcome fears that they may have.”

For those who love horses, the ability to be with them on open land is powerful and often intensely emotional; horses often become close confidants and treasured friends. For men and women facing addiction, horses can be even more: they can be true lifesavers, providing those in recovery with a vocation they enjoy and restoring in them a sense of self-worth and hope.

What Students Have to Say

“This program is hard, and it’s hard for a reason,” says Matt. “Sacrifice and hard work – the rewards are so amazing. You become richer in the sense of life. ... I’m now comfortable in my own skin. I have gained true morals and values and a purpose.”

- Matt L (Volken Academy Ranch)

"The program gave me something I never knew I was missing in life: an opportunity at a job that doesn't feel like work. No medicine could replace what the horses do for me. It's also given me a work ethic that has spilled over into all kinds of areas of my life, for which I am very thankful."

- Hunter B. (Taylor Made Stable Recovery)

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