



Main: EAP has become more popular in recent years. Below: a powerful connection, but a lack of regulation in the industry is causing concern

**D**AWN HOLMES is the young person and family service manager at Turning Point, a social enterprise that supports people with drug and alcohol issues, mental health concerns and learning disabilities. She commissions EAP for some young people in her care.

"Youth workers need to be really eclectic in the way they interact with the young people," she says. "Often it works best if you don't sit in a room or on either side of a table – it helps to do something else at the same time and not tackle anything directly. Equine-assisted therapy is very non-direct. It's also a world that a lot of people we work with have never experienced; being in fields with horses, it's a different experience for them that they wouldn't normally have access to."

But Dawn has struggled to find suitably qualified providers of EAP.

"It's difficult to find a place where the people running those sessions have mental health and trauma expertise," says Dawn.



"They're more likely to be horse people who have trained in therapy on the side."

The lack of mental health training concerns her: "If you open Pandora's box and you can't deal with what comes out, that will have a significant impact on a young person. If you address something that has gone on in their past in the wrong way, that will have a detrimental effect."

Dr Clare Thomas-Pino, senior lecturer in human-animal interaction at Hartpury University, shares these concerns.

"Having seen the industry grow over the past 30 years, I do see some issues in that people are working outside their scope

of practice," she says. "There are people purporting that the animals are providing therapy and taking on clients beyond what they are capable of working on."

Clare makes a clear distinction between the roles of the horse and the therapist: "Horses don't provide therapy, they provide an equine environment that can be therapeutic. It's the practitioners who provide the therapy."

**I**N the US, "therapist" is a legally protected title in most states. A minimum of a master's level of education and a qualification in that state are required to practise therapy. The American Psychological Association and the American Counselling Association both have wings that deal with animal-assisted therapy. Practitioners who don't meet the set of core competencies can lose their licence.

In the UK, qualifications in EAP vary hugely. Last year Hartpury University launched the UK's first MSc animal-assisted counselling and psychotherapy course, designed for those who have already qualified as psychologists or counsellors and are looking to add animal-assisted therapy to their practice.

The current intake of students, who will graduate in July, all had more than 10 years' professional experience prior to starting the course. At the opposite end of

the scale, there are online courses in EAP costing less than £100, with no experience of mental health or horses required.

The EASP has identified this as an issue in the industry: "There is a huge disparity in qualifications, which can be confusing for the public and for people who want to become practitioners," says Sarah Jane.

To try to bring some clarity, the EASP has tasked a specialist group of equine-assisted psychotherapists with looking at the various courses and training routes currently available.

Dawn has concerns about what happens after someone qualifies.