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Using Horsepower to Fight PTSD and Veteran Suicide

Meggan Hill-McQueeney, the president of BraveHearts, is an ardent advocate for the benefits of therapeutic riding, also known as equine therapy



Meggan Hill-McQueeney, photographed at BraveHearts Therapeutic Riding and Educational Center, Harvard, Ill., Oct. 8. PHOTO: TIM KLEIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By

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Meggan Hill-McQueeney, a lifelong equestrian, first witnessed the healing power of horses while working after college on a ranch in Colorado, where she was teaching people to ride. A family had brought their 4-year-old son, a boy with Down syndrome who was uncommunicative. Something about the horse captivated him. Sitting in the saddle, he

signed “horse”—the first word he had ever communicated. His mother started crying, which prompted his first spoken word too: “Mama.”

Moved by the encounter, Ms. Hill-McQueeney began to learn about the then little-known concept of therapeutic riding or equine therapy. She realized that she had been involved in equine therapy for much of her life, though she had never seen it in those terms. Now 47 years old and the president and CEO of [BraveHearts](#), a therapeutic-riding center outside of Chicago, Ms. Hill-McQueeney was born a congenital amputee, missing her right arm. When she was 4, growing up in Florida, her parents bought her a couple of Shetland ponies and built a corral. “My dad was very adamant that it was a two-handed world,” she recalls. Riding and caring for the horses forced her to learn to use her prosthetic arm—brushing the horses, saddling them, holding the reins. “I just fell in love with them,” she says. But it also taught her grit and perseverance: “I broke a lot of bones.”

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In the 1990s, she created her own therapeutic-riding programs, serving children with a range of physical and cognitive disabilities. She saw children with autism and children who had suffered traumatic accidents. Their parents often brought them because nothing else had worked. No matter the disability or the diagnosis, therapeutic riding helped. “I haven’t seen a situation that a horse hasn’t been an answer to,” Ms. Hill-McQueeney says.

At BraveHearts, which began in 2002, Ms. Hill-McQueeney now focuses on military veterans. Many are referred by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs or come from VA hospitals—men and women dealing with blindness, spinal-cord injuries, PTSD and other issues. They step off the bus skeptical, she says, doubting that a horse could help solve their problems—but when they leave, they’re different: “I can’t get them back on the bus.” The veterans don’t just say that the horse improved their quality of life; they often tell her that the horse saved their life.

Kyle Farbman, a veteran who suffers from PTSD and a survivor of military sexual trauma, says that he was ready to end his life when he got a call from BraveHearts. “How are you? Come ride,” he recalls the group saying. The horses give him a reason to wake up, to get out of the house and into the world, to see another day. His service dog, Ricky, acts as a buffer against the world, he says, but the horses “help me with my mind.”



Ms. Hill-McQueeney suspects that research has barely scratched the surface of the therapeutic benefits that horses can offer humans. PHOTO: TIM KLEIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

As many as 30% of American veterans deal with some form of PTSD, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs, and some 22 veterans a day take their lives. Ms. Hill-McQueeney is fiercely committed to stemming the tide of veteran suicide.

Experience has taught her that the key to the therapeutic process is keeping the focus on the horses—having the veterans direct their attention to making sure the horse is comfortable. “If someone comes to the farm and is apprehensive or fearful, the horse is covered in fear,” Ms. Hill-McQueeney says. “Horses are brilliant at reading intention. They are lie detectors, instantly.”

Studies have found that horses can smell adrenaline and sync their heart rates with those of humans. “When you’re near a horse, you have to practice the art of keeping your energy in a good spot,” she says. “To trust them, they have to trust you. Helping the horse reciprocates to helping the person. It’s just so natural, but it ends up changing you.”

Research on equine therapy has shown that it improves quality of life and reduces depression and suicidal tendencies. A study of 23 subjects published earlier this year in

the Journal of Military Medicine found that the treatment improved self-esteem, eased PTSD symptoms, and increased veterans' ability to work and perform daily tasks. Ms. Hill-McQueeney suspects that the research has barely scratched the surface of the benefits that horses can offer humans. Part of the problem is funding: "It's not like there's a pharmaceutical company that's behind equine therapy," she notes.

'All a horse really wants is peace.'

Her theory is that horses have a calming influence because they are prey animals, not predators like dogs (or humans). Even on the racetrack, horses run out of the gates because their instincts tell them not to be last, whereas

dogs run because they are hoping to catch and eat a mechanical hare. "As humans, we're chasing the paycheck, chasing the title. Horses aren't like that," she says. "They've been able to survive by reading intention. All a horse really wants is peace."

In 2013, she launched Operation Mustang, which pairs veterans with mustangs—a wild, undomesticated breed of horse. In the U.S., tens of thousands of mustangs have been rounded up into holding pens to keep them from encroaching on private grazing land. In the process, they are removed from the lands they have known and the herds they have grown up with; they are castrated, inoculated and freeze-branded. In short, they are deeply traumatized.

Ms. Hill-McQueeney sees a parallel with many suffering veterans. "Vets respond to that wild piece," she says. "The mustangs instantly require their attention, and these guys are used to chaos."

Through the work of taming the mustangs, veterans rediscover trust, partnership and purpose, she says. They form a deep bond with the horses, and many go on to become instructors at the facility, helping other veterans past their darkest moments.

This year, BraveHearts will see more than 1,000 veterans, and Ms. Hill-McQueeney longs to reach even more. "Is it unconventional? Innovative? Does it help?" she asks. Her answer to all those questions is "yes." "We've got an epidemic of veteran suicide in this country," she says. "If nothing else works, try a horse."

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