

*“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”*

DAWN HOLMES

# Rules of engagement

Equestrians know how good horses are for the soul – but is the proliferation of equine-assisted psychotherapists safe for both horses and humans? Catherine Welton finds out how experts are working towards a gold standard

**A** GROWING body of scientific research is proving what equestrians instinctively know: being around horses is good for our mental health. Equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) – where someone interacts with a horse as part of their therapeutic process – is being increasingly used to treat a wide range of mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, addiction and eating disorders.

Philip Johnson is a clinical and sports psychologist. He first used EAP 20 years ago at the Sporting Chance clinic set up by footballer Tony Adams.

“In the 28-day programme, we included four sessions of equine-assisted therapy,”

says Philip. “It was all males with severe addiction issues. The horses acted as a mirror for the humans’ behaviour, enabling the individual to connect in a very different way with the horse and with themselves.”

Recently, he’s seen EAP become increasingly popular.

“New facilities emerge on a regular basis now,” says Philip. “The equine industry has recognised its own potential.”

It’s a rise that’s also been noticed by the Equine Assisted Services Partnership (EASP), a membership body for the equine-assisted services sector.

Director Sarah Jane Williamson says: “The number of providers of all types of equine-assisted services has increased in recent years, as riding establishments

and individual practitioners seek to diversify. There also appears to be an increasing interest from the public and from qualified counsellors and psychotherapists who want to offer equine-assisted interactions to meet this increased public interest. And more research is being undertaken to validate EAP as a viable, sustainable service.”

It may be increasingly popular, but how can customers be sure it’s bona fide – and professional? As the industry has grown, so have concerns about the lack of standards and regulations.

While “clinical psychologist” is a legally protected term, other mental health titles such as “psychotherapist” and “counsellor” are not, meaning anyone can use them.