

Submission from Organisation: Equine Learning Experiences Australia

To Whom It may Concern,

I have been working in Ballarat for the last 12 years and supporting people in the mental health sector.

Initially I worked for a Disability Employment Services (DES) provider and I had 65 on my caseload with 80% of those people their disability being chronic and prolonged mental health.

It was during my employment with them i started studying equine therapy (drawing upon horses as partner in the counselling session). I approached our CEO at the time [REDACTED] and shared with him what I was learning and studying , and he gave me 10 long term unemployed people impacted by chronic mental health to see if the counselling sessions I held using horses as part of the counseling session would be of benefit. The engagement of these clients both during the program and afterwards was 100% from all jobseekers.

I had one lady with complex PTSD after sexual assault incident years earlier and she was unable to leave her house unless her 18 yr old son drove her. Since the program she has had her own art exhibition and 5 years on recently sent me a message reading...

'Hi Em, I have had many experiences with mindfulness and my dog since i met you and your horses. I have learnt so much about myself and have healed so much of myself because of you and the information you gave me and letting me experince the healing qualities of the horses.

I just want you to know that I am not only leaving my house by myself easily, i rarely get panic attacks, but I am doing two and a half days of work per week now.

It seems like such a long time ago and yet it seems like just yesterday that I was such a mess. Healing is possible".

In the 9 years since I started my own coaching / counselling practice , I have had many people come to our counselling service completed disillusioned with the mental health system and attending the main stream talk based therapies and with little or minimal result.

They found our service and might have had a small handful of sessions funded by e.g their school or youth justice, [REDACTED] , found they were actually starting to get some positive outcomes with their mental health and then their 4 or 6 or 8 sessions came to an end and their mental health plummeted again.

There seems to be 'the normal channel's for people to go to seek help for their mental health and this is successful for many people e.g go to GP get mental health care plan , have 10 sessions with psychologist etc..If you're a young person go to headspace....

There are many many people impacted by mental health that this does not work for though and I believe we need to support people to find a therapy /. Therapist that works for Them and support them with the therapy they choose (as long as they do have therapy qualification such as

counselling, art therapy , music therapy , psychology , social work, OT etc) to achieve their goals for however long that takes, sometimes it does only take 10 sessions, sometimes it will take years. This one size fits all is not working and i feel we need to broaden the scope of available therapies people can access (keeping in mind that the therapist has to be qualified and working under a governing body) and the time frame is for the client. Yes it might be expensive to have someone in therapy for years however what is the cost of they cant leave the house , or work or contribute in our community and society in some way.

Another example is I had a [REDACTED] year old recently referred to me by [REDACTED] she had been admitted to psych services as a [REDACTED] year old and battled with mental health issues for over 10 years. She had recently been in a relationship which her partner became violent and has since been incarcerated. She was referred to our counselling service with 10 sessions and as she was starting to make progress , she advised the 10 sessions ended there were no more available and her mental health plummeted again. I have since been trying to get her some support through [REDACTED] mental health but they have just closed their doors and funding finished and I have suggested to try and apply for NDIS however even if she was successful with this , this would take 3-6 months and what does she do in the meantime , go back to conventional therapies that she has had no success with in the past as she is not able to access the therapy that has helped her?

Another example was a mother who referred her [REDACTED] yo to me and after a small number of sessions despite getting some positive outcomes with our counselling service was unable to access any more. This is the mothers letter at the time over the predicament she was in.

"To whom it may concern,

I'm the mother of a [REDACTED] year old daughter who was diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety over a year ago. This was a result of constant bullying during year [REDACTED], physically and verbally. This took a huge toll on her mental health. We had many meetings with the school to try and get the bullying to stop but it just continued and even got worse after the bullies realised she had told on them.

I found out she had started self harming at [REDACTED] because of the bullying. She was then referred to [REDACTED] and attended [REDACTED] weekly for a period of time and was later discharged. During this time she was moved into another class at school however the bullying still didn't stop, it continued at recess. I tried a number of times to get her into another school but we were knocked back due to zoning. I tried and tried to get the bullying to stop but we never got anywhere, no one would listen. I stayed awake many nights trying to think of what i could do. I cried everyday because i felt powerless to help my daughter.

[REDACTED] was no better and this was when her mental health really went downhill. She would beg me not to send her to school at times, she would come home crying or she would go to the office and ask them to ring me because something had happened. I hated sending her to school it made me feel sick knowing i was sending her somewhere she was not safe but i had no choice.

Halfway through [REDACTED] i took her to the doctor because she was very low on energy and always withdrawn, she wasn't herself at all. She was then sent to a psychologist and attended a couple of appointments and her psychologist said her issues are more severe than she usually deals with and she needed to be referred to Infant and child mental health. At this point i was not even aware she was suicidal but i found out things were worse than i thought.

She started attending Infant and child mental health weekly. Towards the end of [REDACTED] i found a suicidal note in her pocket when i was doing the washing, i drove straight to school to pick her up because i didn't want her out of my sight. Not long after i found a letter, she seemed to be planning to run away. I asked her about this and she told me she just can't deal with school anymore. I was so concerned about what might happen if she keeps attending that school. I told her she never has to go back there again. This was towards the end of [REDACTED] I never did send her back there again and had no intention of doing so. I had no idea what i was going to do though as i previously hadn't

been able to get her into another school. I just knew i could never send her back to her old school.

While i was busy writing letters to different schools she tried to OD on pills. Luckily she hadn't done herself a lot of damage as at this stage we had locked away pills and anything else we thought she could use to harm herself. We had been on suicide watch for some time. She only had access to period pills and thankfully she was okay after being observed at emergency for a while.

After that attempt she regularly told us she wanted to die, she was also having voices in her head (Audio hallucinations). she called it the demon in her head. It caused her a lot of stress, she would play music to try and drown it out. She couldn't sleep because this voice was worse at night. She was put on sleeping tablets which seemed to make no difference, she was put on anti depressants those too seemed to make little difference to her and at one stage she said she felt worse being on them. She had lost a lot of weight and lost interest in everything.

I did finally get her into another school. She completed ██████ at her new school but that was a lot harder on her than i thought it would be. She struggled to make friends because of the depression and anxiety. She thought everyone there hated her. she couldn't concentrate because of the audio hallucinations. She had several days a week off because her anxiety was too bad and she just couldn't get there. She would skip classes when she was at school because she would be too anxious to get to her next class, especially in her elective classes where she didn't have her regular classmates. This was still a problem right till the end of last term. I am hoping she finds getting to class easier this year and with the help of Equine Counselling (therapy) i think she will.

She attended Infant and child mental health for about a year, she was discharged about September last year. She told them she didn't need to go there anymore and would refuse to engage during her appointments. She said it just doesn't help her. My husband and i were left to ourselves and had no idea where to turn next. We knew our daughter was still unwell and needed help, her cuts were proof of that. At this point she was still cutting regularly. Her thighs were covered in cuts, the school rang me about it one day because they had been bleeding at school. There was little we could do to stop her, I searched her room for pencil sharpeners because i knew she used them to cut and had removed them from her before. I just found sharpeners with no blades. I asked her to give me the blades and she told me she can't because she is scared that if she doesn't cut she would explode. It was her way of dealing with the pain and difficult emotions. I thought this was as good as it was going to get and our daughter will never be back to normal, we were out of options.

I first heard about Equine therapy from my daughter's clinician on her last appointment at Infant and child mental health. I had never heard of it before so i found some info on the internet and thought it was worth a try. I contacted Emily at Equine learning experiences Australia. The problem was then we could not afford to send her to this therapy. I then did manage to get her a small amount of funding from Infant and child mental health this was enough for 9 sessions of which she has completed 6 of those sessions but have been told she will need many many more because she has so much trauma.

The changes we have seen in our daughter after only six sessions has been amazing. I was worried we would never get her back to her happy self but she is well on her way. My husband was skeptical of Equine therapy before she started but has seen it work for her now too. Christmas 2016 was very different to Christmas 2015. She tried to OD weeks before Christmas 2015 and she was totally miserable, she couldn't sleep at night, she lost a lot of weight because she wouldn't eat properly, she would spend her school holidays in bed all day. She was too anxious to leave the house. We were pretty much house bound those Christmas holidays because we were on suicide watch for her. Her big sister would watch her, sometimes even her big sisters boyfriend would keep an eye on her too. She spent most of the holidays in bed. My mum had our daughter stay with her for a few days so we could have a break and take her younger brothers out of the house for a while. It was extremely hard on all of us. What a change we saw in her for Christmas 2016, she had come a long way, I couldn't believe it, on the way traveling to our parents our daughter was singing Christmas carols all the way there. She was so happy, she was excited. Her grandparents noticed the changes in her too.

We noticed changes after only a few sessions of Equine therapy. First of all she had stopped cutting and her thighs are now healing. It's like a huge weight has been lifted off her and all of us. She is more relaxed (i don't think she has been able to relax for years, she was always on edge), she is calmer, she talks more, she is happier, she has better concentration, she joins in with us, she plays with her younger brothers again, she sleeps better (no sleeping

tablets), she eats better, she gets out of the house more, she enjoys spending time with her friends again, she doesn't spend all school holidays in bed. She also copes better when things don't go her way. After a few sessions she would cry if she was upset, this should be normal but she hadn't cried for so long. It was like her built up emotions were finally being released. She never cried no matter how upset she was.

Equine Counselling / therapy has been just what our daughter needs. She never complains about attending Equine Counselling / therapy, she gets along with Emily and she loves the horses. It is without a doubt the only thing we have seen positive changes with. After many trips to doctors psychologist, many appointments at infant and child mental health, she had made very little progress. She still has a way to go especially regarding self esteem and anxiety. Our daughter has been through so much, i am grateful she is still with us. My goal for over a year has been to just keep her alive. I don't know where we would be without Equine Counselling / therapy,

We have finally found something that is making a positive difference in our daughters life and now we are impacted by another hurdle around accessing funding to enable her to continue. I would hate to stop this therapy because we can no longer afford to send her only to have her go backwards. We want our daughter to concentrate at school again, attend all classes, one day get a job and lead a happy normal life. I think Equine therapy is the answer and will get her back to exactly where she needs to be.”

I am sorry to say but two days after writing this letter this lady (who will remain anonymous due to confidentiality) passed away suddenly , and her young teenage girl was unable to get any further support for our service. A teacher at her school tried for 2 years for her to come back to our service and all funding applications were rejected. This story is an absolute indictment on the mental health system of Australia.

In our 9 years of operating, we have had our local Buninyong Community Bank fund a \$30,000 research project with Federation university on the efficacy of our equine counselling program. After 2 years of research there was consistent evidence that our therapy was beneficial over three cohorts children, youth and adults.

The chairman of the Community Bank 'Steve Falconer' is on many boards , both in the health and community sectors. He took this research project to many of his contacts and shared it with so many people however due to barriers and blocks in our health system , this evidence on the efficacy of our counselling was not shared with the decision makers that can make change and therefore we have a waiting list of people still who cannot access our service who are desperate to as they are in a system that has a narrow outlook on what therapies they can engage in with government support. My argument though is that in the long run it costs our society so much more both economically and socially to not support people in the way that is client centred and meets their needs not 'The systems' needs.

I have included a link to the research project

https://elea.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/FedU_ELEA_8ppA4_web.pdf

<https://elea.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ELEA-RESEARCH-REPORT.pdf>

As well as a link to a story covered on our program by channel 10, 'The project'

Which can be found that either

www.elea.com.au

or

<https://www.facebook.com/TheProjectTV/videos/10154754321373441/>

I guess to finish up with my submission, the message I am trying to get across is, the current mental health system currently is not working, there is limited amount of therapies that is funded and supported by the government and a lot of those therapies are talk based. In my experience people don't want to just talk about their problems , they want support to feel better about themselves and medication is not the only answer.

Our counselling practice is experiential so people are engaging their minds and bodies, it is somatically informed as the body and the mind we all know are connected so why support one without the other, basic things like diet, exercise and sleep are not taken into account in being a factor as to why people are out of balance. A personal example is I was feeling a little flat last year for about 6 weeks, I was working long hours and it was winter time. I went to my GP and he wanted to prescribe me PROZAC, I was dumbfounded and strongly rejected this and asked for a more natural option. He suggested exercising so my heart rate was up for 30 min a day and taking a vitamin 'st johns wort', within two weeks I was feeling great again. Why wasn't this the first option? Why do dr's get kick backs for prescribing medication.

I am currently investing in a internationally renowned trauma treatment training program called 'Somatic Experiencing' it is specifically for treating people with PTSD, trauma and who have an inability to regulate their nervous system and are stuck in a constant state of hyper or hypo arousal. Most of my clients fall into this category. I am paying for this \$30,000 course out of my own pocket and spending 3 years completing it. It is called Somatic experiencing and it is highly regarded therapy in the U.S.A and other parts around the world. The man behind this course is "Peter Levine" who has been at the forefront of effective trauma treatment and nervous system regulation since the 1970's. Most of the leading practitioners around the world know of the effectiveness of his treatments. The decision makers in Australia's mental health system should be familiar with this highly successful modality of therapy, they need to look more broadly at what is working on a global basis and take into account therapy models such as Somatic Experiencing.

Last year we were referred by [REDACTED] a client with significant PTSD, psychologist advised it was the worse case of abuse she had ever come across, and advised she did not know what else she could do to treat and support her. She had 6 funded sessions and within those 6 sessions there as a significant and positive shift in this clients ability to cope with her day to day life and barriers. Then as per usual the funding stopped. This client needed 6 + years of therapy not 6 sessions. I put my feelers out to some contact at [REDACTED] and 6 months later with the clients mental health in the meantime plummeting lower and lower, finally she was able to access funding through NDIS. Drawing upon the Somatic experiencing model and equine therapy / counselling, this client after 7 months is doing better than she has in years. She is not dissociating as regularly is looking to her future and possible employment options and for the first time in 25 + years feels she has a reason to live and a future to look forward to.

If anything can come out of this Royal Commission to our mental health system, can it please be that Australian's can access a broader range of therapies, not have to wait for months and years. To be able to engage in therapy models that are at the forefront of treatment elsewhere around the world such as somatic experiencing, or art therapy, music therapy, equine therapy and a lot of these alternate but very effective therapies in their own right. If these therapists have completed the appropriate training and are working within the parameters of a governing body (I am governed by the Australian counselling association – ACA) as a counsellor with my advanced diploma and have regular fortnightly supervision. Yes there needs to be governance over therapists but we need to be more broad minded to accommodate a broader range of therapies, and support people for however long they need to be supported according to their needs not our needs and how long we think it should take them to get better.

On a final note here is a letter written by a [REDACTED] yo student from a local high school, she was homeless around this time and in and out of the youth justice system. Our local Buninyong Community Bank funded her to attend sessions as there was no help to access our counselling service through the conventional mental health channels.

'Dear Emily

I want to wish you the happiest of Christmases. I want to thank you for the amount of love and dedication you put into your amazing job. The fact that you listen and not judge me at all makes me so very happy and I finally feel like I have a voice and its being heard.

Equine Counselling / therapy has been the best thing for me. I've learnt to be grounded, I've also learnt and still learning about relationships, mindfulness and communication skills. Im so so happy that I remember and use the things that you teach me in the bush out with the horses, out on my own with no one having to tell me too!!

Emily, thank you so much for having faith in me and that I can do this."

Feel free to contact me to discuss in more depth any of the above mentioned elements of my submission.

Warmest Regards

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