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This Health Center Shows the Healing Power of Horses

And Brown University has Taken Notice

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Photo Courtesy Beachwood Center for Wellbeing.

By Courtney Gabrielson

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A few facts: Rhode Island is not only the highest-ranking state in the country for depression rates, but also tops New England as having residents with stress- and stress-related illnesses, according to a recent [Blue Cross Blue Shield study](#).

What's the solution?

For Rev. Lynne Phipps, it's interactive equine therapy.

"I started figuring out that horses help people heal," she said. "I've been a life-long equestrian, but about five years ago, with one horse in particular, [I recognized] what he was doing for me."

Phipps said that her own experiences, coupled with how she'd observed how horses benefited others, made her realize that more people needed access to horses and the therapy they bring.

Enter [Beachwood Center for Wellbeing](#), a company that's existed on a seaside farm in Wakefield for the past two years.

Phipps and Beachwood's methods are so uniquely successful that they've garnered the attention of Brown University, which began an evaluation of the organization's therapeutic approach in January. In fact, researchers haven't written Phipps: "Early examination of the data shows consistent decreases in depression, anxiety and stress scores. Patients are also reporting improvements in their subjective sense of well-being."

"It's the most judgement-free space in the world."

But what is that process? Phipps explained.

Patients come to Beachwood typically dealing with anxiety, depression, PTSD and other health issues. Over seven, one-and-a-half-hour sessions, clients join one of Beachwood's [five horses](#) and a trained therapist out on the Beachwood farm, in healing spaces like the "Lavender Labyrinth." There, they begin interacting with the horse from the ground — no riding.

The therapists are trained to work with both horses and people, and as such, the horse's reaction to the patient guides how the therapist guides the session.

"There's not much talking at all," Phipps said. "Once a horse and human is connected, I can see what's going on with the human through the behaviors of the horse. ... Oftentimes, people don't know what's wrong, but [the horse] knows what's wrong."

Phipps explains further. "The horse's responses are quite subtle," she said. "They move closer or farther away; they create safe space for themselves and for the clients to feel and react, which is why it's not judgmental. There's no shame, because [the horse's physical reactions] not so literal or obvious like seeing our own behavior reflected back at us."

Horses, Phipps continued, are objective readers of moods, as they must accurately observe their environment to survive as a prey animal.

"They're constantly aware of who's around them," Phipps said. And, unlike dogs or other pets, horses don't rely on the direct influence of the people they interact with to take care of them — and as such, don't mirror the surface moods of their caretakers.

Essentially, horses cut through projection and get to the heart of the matter.

"If you're anxious, if you're worried, they'll show you that you're worried," Phipps said. "It shows up in a really kind, gentle, wonderful way; there's no judgement. It's the most judgement-free space in the world."

And it's a therapy that works, Phipps added. How? The time with the horses reprograms or rebuilds the [neural pathways](#) — mental and nervous connections between learned information — that trauma has scrambled or broken, restoring clients to health.

Phipps told me story after story of clients coming in and experiencing freedom and recovery after their sessions with the horses. There's the patient who'd long suffered from fibromyalgia who was able to leave her therapy pain-free; a young adult with severe anxiety and panic attacks who was able to get out of bed, go to school with peace and

ultimately graduate; and one patient's mother said her daughter had improved more in the five days she'd spent with the horses than a month at a large medical center in New York. These are not the center's [only successes](#), and they span age and gender.

"What the therapists are trained to do is create a safe space to go to those places and get in touch with your highest self, the person you are at the core of your being – and then become that person," Phipps said. "People oftentimes come to us who aren't horse people, [saying], 'I'm scared of horses, why horses?,' all of those things."

When they leave, their tune has changed, with clients telling Phipps, "I had no idea this was possible, I had no idea what I would find inside myself."

Brown isn't the only organization taking notice of the company's successes. Beachwood has partnered with Venture for America, the Social Enterprise Greenhouse, The Providence Center and Ocean State Job Lot, which was so impressed with Beachwood's work that they set up a program for its employees and their families.

Beachwood wants to continue this trajectory of healing. Originally bootstrapped, the company is now operating under a nonprofit model and looking to train additional therapists and acquire more locations. It's a logical step, as the organization already has many out-of-state clients fly in to Rhode Island for treatment.

But one of Beachwood's most immediate concerns is continuing to provide opportunity for free therapy, as this type of service is rarely covered under health insurance. It's something the organization is committed to, boasting a rate of 44 percent of services provided free of charge to those in need.

Editor's Note: *Beachwood Center for Wellbeing is one of Rhode Island Inno's 2018 Coolest Companies. [Read more here.](#)*

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