DISCOVERING THE MEANING OF THE EXPERIENCE OF INTERACTING WITH HORSES

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By
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ABSTRACT

The literature on the human-animal bond is vast and has focused mainly on the bond between humans and their pets or small companion animals. However, within the literature, few studies exist that explore the human-horse interaction. Furthermore, studies that specifically examine the human partner’s perceived meaning of human-horse interactions are limited. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of adults who have interacted with horses. The intent of the study is to: 1) explore the essence or meaning of human-horse interactions, and 2) examine how this essence may contribute to a perceived sense of well-being.

This study adheres to phenomenological data collection and analysis methods. Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with eight adult participants who reside in Saskatchewan. Data analysis followed the procedures of phenomenal analysis as outlined by Moustakas (1994). The meaning or essence of the participants’ experiences of their interaction with horses was constructed through the emergence of central themes coming from the data. The essence of the findings shows that interacting with horses was beneficial to the eight participants in five ways. The five themes that emerged from the data are: the physical benefits that being around horses provides, the intellectual growth of individuals interacting with horses, the emotional healing that takes place within individuals, the social benefits of relationships that are formed, and the spiritual space horses seemingly create in individuals.

This research provides emerging knowledge and insight into interactions between humans and horses, which may in turn lead to improvements in the practice of equine-assisted activities. This research contributes to the social work knowledge base by creating an examination of the perceived meaning and roles of horses as contributors to human well-being.
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DEDICATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social work practitioners in Canada are increasingly using horses, as co-facilitators in the field of mental health and learning programs (Schlote, 2009; Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010; CanTRA, 2011). The practice of incorporating horses within these contexts is generally referred to as equine-assisted activities (EAA) (Selby, 2009). The field of animal-assisted interventions is vast and there is considerable debate over how best to categorize the different practices that exist (Schlote, 2009). For example, some programs offer education or learning, while others offer personal growth and development (Bizub, Joy & Davidson, 2003; Dell, Chalmers, Dell, Sauve & McKinnon, 2008; Ewing, MacDonald, Taylor & Bower, 2007; Hallberg, 2004; Karol, 2007; Klontz, Bivens, Leinart, & Klonz, 2007; Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010). Education or learning programs refer to any number of practices where the horse serves to facilitate learning or knowledge (Schlote, 2009). For instance, horses may help clients understand body language and communication skills or clients may learn how to care for horses. Personal growth and development programs refer more to the involvement of horses in the therapeutic treatment of humans, as seen in professional fields such as psychology, physiotherapy and social work (Schlote, 2009). Common within both education and learning programs and personal growth and development programs is the inclusion of the horse as an integral component in assisting the participant towards a goal of improved emotional health and personal well-being.

Personal well-being can be described as a state of being in which all aspects of a person’s life are in balance. Such aspects include a person’s psychological, emotional,
social, environmental, spiritual, and physical needs (Feral, 1998). When these needs are met, personal well-being is obtained and health is optimized.

1.1 Purpose of the study

This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of eight adults, who have directly interacted with horses, for the intended purpose of discovering the essence or meaning of the human-horse interaction. The essence of a phenomenon is considered to represent the true nature of the phenomenon being studied and is described as the features of a lived experience that is common to most persons who have had the experience (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The research question for this study asks, “What do adults experience when they interact with horses that they consider contributes to their personal well-being?” The study further seeks to discover if the participants consider their interaction with horses as contributing to their personal well-being.

1.2 Background / rationale for the study

Acquiring an understanding of the meaning of the experiences of individuals when they interact with horses and how this meaning may contribute to their personal well-being may be helpful in further building the EAA knowledge base. Increased research in the area of the human-horse interaction may be useful for practitioners incorporating horses in therapy because it may provide a deeper understanding of the experience of equine therapy programs and enhance program development which may lead to better therapeutic outcomes. The results of this study may also lead to a deeper comprehension of how humans make meaning from their experience with the horse and how that meaning may contribute to their personal well-being, which is important for daily functioning and an overall sense of being able to meet life’s challenges.
Reports in social work literature on the practice relevance of the human-animal bond date back to 1975 (Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010). The human/animal bond has been defined as,

a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes, but is not limited to, emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, other animals, and the environment (Fine & Beck, 2010, p. 7).

However, the bulk of human-animal studies have focused on the relationship between people and their pets or companion animals (Fine, 2010; Risley-Curtiss, 2008; Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010). In comparison, few studies have emphasized the human-animal bond with respect to horses and humans and much of the literature that does examine EAA has focused on studies of children and adolescents (Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010). Further research into the human-animal bond generally and the inclusion of horses in therapeutic processes specifically is needed due to the growing popularity of animal assisted therapies and the increasing inclusion of horses within these therapies (Netting, Wilson & New, 1987; Turner, Wilson, Fine & Mio, 2010; Fine & Beck, 2010). Research documenting the correlations and value of animals in people’s lives would enhance the human-animal bond’s credibility (Fine & Beck, 2010).

As well, part of the experience of interacting with horses is that they require individuals to be in the moment and develop present moment focus or presence (Garcia, 2010; Pelletier, 2009; Parelli, 1993; Kohanov, 2001; Kohanov, 2003). Garcia (2010) states, “besides its therapeutic benefits, working with horses is also a wonderful way to
learn about creating and sustaining *presence*” (p. 85). Having *presence* can be described as attending to the internal experiences occurring in each moment, such as bodily sensations, thoughts and emotions, and at the same time attending to aspects of the environment, such as sights and sounds (Baer, 2003). By having *presence*, a person is then connected to what is happening in the ‘here and now.’ Karol (2007) emphasizes that paying attention to the ‘here and now’ and developing the client’s ability to be aware of his or her self while engaging in daily life is important for gaining personal insight and results in clients employing new ways of interacting with others and being in the world. Karol (2007) asserts that a horse is able to facilitate self awareness and presence.

Creating presence is an intrinsic component of *mindfulness* (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Mindfulness has long been believed to promote well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003). These authors state that, “*mindfulness* is most commonly defined as the state of being attentive to [internal and external experiences] and being aware of what is taking place in the present [moment]” (p. 822). Recent research has shown that the enhancement of mindfulness facilitates a variety of well-being outcomes (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Hick and Bien (2008) also support the notion that mindfulness improves well-being as they state, “the benefits to health and well-being from mindfulness is fairly well established” (p.232). As a result, “interventions based on training in mindfulness skills are becoming increasingly popular” (Baer, 2003, p. 125).

Mindfulness involves paying attention to one’s bodily experiences. Saleebey (1992) writes that the social work profession has become disembodied and has ignored the body and the visceral side of life and the body’s urges, promptings and energies, frailties and calamities, and its self-identity. Saleebey (1992) states, “for social work to
ignore the body compromises the quality of both theory and practice” (p. 112).

Tangenberg and Kemp (2002) agree that typical social work practice is concerned with conditions such as poverty, addiction, and violence with little attention given to the body in the professional literature and in social work’s theoretical and practice frameworks.

More recently however, the inclusion of mindfulness in everyday practice is increasingly evident within social work practice literature (Hick & Bien, 2008). For example, Hick and Bien (2008) observe, “the research studies to establish that the use of mindfulness by therapists cultivates the qualities necessary for effective therapeutic relationships are just beginning” (p. 233). Research studies serve to illustrate the value of mindfulness in developing therapeutic relationships (Hick & Bien, 2008). Stephen Hick (2008) explains that there is a growing movement among mental health professionals in mindfulness as it affects practice for themselves and their clients.

For the purposes of this study, it should be noted here that present moment focus, presence and mindfulness all relate to a similar concept or way of behaving and will be used interchangeably throughout the research study. This behaviour can be understood as a focusing of a person’s attention, becoming aware of his or her environmental surroundings as well as bodily sensations, thoughts and emotions, and thus creating an awareness of what is taking place in the present moment. The employment of, or the practice of, this concept/behavior of present moment focus, presence or mindfulness may result in a person obtaining or experiencing personal well-being.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The meaning of the experiences of adult interaction with horses is not clearly understood as very little literature exists. The bulk of the literature on equine activities has examined children and adolescents. Adult literature on equine-facilitated psychotherapy with adults is just starting to emerge (Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010). A gap exists in a deeper understanding of the meanings adults attach to their experience when they interact with horses.

2.1 Well-being

The concept of well-being includes both the physical and the mental health of an individual. Mental health can be constructed as a positive quality of life and psychological well-being, with enhanced emotional processing and coping skills in dealing with the debilitating effects of depression, anxiety, sleep deprivation, and other affective dimensions of mental disability (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt & Walach, 2004). Health parameters for physical well-being include the absence of, or lessened, medical symptoms, physical pain and physical impairment (Grossman et.al., 2004). Studies in the human-animal interaction have provided research to support the benefits of human-animal interactions as having a beneficial effect to both the physiological and psychosocial aspects of health (Baun & Johnson, 2010).

As well, there are many conceptual and anecdotal literary pieces in the area of humans and their interaction with animals. The conceptual or theoretical literature on human-animal interaction has overwhelmingly focused on the positive relationships between people and their pets, or companion animals (Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010; Beck & Katcher, 2003; Kirby, 2010; Karol, 2007; Parelli, 1993; Kohanov, 2003; Dell,
Chalmers, Dell, Suave & McKinnon, 2008; Fine, 2010; Fine & Beck, 2010; Serpell, 2010; Kruger & Serpell, 2010; Katcher & Beck, 2010; Hart, 2010; Friedman, Son & Tsai, 2010; Hines, 2003). Kruger and Serpell (2010) in their review of animal-assisted intervention literature affirm, “the idea that the presence of, or interactions with, animals can produce calming effects in humans is commonly cited in the animal assisted intervention literature” (p. 37).

The existing quantitative research in human-animal interaction has demonstrated that animals do have a positive effect on humans (Klontz, Bivens, Leinart & Klontz, 2007; Ewing, MacDonald, Taylor & Bower, 2007; Trotter, Chandler, Goodwin-Bond & Casey, 2008; Graham, 2007; Tetreault, 2006). Garcia (2010) suggests, “the horse human relationship may facilitate a positive re-framing of the individual’s relationship to self, to others, and to the greater ecology of the Earth” (p. 86). Karol (2007) notes that interacting with horses through riding, “can serve as a therapeutic change agent through the actual [felt] body experience in conjunction with the emotional and psychological connection between the human and horse” (p. 82). When interacting with horses, a person “is actually forced, through bombardment of a variety of stimuli, to stay present while riding...senses are stimulated by changing sights, sounds, smells, temperature, and the physical feel of the horse under them” (Tyler, 1994, p. 144). Staying present means being aware of experiences that are occurring in the moment both internally and externally (Baer, 2003). Having presence is a natural component of mindfulness (Brown & Ryan, 2003).
2.2 Mindfulness

The theoretical frameworks and perspectives that have been drawn upon to guide research and literature on equine assisted programs and the human-horse interaction, as well as human animal interaction include attachment theory (Karol, 2007), human-animal bond (Yorke, Adams & Coady, 2008), social support theory (Beck & Katcher, 2003), biophilia hypothesis (Beck & Katcher, 2003), ecology and ecopsychology (Beck & Katcher, 2003; Ewing et. al., 2007; Garcia, 2010) and person-in-environment (Garcia, 2010).

Research studies from the perspective of ‘mindfulness with horses’ and how mindfulness in conjunction with the interaction with the horses, contributes to personal well-being are virtually non-existent. Mindfulness is a present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in one’s attention is acknowledged and accepted as it is (Hick & Bien, 2008). Emily Pelletier (2009) mentions the importance of using mindfulness principles in equine facilitated wellness work to create a guide for practitioners to work safely and effectively with clients and horses together. Pelletier (2009) states, “horses are partners in experiences that initiate integration between cognition, emotion and the body while updating the nervous system to respond to the present” (p.10).

2.3 Equine assisted programs

A number of authors (Garcia, 2010; Karol, 2007; Kirby, 2010; Tyler, 1994) report that clients develop improved psychological and emotional health as a result of participation in equine-assisted programs. For example, in their equine-assisted learning program, Cartier Equine Learning Center (2010) states that, “by including horses in
specially designed educational experiences, equine-assisted specialists have greatly multiplied the participant's rate of success to self discovery” (para.5).

In a qualitative study by Bizub, Joy & Davidson (2003), using interviews of the five participants, numerous benefits to horseback riding for people with psychiatric disabilities were demonstrated that included positive psychosocial gains such as elevated self-esteem, becoming socially active, and seeking work. Klontz, Bivens, Leinart and Klontz’s (2007) quantitative study found that participants in an equine-assisted experiential therapy program reported statistically significant and stable reductions in overall psychological distress and enhancements in psychological well-being following the program completion.

Ewing, MacDonald, Taylor & Bower’s (2007) quasi-experimental design used pre and post tests with experimental and control groups in a 9 week equine facilitated learning program versus traditional in-class counseling. The results showed no statistically significant differences between the pre-tests and post-tests for the quantitative measures, however qualitative analyses showed positive effects such as an ability to discuss fears and anxieties, increased social skills, improved behavior, building of trust and a boost in confidence and personal esteem. In another quantitative study by Trotter, Chandler, Goodwin-Bond & Casey (2008) the positive impact of equine assisted counseling (EAC) for children at-risk was examined for academic and social failure and to determine the efficacy of equine assisted counseling versus a traditional counseling program. The research found the EAC to be a viable treatment for at-risk children and adolescents at risk for social and academic failure and results on the Behavioral Assessment System for Children (BASC) showed a noticeable increase in participants’
ability to internally cope with the problems and seem less lonely, less nervous and less anxious. The BASC results also support EAC as effective for improving adaptive skills, such as leadership, adaptability, and social skills (Trotter et. al., 2008). Measurements of behavior and social change are often mentioned anecdotally through participants’ words (Bizub et. al., 2003; Hallberg, 2004) teacher (Ewing et. al., 2007) and parent feedback (Hallberg, 2004). Karol (2007) believes the intensity of the client’s attachment or the strong emotions the client experiences for the horse, contributes powerfully to the effectiveness of equine assisted activities and can be among the chief motivating forces behind therapeutic change. Garcia (2010) notes that most equine facilitated research has focused on measuring the effects of clinical sessions, showing there is strong anecdotal evidence in support of the effectiveness of equine facilitated practices. Although some studies have demonstrated that participants experienced change, much of the literature is anecdotal in nature, hence the need for further research.

2.4. Shortage of evidence-based research

Smith-Osborne and Selby (2010) state that, “literature on equine-assisted activities has been largely descriptive or anecdotal and is still relatively sparse in empirical studies, qualitative or quantitative, showing the psychosocial benefits of the horse-human relationship” (p. 8). Although descriptive or anecdotal literature does contribute to the area, more rigorous systematic research is needed. As compared to conceptual and anecdotal literature, the empirical literature is almost nonexistent and most of what exists is quantitative. As Fine and Mio (2010) explain, “for animal assisted therapies to eventually gain respectability in the mental health arena there is a strong need for evidence-based research to document the interventions” (p. 570). Fine and Mio (2010)
go on to say, “if the clinical community wants to increase the stature of animal assisted therapies into a more critically accepted evidence-based approach, more scientific evidence is needed to make the skeptics more convinced” (p. 571).

2.5 Therapeutic vs. therapy

EAA programs consider the inclusion of the horse as an integral component and recognize the therapeutic effect on participants because of the interaction with horses. The involvement of humans in horse activities may be associated with improved personal well-being in the individual. Kruger and Serpell (2010) in their review of animal-assisted intervention literature affirm, “the idea that the presence of, or interactions with, animals can produce calming effects in humans is commonly cited in the animal assisted intervention literature” (p. 37). The calming effects, identified within this literature, can also be considered to be therapeutic.

However, caution in the use of this term is noted by Kruger and Serpell (2010) particularly as it relates to AAI. They explain that therapeutic is described as an ameliorative process, whereby something is improved or made better and is not necessarily connected to a treatment, whereas therapy is the medical treatment of disease and could include medical or psychiatric treatment. The authors contend that clarity in this terminology is paramount as:

there is a tendency in certain quasi-medical fields to weaken or confuse the meaning of the word therapy by linking it to experiences that may provide transient relief or pleasure, but whose practitioners cannot ethically or credibly claim to diagnose or change the course of human disease such as in aromatherapy, massage therapy etc. (p. 34).
However, according to Fine (2010) when a qualified health practitioner is working with an animal and a client, with a specific treatment plan and goals, this may be termed as therapy. Fine (2010) states that, “animal–assisted therapy is defined as a form of therapy that involves using an animal as a fundamental part of a person’s treatment” (pg. 36). Fine also notes that using animals in therapy assists in the healing of psychological and emotional problems.

Kruger and Serpell (2010) express concern that, “the field of animal-assisted interventions currently lacks a unified, widely accepted, or empirically supported theoretical framework for explaining how and why relationships between humans and animals are potentially therapeutic” (p. 37).

2.6 Gaps in the body of knowledge

A review of the literature indicates that there are a number of gaps in the existing body of knowledge. Much of the research into human experiences with horses has been through an examination of participation in structured, facilitated equine assisted programs with children and youth. Only limited information on adult human-horse interaction is available, and there has been very limited evidence-based research.

This research study examines the lived experiences of eight individuals and their direct interactions with horses. An exploration of the perceived meaning of the human-horse interaction from the perspective of the adult human participant and how this meaning may be understood as a contributor to well-being helps to meet an identified gap in the literature.
3. RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question for this study asks, “What do adults experience when they interact with horses that they consider contributes to their personal well-being?”

Thus, the purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of adults who have interacted with horses. The intent of the study is to: 1) understand the essence or meaning that people give to their lived experiences during human-horse interactions, and 2) to examine how this essence may contribute to a perceived sense of well-being. The term interact, for the purposes of this study, was defined as owning horses, watching horses, grooming horses, talking to horses, working with horses and riding horses.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Assumptions

In undertaking a phenomenological study it is important for the researcher to understand her own assumptions and biases in order to be keenly aware of how these may affect the research study. Lopez and Willis (2004) state that, “there is no one true meaning produced by any interpretive study, but the meanings that are stated in the research findings must be logical and plausible within the study framework, and they must reflect the realities of the study participants” (p. 730). As a social worker, working as a child and youth counselor and as a practitioner of an equine assisted therapy program, I am intrigued by the influence horses appear to have on my clients. What interests me the most is the client’s own experience which seems to bring about personal change and increased commitment to counseling, by participating in equine assisted therapy.
My own experience with horses has been lifelong and can be best explained as a sense of spirituality and connectedness. I have found that whenever I interact with horses I find myself transported to an entirely different mindset that includes an enhanced feeling of peace and tranquility, of a connection with spirituality, not necessarily tied to any religious domain, but found deep within my own body. I also feel a deep connection with nature and the horse itself. The connection to nature comes from the sights, smells, sounds and the very environment that I am in when I am with horses. Based on my own experiences, the natural outdoor environment is very therapeutic and stress relieving.

My curiosity in the study of the human-horse interaction has motivated a keen interest in how others may experience their interaction with horses. While interested in what others may experience, I am also aware of my own biases. I am also aware of my own biases which may, in part, be influenced by the fact I am a middle class, Caucasian woman with Christian beliefs. In phenomenology the researcher immerses themselves in the data and they must be honest and vigilant about their own perspectives, preexisting thoughts and beliefs (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Therefore, I was diligent in separating my interpretation, values and experiences from the participants. I was meticulous in describing the participants’ experience in their own words and I used their own stories to capture the elements of their lived experiences. Phenomenological analysis produces rich thematic descriptions that provide insight into the meaning of the lived experience and are often written as anecdotes or thematic stories (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

I kept a reflective journal throughout the research process to separate my thoughts and impressions from the participants and this helped me to acknowledge my biases. The journal also helped me to gain new insights into my own perceptions on this topic. As
Moustakas (1994) points out, “the self of the researcher is present throughout the process and while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge” (p. 17).

4.2 Methodology

This study is a qualitative design. Qualitative research is conducted when there is a need for a detailed understanding of lived experiences (Byrne, 2001; Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; LeVasseur, 2003; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Thorne, 2000). Qualitative research helps us to make sense of the world in a particular way by organizing the undisciplined confusion of events and experiences of those who participate in those events (Morse & Richards, 2002). Obtaining a detailed understanding of these phenomena can only be established by listening directly to people and allowing them to tell their stories unencumbered by what a researcher may expect to find (Byrne, 2001; Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; LeVasseur, 2003; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Thorne, 2000). Qualitative research examines phenomena in their natural setting and attempts to make sense of, or interpret, the phenomena in terms of the meaning people ascribe to them (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Individuals seek to understand the world in which they live by giving meaning to their experiences (Byrne, 2001; Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; LeVasseur, 2003; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Thorne, 2000). These meanings are varied and are as uniquely individual as the people experiencing them because they are formed through interacting with others and through historical, social and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives (Creswell, 2007; Lopez &
Willis, 2004; Thorne, 2000). In other words, meanings are constructed through our social interactions and thus there are multiple meanings or truths for people. A research paradigm that aligns with this belief in the existence of multiple truths, and thus guided this research is constructivism (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Behind each method of research there is a theoretical framework that carries assumptions about social realities and how those realities can be understood (Morse & Richards, 2002; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Within a constructivist worldview, meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views.

The goal of research is to rely as much as possible on each participant’s experience of the phenomena (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Moustakas, 1994; Lopez & Willis, 2004). In this study, the participants described their own experience and meanings when interacting with horses. Guba & Lincoln (1994) explain, “human behavior, unlike that of physical objects, cannot be understood without reference to the meanings and purposes attached by the human actors to their activities” (p. 106).

As noted earlier, I consider myself to be a middle class, Caucasian woman with Christian beliefs. I have interacted with horses all of my life. This is important to acknowledge since, within the constructivist paradigm, the researcher must recognize that their own personal, cultural and historical experiences shape their interpretation (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Congruent with the values of the constructivist paradigm is the methodology and methods of phenomenology. Phenomenology is the study of phenomena and the discovery of its essence as the ultimate purpose of research (Morse & Field, 1995; Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological tradition seeks to understand the lived
experiences of individuals (Morse & Field, 1995; Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2007). As Morse and Field (1995) explain, “the goal of phenomenology is to describe accurately the phenomenon under study and not to generate theories or models or develop general explanations” (p. 23). A phenomenological approach involving a return to the experience in order to obtain a comprehensive description from participants is congruent with addressing the gap in the literature on the meaning of the experiences of adult interaction with horses. These descriptions will provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the *essence* of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). In phenomenological research the intent is to understand individuals’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The researcher determines the underlying structures of an experience by interpreting the original descriptions of the situation in which the experience occurs (Moustakas, 1994). The aim is to interpret what the experience under investigation means for the persons who have had this experience. From these descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived, in other words the *essence* of the structures of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). However, Dahlberg (2006) acknowledges that there are no universal meanings. Dahlberg (2006) explains that although Edmund Husserl’s [from whom Moustakas was significantly influenced] idea of phenomenological essences centered in the conviction that essences are universal, Husserl also says that essences leave open possibilities for further exploration and is characterized by its open horizons. Consequently, Dahlberg (2006) clarifies that:

essences are also open, infinite, and expandable and they are never finally completely explored and described. Meaning emerge in relation to events of the lifeworld, and when the lifeworld changes, meaning changes as well (p. 16).
A phenomenology study therefore, will provide a deep understanding of the common meaning of the experiences, or *essence*, of adult interaction with horses as experienced by several individuals. There is never only one, true meaning, produced by any interpretive study and the research findings must reflect the realities of the study participants (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Phenomenology was the method of choice for this study because it best met the study’s purpose of describing the *essence* or meaning of lived experiences (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). In phenomenology, data collection may take the form of in-depth interviews in which the researcher and participant are co-learners in the search for meaning (Morse & Field, 1995; Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Thorne, 2000; LeVasseur, 2003; Byrne, 2001).

**4.3 Method**

The phenomenological method that I used is *heuristic* research which was introduced by Clark Moustakas (1994). Moustakas’ (1994) method of analysis searches for meaning in descriptions obtained through first person accounts. I used the *heuristic* model as it focuses on discovering human experience. This method requires the researcher to have a personal connection with the topic of inquiry and aims to explore the essence of a person’s experience (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) argues that questions and methodology in heuristic research flow out of inner awareness, meaning and inspiration. Throughout the investigation, heuristic research involves self-searching, self-dialogue and self-discovery (Moustakas, 1994). In staying close to Moustakas’ phenomenological method, I used a journal to record my personal thoughts.
The process of heuristic research begins with a question or situation that requires understanding and then proceeds through six phases: "initial engagement, immersion into the topic and question, incubation, illumination, explication and culmination of the research in a creative synthesis" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 18). I returned again and again to the data to check the depictions of the experience and to determine whether the qualities that had been derived from the data revealed the necessary and sufficient meaning of the phenomenon and that the explanation of the essence and meanings portrayed the phenomenon investigated (Moustakas, 1994). In order to arrive at an explanation of the essence and meanings found in the data, I used what Moustakas refers to as bracketing or epoche. Bracketing and epoche are interchangeable and refer to the change in attitude necessary for philosophical inquiry (LeVasseur, 2003). Dalhberg (2006) uses the term bridling, as it relates to her existence on a horse ranch, to mean the same as bracketing which is, “the restraining of one’s pre-understanding in the form of personal beliefs, theories, and other assumptions that otherwise would mislead the understanding of meaning and thus limit the researcher openness” (p. 16). The technique has been described as an attempt to hold prior knowledge or belief about the phenomenon under study in suspension in order to perceive it more clearly (LeVasseur, 2003). Moustakas (1994) describes bracketing as “setting aside our prejudgment, biases, and preconceived ideas about things.”

A problem with bracketing, according to a study by Norlyk & Harder (2010) which analyzed peer-reviewed empirical nursing studies, is there are differences as to when bracketing is applied. The authors explain that some of the researchers in the study used bracketing throughout their research process, whereas others had used bracketing
during the analysis process and for others it was used in the research process but was not described. I used bracketing throughout the research process.

Another challenge to bracketing, as described by Moustakas (1994) is to silence the directing voices and sounds, internally and externally, and to remove from oneself manipulating or predisposing influences in order to become completely and solely attuned to just what appears. Moustakas (1994) says that bracketing is rarely perfectly achieved. I maintained an awareness of my interpretations and took special care to recognize them and tried very hard to not let my own assumptions obscure what the participants were meaning. As Creswell (2007) points out, “researchers recognize that their own background shapes their interpretation, and they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences” (p. 21).

I engaged in self discipline and made efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon. In order to launch the study as far as possible from preconceptions, beliefs, and prior experience of the phenomenon I was completely open and receptive in listening to and hearing research participants’ describe their experience (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) writes, “everything referring to others, their perceptions, preferences, judgments, feelings must be set aside in achieving the epoche” (p. 88). I attempted to set aside preconceptions by making a conscious effort to bracket my thoughts and prior understandings and to be curious by documenting my thoughts in a journal. As LeVasseur (2003) suggests, I assumed that I did not know or understand anything in order to attain the epoche. I realized that my own background shaped my thoughts and interpretations and I acknowledged how my interpretation may flow from
my own personal experiences (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; LeVasseur, 2003). In alignment with LeVasseur (2003), although I could not eliminate any preconceived notions I had, I did make every effort to temporarily suspend my prior beliefs so that other perspectives and questions could emerge. In addition to bracketing to confirm biases were not interfering, I submitted my initial interpretations to my supervisor, who reviewed my analysis and discussed them with me. These submissions continued throughout the research process.

5. RESEARCH DESIGN

5.1 Sampling and recruitment strategy

In a phenomenological study, the participants must be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon being explored and are able to articulate their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Participants agreed to participate in a tape-recorded in-depth interview (Moustakas, 1994) and were willing to share their story about their experiences of their direct interaction with horses and how it may contribute to their well-being. I used purposive sampling for this study. This means that I selected individuals for the study because they could purposefully provide an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2007). Criterion sampling was used because it represented people who had experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2007). All participants were selected based on the sampling criteria. I recruited volunteers through their response to posters posted at various horse venues and emails sent to various Saskatchewan horse-related clubs including community riding clubs and pleasure clubs. Participants who responded to the posters and emails by contacting the researcher were screened to determine if they met
the sample criteria. Eight participants who met the sample criteria took part in this study. The sampling criterion was that all participants must be adults living in Saskatchewan, male or female, over the age of 30, who had a minimum of five years involvement with horses. Participants must own their own horse(s) and have had direct interaction with their horse(s) through watching horses, grooming horses, talking to horses, working with horses and riding horses. Participants were male (4) and female (4) and resided in Saskatchewan. No other demographic information was gathered from the participants. However, based on my own observations, all participants appeared to be Caucasian.

During the initial contact via telephone, the nature and purpose of the research was explained. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they could choose to withdraw at any time. As well, they were told all identifying information would be removed and a pseudonym name would be used. The pseudonym names used were: Wyatt, Virgil, Morgan, Doc, Jane, Belle, Bridgette and Annie. Upon conclusion of the initial telephone contact, a date, location and time for the interview was established [appendix F]. Once verbal confirmation of interest was received by telephone, participants were mailed a formal letter of participation detailing the research study and participant expectations [appendix A].

5.2 Data collection

The method of data collection was in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant. The interviews were audio-taped using a digital recorder and then were transcribed verbatim. Interviews were between 60 and 90 minutes in length. Open ended questions and an interview guide was used [appendix E] when needed. All of the interviews were conducted at the participants’ homes.
5.3 Data analysis

I transcribed the interviews myself. Moustakas (1994) explains the importance of returning transcripts to participants for review. The interview transcripts were then mailed and emailed to participants for their review. Participants were able to review their transcripts for accuracy, approval, alteration and clarity. Participants were allowed to make amendments or adjustments to the transcripts and the meanings I had interpreted from the transcripts and then return the transcripts. Participants made very few amendments to the transcripts, if any. A pre-stamped envelope was provided for the return of transcripts.

Data analysis consisted of analyzing data first for significant statements and then again for the meanings of those statements. This is called horizonalizing the data (Moustakas, 1994). Horizonalization meant being receptive to every statement of the participant’s experience and granting each comment equal value which then contributed to an understanding of the nature and meaning of the phenomenon. From the horizontalization of the data, the meanings were listed and then they were clustered into common categories or themes. The clustered themes and meanings were used to develop a textural description of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

A textural description of the experience evoked clear images of the experience of interacting with horses and included participants’ thoughts, feelings, emotions and physical experiences. Next a structural description was made to provide a vivid account of the underlying dynamics of the experience of interacting with horses (Moustakas, 1994). From these textual and structural descriptions the meaning or essence of the phenomenon was interpreted and described.
Moustakas (1994) emphasizes that in heuristic investigations, “verification is enhanced by returning to the research participants, sharing with them the meanings and essences of the phenomenon as derived from reflection on and analysis of the verbatim transcribed interviews and other material, and seeking their assessment for comprehensiveness and accuracy” (p. 18). Copies of the researcher’s analysis of the textural-structural descriptions of participants’ experiences were sent via email to each participant to increase authenticity of the research. However, only two replies were received from the eight emails sent. No changes were requested by the responding participants. It was recognized that asking the participants to review a second time for meanings and essence may have been asking too much of a volunteer participant and in light of the first request for review that provided little or no changes, additional requests for information may not be produced. All participants were told that additional reviews would be to ensure accuracy and authenticity of the research. A request for each participant to review the researcher’s analysis and make additions, corrections, or comments was not a requirement of participant involvement. I was the only person who had access to the raw data. My supervisor would have had access to the codes and data if this was required; it was not.

5.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical principles guide human science researchers (Creswell, 2007; Heppner & Heppner, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Silverman, 2005). Ethical principles include establishing clear agreements with research participants, recognizing the necessity of confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent, and full disclosure of the nature, purpose and requirements of the research project (Creswell, 2007; Heppner & Heppner,
2004; Moustakas, 1994; Silverman, 2005). These principles were addressed by ensuring that the research was made clear to participants verbally as well as through the Formal Letter of Participation [appendix A] and the Informed Consent Form [appendix B].

The informed consent form included the intentions, nature and purpose of the study. It also included information on how data from this study would be used. The consent form was reviewed with each participant in person prior to the first interview. Participant names and identifying information was not used in reporting the results. Participant information will remain confidential and anonymous with only myself knowing the identity of each participant and their corresponding transcript. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality in reporting the results. Approval from the University of Regina Research Ethics Board was received prior to commencing the research project (see appendix G).

Self awareness was used throughout the study to prevent personal biases from entering into the analysis. I wrote in my journal immediately after each interview and made notes related to my thoughts, conflicts, beliefs, and tensions that may have occurred to me. I followed the procedures for transcribing data as set out by Moustakas (1994). Throughout the process of the study, I maintained close contact with my supervisor by debriefing with her often.

6. FINDINGS

In following the procedure of data analysis suggested by Moustakas (1994) the first step in data analysis of the transcribed interviews involved horizontalizing the data. I horizontalized the data by searching for words, sentences and significant statements and then searched for the meanings or essence of those statements. The essence of the
participants’ statements was drawn through analysis of semi-structured interviews and dialogue with study participants. The data revealed the emergence of twelve themes. Upon further analysis of the transcripts, I became aware that a cluster of five common themes were emerging (see Figure 1). The five common themes that emerged from the data are: the physical benefits that being around horses provides, the intellectual growth of individuals interacting with horses, the emotions that take place within individuals, the social benefits and relationships that are formed, and the spiritual space horses seemingly create in individuals. It is important to note, I was not looking for any particular themes, but the themes that emerged out of the data are similar to Feral (1998) and Friedmann, Son and Tsai’s (2010) descriptions of optimized health. Feral (1998) writes that well-being is obtained and health is optimized when all aspects of a person’s life are in balance, such as their emotional, spiritual and physical needs. Friedmann, Son & Tsai (2010) state that, “health comprises the integration of psychological, physical, social, environmental, and spiritual aspects of an individual into a functional whole” (p.85).

It is important to note here, that the above descriptions of well-being are congruent with widely held North American First Nations’ beliefs depicted in the Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel holistic model is based on an understanding that all things are affected by the four interconnected domains of humanness, which is emotional, physical, spiritual and mental/cognitive experience (Blackstock, 2011; Hart, 2002). It is believed by many First Nations people that optimal well-being is achieved when all of these four dimensions are in balance (Blackstock, 2011; Hart, 2002). Balance implies that each domain requires attention (Hart, 2002).
Figure 1: Five themes emerging from the lived experience of interacting with horses.
An in-depth analysis of each of these five themes revealed a number of sub-themes (see Figure 2). Together these five themes and their corresponding sub-themes reveal the *essence* of a horse and the human interaction of the eight participants and how that interaction may contribute to their perceived sense of well-being. I returned to the data again to authenticate the themes and search for further thematic divergence. No additional themes were found.
Figure 2: Lived experience of interacting with horses themes and sub-themes.

Perceived sense of personal wellbeing

**Theme 1: Physical**
- Physical health
- Relaxation
- Stress relief
- 5 senses

**Theme 2: Intellectual**
- Learning
- Communication
- Accomplishment
- Challenges

**Theme 3: Emotional**
- Self confidence
- Trust
- Enjoyment
- Focused (mindfulness)

**Theme 4: Social**
- Helping others
- Meeting new people
- Companion/partner in horse/human animal bond

**Theme 5: Spiritual**
- Escape
- Salvation
- Connection to nature
Through discovering the themes and sub-themes the essence of the lived experience of interacting with horses became apparent. The essence of a lived experience is the invariant or unchanging, meanings of a phenomenon commonly experienced (Moustakas, 1994). An overview of the five themes illustrates the experience of interacting with horses and the perceived contribution to individual well-being is reviewed as follows. It is important to note that, the five themes presented are not stand alone themes, rather, each of the themes is presented individually for clarity, yet they are intricately intertwined with each other.

6.1 Physical benefits

The physical benefits experienced by all the participants were vast. The experience and meaning of how the physical benefits manifested were identified in a variety of ways. For ease of understanding, I was able to reduce them into four commonly occurring sub-themes of physical health, relaxation, stress relief and the five embodied senses that include sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste.

6.1.1 Physical health

The underlying invariant meaning for all of the participants is that interacting with horses contributes to an improved physical benefit to the human body in one way or another. Physical benefits that participants identified included: improved joint movement, a physical workout, maintaining or losing weight, reduced blood pressure, increased muscle tone and better balance, stimulation of mental functions due to physical activity, deep breathing and improved posture.
The physical benefit for one participant was obtained by the actual movement of the person’s body joints, thus releasing fluid into the joints. The participant Jane explained:

I had back surgery three years ago and I have sciatic joints that are pretty well screwed and one of the things the physical therapist said was to keep them [joints] moving, to keep the fluid going through the joints. When you get on a horse, just the movement of the horse keeps those joints moving so that I don’t have back pain when I ride! I may have some muscle pain after I ride, depending on how far I have gone! But I don’t have joint pain, it moves those joints. I do move better afterwards. Getting off doesn’t look pretty sometimes, as I am pretty darn stiff. Then you walk and everything is moving, your joints have fluid. Horseback riding is one of the best exercises that I can do.

The muscle pain, as mentioned by Jane is seen as a positive physical sensation by another participant, Bridgette as she says:

[Riding is] akin to a burn from a physical workout that people have at a gym or [from] running. You know they are tired and their body hurts, but it is a good hurt. Like when your legs are tired after you have ridden a really long way, or your shoulders are a little sore because you have been doing a lot of grooming or whatever. But it is a good sore. I think it is a good sore because it is tied in with a sense of accomplishment. I have done something. I have had a good ride.

What makes the physical benefit of riding rewarding to the participants is that the physical activity associated with horses is also associated with a purpose and positive emotional connection. Annie states:
Whether you are doing the chores to clean the paddock or clean the stalls or getting the hay that is physical activity. I don’t pay to go to the gym because I get that physical activity and it is for a purpose. It’s not like being on a treadmill running around going nowhere.

Another physical benefit expressed by the participants was the belief that interacting with horses is beneficial to maintaining good general human body conditioning. Looking after horses and riding horses demands physical activity and physical activity results in improved physical health. One participant, Doc told me:

When I am on an eight day trail ride, my belt gets loose. Your muscles get toned up because riding a horse is a core muscle workout… and your balance has to get better because your perched up on a peak, moving sideways, forwards, and backwards, so you have to get better balance or you will fall off.

For another participant in the study, losing weight was a critical part of continuing to ride and enjoying horses and was the motivating force to a life changing experience. Morgan explains:

I was up to 265 pounds and I was way too heavy for my horse, my saddle and me. I was very uncomfortable. So I came home and I immediately lost 25 pounds and I am going to lose another 25 or 50. Well that horse taught me, “you better lose weight guy or you are not going to be riding me,” because it wasn’t pleasant. So it taught me a life changing experience…I ride my horse now and it is more comfortable. It is better for them [horses], better for me. My blood pressure has gone down to the point that I don’t need any more pills. I have got better blood pressure, cholesterol, and everything is in better shape now, because I wanted to
lose weight to be more comfortable riding. I wanted to stay healthy because of the horses. The physical benefits are unbelievable.

Although for Morgan losing weight was a life changing experience, for Wyatt the physical activity of riding changed his life by improving his mental functioning:

> It’s a good feeling being out there, being physical riding. It’s good exercise. I got that ADD which [means] I need that physical exercise to keep my mental thinkin goin correctly. If I sit around very much at all, my thinkin really gets [off] and I find I have a hard time wantin to be around people so to get busy physically, then I get feeling so dab darned good that I can enjoy people better.

Additional physical benefits identified by all participants were the recognition of how important breath is to interacting with horses. Breath was often cited as important in physically allowing the body to: “relax,” “stop everything and take a deep breath,” “make myself stop and breathe and be aware of where I am in that space and time.” Annie shared:

> I know there is one horse that can suck the tension out of me. I just walk up to him and if I put my arms around him or I start to rub his shoulder, then I can just feel everything come out of me. And it is funny because he will take a deep breath and sigh. It’s like he is taking it [tension] out of me, he can feel my relaxation, and so then he takes that breath.

Whereas Bridgette says:

> [She] will just place my hand on my chest, and place my hand on my horse’s chest, and take a deep breath, and just slow down, and make myself stand there until, *I am…Quiet…*until I am able to, *be still*. And it is amazing!
Breathing was also an important part of how people carried themselves when around horses and contributed to their improved posture, which in turn, gave them a sense of improved overall well-being. Belle describes how her body position changes when she is around horses:

> If you are depressed you kind of shrink into the fetal position, to get out of that feeling is to lift your head and breath deeper. How I picture myself with my horse is I think, I stand a little straighter maybe breathe a little deeper. Especially if you have a taller horse, you do try to stand taller. And the physical aspect of brushing or petting means you are raising your arms which will pull your spine straighter and your chin higher and your breath deeper. All the things that I learned from a [Tony Robbins] seminar that are ways to defeat depression. So maybe that is related to the feeling, maybe you do change your stature and it is part of the feeling of well-being you get from horses. It probably is because we wouldn’t slouch as much, because you have to be more alert and more upright and because of where their head is, then your head would come up which opens your airways…. And brushing and throwing a saddle up would really contribute in opening up your airways. Like if you raise your arms, that opens your diaphragm up for better breathing. They teach you that for kids that have asthma.

Annie also recognizes the change in her body position:

> You know the muscles you use in horseback riding are unique to horseback riding. Like the way you sit and all that, my posture has really, really improved. I didn’t realize how I wasn’t carrying my ribcage. I wasn’t carrying my shoulders. I had that forward stoop…Thank goodness I have been riding because there is a
purpose for it. It is different than just going to an exercise class and being told to
stand up straight, or going to Pilates or something. I mean if I want to ride really
well. I need to fix my posture.

The physical benefits of interacting with horses varied from one participant to
another, but they were able to easily describe a physical benefit they derived from their
horses.

6.1.2 Relaxation

Closely tied to the participants’ description of the physical benefits of interacting
with horses was relaxation, which they all said they received from being with horses. For
the participants relaxation was achieved in one way or another through simply being with
horses, the horses own state of perceived relaxation, being out in nature, the routine that
horses provide and/or the act of riding. Relaxation was a fundamental element for all
participants and was thus essential to their experiences.

Belle said, “you just have to stand beside a horse and you can feel it, that
calmness inside their spirit or something. It is just a feeling you get when you stand
beside them, a kind of peace.” For Morgan when he was riding horses he was relaxed
because he wanted the horse to be relaxed:

When you go for a ride the calmer you are, the calmer the horse is. So the ride is
more enjoyable. So if my horse is going to be calm, then I know I better be
calm… You get further with these animals if you are calmer and you’re not overly
aggressive, so if I am relaxed, they are relaxed.

Doc also echoed this understanding of horses, “If the horse is relaxed I am relaxed. If the
horse starts to tighten up, I will tighten up. Or, maybe tightening up is the wrong word. I
will get cautious, you get ready for something.” In addition, Doc found being in nature relaxed him because it allowed him to be away from other people, enjoying the sounds of nature and the lack of sound around him:

Anytime that I am away from people and it is quiet, in nature, I feel good. I did that golfing, I do that riding horses. At six in the morning is the best time because nobody is around, the birds are singing and it’s quiet. For me it is the quiet and the peace. If I never get into a crowd I am happy. So like in nature and riding in the mornings, it is because of the peace and quiet. If I am out riding down the road or out through the bush, nobody can get a hold of me. Nobody can contact me; nobody can be in conflict with you. You are in a protected spot. You are isolated, you are peaceful, you are relaxed and your mind is at ease along with the rest of you.

Establishing a routine when working around horses was relaxing for Bridgette:

It is comforting to me to be able to have a routine, to be able to have the structure, discipline and traditions that I have in my barn, or how I am when I work with my horses. I am probably slightly obsessive compulsive, so to be able to follow a routine and not have to deviate from that, I gain comfort from it and horses do as well. When I am mixing up their supper meal and the spoon goes in to stir up the supplements, then the horses both become quite excited and it is like clockwork. The old one nickers in her stall and the young one walks around in circles and can’t wait until supper comes. But it is routine, it is comfort for them and it is comfort for me. To me it relaxes me.
The participants also described how the act of riding helps them to feel relaxed. Annie describes how when riding, her horse requires her to relax. If she is relaxed her horse will make positive changes and do what she is asking it to do. Annie explains:

I naturally have a lot of tension in my hips. I am not a relaxed rider. I have more of a tense core and just as soon as I become aware of that, and I start to relax, then I can just feel the change in my horse. And then of course that cycles back to me and so that is my positive reinforcement.

Virgil describes his relaxation while riding as a drop in his level of intensity, “I can go out and I can grab my horse and my level of intensity or energy can just drop off.”

6.1.3 Stress relief

A third sub-theme for the physical benefits of interacting with horses is the aspect of stress relief. All participants said they believed being with horses decreased their stress levels. It was discovered that stress seemed to be lowered in the participants through the requirement of full concentration when riding or training and the physical requirements of caring for them. But participants also claim that horses have the ability to take the stress right out of you simply by being there. Morgan states:

My thing with horses is that you have to have full concentration when you are with them. So when I was working and running a business, which had a lot of pressure on it from time to time, when I came home from work, I would go to my horses to relieve my pressure, my tension, my stress. I would come home and get on my horse and go for a ride, or train a young one and forget about all those tensions of the day. And it would just take the stress right out of my life, which
would make my family happier. It makes me work better with my wife, my two
girls, and it just relaxes me.

Annie also talked about the benefits of coming home from work to spend time with her
horses and how that would relieve her stress:

For me they are my company. I come home from work, and I have a fairly
demanding job. So when I come home from work, I go straight out and do my
chores. And even though I am not riding, or being with them. Just the fact that
they are there and I am there doing this physical activity brings me down and
grounds me and my stress is gone. The fact that it is physical labor is one thing
that is a big de-stressor for me because your physiological being is preparing for
fight or flight. So when you are in that situation all day and you’re always on, and
then when you can come home and you can dissipate all of that energy through
activity, then of course you are going to start to calm down.

Somewhat like Annie, Belle too explains that just the fact that the horses are there and
she is with them helps her to relieve stress:

I know a lot of times if I am really stressed, I will go out and just be with my
horse. I don’t have to ride. Even just feed him, brush him, be beside him, you
don’t have to talk or say anything or do anything, he just gives you a feeling. He
just takes away the stress. It just calms my spirit and makes me quieter inside. It
just kind of drains away the stress when I am with them, in a way that I don’t
know of anything else which does that.

Belle goes on to say:
I know that it [being with horses] is what I seek when something happens in my life that is really stressful or really hurtful. Maybe it is total acceptance? There is no judging, there is no having to evaluate if you were wrong, or you made a mistake or you were saying the wrong words. There is none of that, there is just acceptance.

Belle believes this is because, “They seem to be able to have an ability to absorb your problems, you don’t even need to talk about it, just stand beside them and it just kind of goes away.” Acceptance from horses is also something that alleviates stress for Wyatt:

I didn’t like to let people know all I wanted to do was be a cowboy….I didn’t never want nobody to know cause I thought they’d laugh at me and I didn’t want that. So, I was very safe in the horse world, cause with a horse and it’s almost the same as with a dog, they are your buddies no matter what.

Horses not only accept who we are, but they also accept what we do with no judgment. This allows people to become calmer in their handling of stressful situations.

Virgil explains:

When I started being around the horses I noticed myself being more and more calm. [I was] just more able to rationalize things and not be flying off the handle and I saw my temper level. Part of being with the horses is you can get mad at them all you want and they couldn’t really give a darn. They [horses] are like, go ahead have your little temper tantrum. I don’t know what you are doing and it doesn’t get you anywhere. So I think you just learn and grow and you have to figure out a way, calmly and rationally, to go about your day and go about your life cause any other way [having temper tantrums] you are not getting the desired
effects. If you go about things in a proper form, or in a calm manner, you get a lot more response. You get a lot more people who will work with you and horses to work with you. But that is one of the biggest things that worked for me. You can have your little hissy fit and name call and this and that and where does it get you? Where did it just get you, other than people just think you are an ass? Or, the horse thinks you are an ass. But you know, 20 minutes from now when you calm down and you want to communicate properly and talk in a normal manner, then everybody will go, okay, now you are ready to move forward, now we can carry on with everything and deal with the task at hand, or deal with the situation at hand and in a rational manner. I think that is a lot of it. You can have an emotional breakdown and the horses are just looking at you like, what’s your problem? I think that really translates into all around life. Nobody is going to deal with you when you are having a temper tantrum.

Bridgette echoes the importance of staying calm when around horses, she says:

If you become flustered and frantic the horse will as well and so we must maintain the calm, we must maintain the leadership role with horses that says, it is okay, we will find out a way to do this, to get past the boogey thing in the ditch.

She also points out:

Horses are for the most part, very lazy so everything they do is pretty slow. They get it done, but they are not in a real panic to get it done. They will walk across to a nice patch of green grass, but they will get there in their own time. They are certainly not going to run to it. So their mannerisms and their slowness reflect and influence my actions as well.
Bridgette goes on to say that this makes her life much less stressful.

6.1.4 Five senses

A final sub theme for the physical benefits of interacting with horses is the importance of how horses seem to stimulate four of the five body senses. Senses identified were the sense of smell, touch, sight and sound, with the sense of taste not being mentioned. Jane passionately explains how the various aromas she encounters when around horses contribute to her feeling: loved, accepted, relaxed, pain relief, and stress relief due to worries:

I have always loved the smell of a barn. That sounds terrible, for you know what you smell, but you go in [the barn] especially after you have brought the hay in and the smell of the hay, it just creates a sense of… I don’t know. I mean smells create a whole bunch of different things. But you come in [the barn] and you take a deep breath and it’s like it just makes you feel better. It’s like smelling a horse. I would equate it almost to a feeling of love. It’s a loving feeling. It’s when you hug someone and they hug you back and it just gives you that feeling of love and acceptance. And of course, it relaxes you. As soon as you take that deep breath you relax right? I mean that’s part and parcel of everything, it doesn’t matter if you are just walking along, or if you are upset or you are hurting, or if you are in pain or whatever, you take deep breaths to relieve that pain, that physical pain. But also if you are in mental pain, you go out there and you have the smell of the horse, you have the smell of the barn, you have the smell of the hay. It releases a lot of that mental pain, if you are in mental pain, or if you are in sorrow… it relieves. It takes a lot of the worries and stuff.
Jane goes on to explain that she once had a very good friend who was diagnosed with cancer and when Jane heard the news she became very upset and “it was interesting how, when I was most upset I would go straight to the barn where the horses are because of the smell and he [her horse] literally had his head on my shoulder to comfort me.”

Virgil sees the humorous side to his fond affiliation to the smell of horses:

Everybody that climbs into my truck thinks that I’m weird [because] it smells like horses in there, but the smell of sweaty horses, there is nothing better to me. I could wear it as an aftershave or cologne, that sweaty horse blanket. There are so many times that I will just walk up and put my arms around one [horse] and just bury my nose into their neck or throat latch where you can just get your nose in there and smell…..yep, that’s what it is all about! And not a lot of people understand that, they say, aw, horses they stink and such. But there is just something about that smell, it is distinctive and it’s just a really cool smell. To me there is not a cooler feeling or smell than the feeling that you get from just putting your hand over them and the smell of them, like when you walk into a tack room, the smell of leather, sweaty horse blankets and stuff like that… and the manure. If I have my trimming stuff in my truck and my boots are in there and people climb in they go, ‘Whoa...!’ I say, ‘what are you talking about?’ I take a deep breath and say, ‘that’s good stuff right there!’

In contrast to Virgil’s fondness of the pungent smell of the horses, Wyatt contributes a portion of his sense of physical well-being to the freshness of the smell of the outside air. Wyatt states, “the satisfaction I guess I get from riding is the physical well-being that
comes out of it, the mental sense of accomplishment, the smell of the fresh air and the doing something physical.”

Another sense that participants mentioned often was the sense of touch. Virgil thinks, “there is nothing cooler than the nose of a horse. That little stroke of that smooth muzzle.” Annie describes what it is like for her to touch her horses:

I have one horse that loves to be groomed. He just loves to be rubbed, and when you see that lower lip quivering, and something happens to their face, they become really soft and their eyes become soft and you can just feel it radiating back out of them that they are just so happy and they love this, and they welcome it and I am sure, if they could, they would say ‘I love you.’

Jane also believes touch connects to a feeling of love, similar to what she previously mentioned when she described what she feels when she smells the horses:

To rub your hand on winter fur versus a summer coat …Oh my God! In the winter I just dig my hands in! I love riding bareback in the winter because it is nice and warm and I am riding and my hands are tucked in underneath their mane. Then there is when you run your hand down their face and that velvet muzzle and stuff. When I was a teenager, I would lay my head on my mom’s lap when we were watching TV and she would stroke my hair. All my babies, I stroked their hair or rubbed their back. So when I do that to a horse I am thinking the same thing. It is that touch, that loving touch. There again it comes back to a love. So you feel that and you are rubbing along and you forget you are doing it and so it just creates [love]… maybe it releases endorphins in us?
For Doc, that sense of love is described as a kinship between his horses and himself. Doc says:

When I walk out there he [horse] is there. It’s a friendship, it’s an admiration when you walk over there and you pet him. Now I don’t know which emotion you would put it under, perhaps kinship? But, when he comes up and gives you a little nudge, or puts his head on your ribcage, or when you’re working out there [you know] one of them is going to have their nose in the middle of your back. It’s like they are looking for affection.

Doc also mentioned that he enjoys seeing his horses:

It is nice to walk out there [in the corral]. That’s why we bought an acreage and didn’t rent a place to put horses I don’t want to go see my horses once a week. I want to look out the window and see them.

Having his horses close to him, living with him, where he can see them every day is important for Doc, as well as for Jane. Jane loves her acreage and having her horses close to her, “I am really happy here because I see them [horses]. I see all their herd dynamics. I know what they are talking to each other about and I get to know them and know what they are feeling.” Although actually seeing horses is very important to participants, sight is also thought of as something that builds a deeper connection between the horse and human. Belle explains:

Because their eye is close to your eye, I think it is part of the connection. The eyes would be the first place that I would be drawn to right away, like if they have a gentle eye or a hard eye. You kind of feel them out that way. It is like people I
think, the same eyes connecting. They kind of connect and it touches something more than physical, it’s more inside.

Virgil also feels this connection through the eyes:

With horses it is obvious the words can’t be spoken, but just the eye contact or just the feeling of their presence. They [horses] have a presence about them that kind of attracts you or you can sense that the two of you are going to be something [together].

Although the participants did not come right out and say what they thought about how horses affected them through their sense of hearing, sounds or noises the horses made were often referred to during the interview. Noises that were identified were “nickering,” “whinny,” and the “clip clop of hooves” as well as the sounds of nature, “calls of the birds,” “it is quiet,” “the birds are singing,” and “the wind in the trees.”

Belle said:

He [horse] would get that groin noise that geldings sometimes get if I was feeling funny or nervous. If I could calm myself, that groin noise would go away. I never knew what that noise was but it seems like it is kind of a stress thing.

However, not all sounds mentioned were peaceful, calming sounds. Bridgette describes an unfortunate experience she had with a bucking horse:

He honked all the way through the paddock and the pen and he ended up in the far corner of the pasture. He honked and hollered like a bronc coming out of the chute at a rodeo. He snapped both his reins, the saddle it was just a mess, and he was making that horrible wind sucking noise they make when broncs are really working hard.
On the flip side of the fear instilled in this incident, Bridgette also finds horses to be calming, “It is just the quietness of them. Horses are not noisy animals.”

Next, I explored the intellectual benefits of interacting with horses as described by the participants in the study.

6.2 Intellectual benefits

All of the participants in the study shared with me the acquisition of new skills and personal growth that was experienced. They mentioned how they would have to think and work things out in their minds when working with horses and the personal growth that comes as a result. The participants spoke about how those experiences transferred into how they lived their life with other people. They also talked of the building of communication skills and the feelings of accomplishment that comes with that and the challenges they faced in learning and growing with horses.

6.2.1 Learning

Participants mentioned learning skills through what takes place when working with horses and how that ongoing learning contributes to enhanced experiences in other areas of their lives. Some participants talked of how they learned to be more assertive, while others learned to be less assertive and to control their anger and aggression. Still others mentioned how the learning was ongoing and built an awareness of self and others and helped them to transfer those lessons into their personal interactions with others. Learning these skills also helped participants to deal with winning and losing in their life.

Annie’s lesson taught her to become more honest and assertive with her feelings:
The thing with horses is if you give them an inch they will take a mile so you have to learn how to be assertive. For instance, if I don’t like something, I am
more honest about my feelings. I have feelings and I think that people have a right to know what my feelings are instead of me being more submissive. So I have learned to be more assertive in my own relationships.

In contrast to how Annie needed to become more assertive, Jane realized the need to become less assertive in her life and describes how the horses changed her:

I spent almost 15 years in the military and in the military there are standard operating procedures for everything you do. My children were brought up similar in the sense that I was fairly rigid in my viewpoints of things. There is a right way and there is a wrong way and for a good many years there was no in-between way. [But] horses don’t go right and wrong. If everything is working and you are in tune and the horse is in tune, it is a beautiful ride. If somebody’s off then that ride is off, but it’s not a case of, I did this right and this wrong. It is more like, I did this, this way, but when I did it this other way it wasn’t as right. It wasn’t as right because I still got the turn, but it wasn’t a nice turn…and so you get out of yourself. You start seeing things different, you have to give more. Just because I wanted it done this way, doesn’t mean necessarily it is going to get done in that way.

And so through this Jane learned to do things differently with the people around her. Doc mentioned how his learning is ongoing:

Everything you come in contact with you learn something, because in my mind I am still really new at the training and learning, so everything is seeing, analyzing, trying to make use of it. I want him [horse] to be learning for next week and so [for me I ask] what did I do wrong so I can fix it or make it better. My mentality...
still is [that] I don’t know very much. I have a lot to learn so I try and listen more than I talk…and if you are paying attention you will learn, you are impacted by everybody around you all the time, you never sit still. You are either going forward or you are going backwards, there is no staying at one point in the life your living. You do the same thing with horses, you are either getting better or you are getting worse, there’s no staying the same. If you just get on and ride from point A to point B, you are never going to get better, in fact the horse is probably going to get worse. So everything is plus or minus, gain or loss.

Virgil is enthusiastic about his learning process:

To see them [child and horse] go out into an arena and smoke a reining pattern was just really cool. It makes me feel like I am getting somewhere with it all. I feel like I am starting to learn, starting to get some of the concepts down. It is kind of neat to see that growth in myself and in the horses and that I can get that communication.

However, not all learning is really cool, for some it is a challenge to remain patient.

Belle explains how when patience is lost the learning is halted:

If you are angry and you are training a horse, or if you have lost patience and you are blaming the horse for things they are doing, then the learning stops. It’s the same with kids, if you are angry there is no more teaching happening, if you have lost patience then you are done. Just knowing that has helped me.

Wyatt wishes the people he interacted with would learn this lesson of patience:

You have to do different things with different horses because they are all different. But it goes back to me wanting people to be patient with me to give me
time to learn. It don’t matter how dumb a horse is I don’t get raggin on them for a darned thing. I just love to work with them until they get it figured out and I give them time to figure it out. I am going to give this horse time to learn. I never once yanked on him or nothing I just kept pettin the heck out that old rascal. Most of the time he wanted to get away from me, so I just kept going and boy, the only thing I worried about was is he going to get going around so often that I am going to get dizzy and fall over! But, about the time I am startin to thinkin, oh oh, this ain’t goin to work! Then he will shut down and then when he licks and chews, then aww things are startin to work. It may take quite a while, but see, I love givin the horse time to learn ‘cause that’s the way I was always. So now to try to get other humans to think that way, to be patient and wait, that’s why I run into trouble.

Another aspect of the learning process that was often mentioned by participants was the building of awareness in one’s self when interacting with horses. Often this self awareness which was gained through interacting with horses, expanded into self awareness of how the participants interacted with other people. Virgil said:

I always strive to do better at what I do for a living, and even into marriage and with the kids. How do I be a better dad? How do I be a better husband? What could I do differently to make things better as a family unit? Do I get it all right? No! But at the same time, if I can have that level of self awareness with the horses, I should be able to have that translate into the rest of my life as well, no matter what I do and no matter who it is with, whether it is with the kids or with our friends and down to the important things in my life, my family. If I can do
that over here [with the horses] then I should try and do it over here [with my family] as well I should not only try, I should be doing it. To be honest, just as a human being in general, I have that strive to be a better neighbor, a better person in the community, a better person in general.

For Morgan the self awareness that he gained through being with horses changed his whole philosophy in life and prompted him to be a less aggressive person. Morgan conveys:

Over the years, I have felt that the horses have really changed my philosophy in life, or my way of reacting to things in life because of the way my horses react. If I was too aggressive or too mean spirited with a horse one day, then they would react differently. Every [horse] has a different personality and every person has a different personality, so everyone has to be treated differently. And if you learn to treat your horse differently they are going to treat you differently. From which you then take that, and you go to work and think, I have to treat people differently now because they are not all the same. You try to be the same with all of them, but to get the same results you have to do it differently. Some people you have to treat differently than others, some you have to be more aggressive, just like your horses. With some you need to be calmer. Some can’t take criticism.

Morgan goes on to explain how being aggressive will result in unfavorable conditions with horses:

If you are riding a horse down a trail and it shies at something, the best thing a rider can do is ignore it and just go around and keep going. The worst thing you can do when you react to that horse is squeeze your legs, yank on the reins, and be
aggressive. Because then you are going to squeeze your legs, and it will likely start bucking and buck you off. Same thing happens in our life, if you are going down the road in real life and something happens and you react aggressively and without tolerance, then the situation gets worse.

Horses have also helped one participant to understand the concept of winning and losing and how to accept and deal with the losses in life that we may be faced with. Showing horses is one way how horses have taught Morgan’s children to accept winning and losing gracefully. Morgan explains:

You go to horse shows and you learn to win and you learn to lose, so you learn how to be competitive. You learn how you should strive in life to win. People will say winning isn’t everything, but when you get out in the real world it is something you have to strive for because if you don’t strive to win you are never going to get anywhere. They say you have to learn how to lose. I don’t think you want to learn how to lose; you have to learn how to accept loss. You don’t want to be a learned loser. You want to accept your loss and move on, and we have had good horses that we have lost and we have learned to accept that.

This life lesson was taught to Morgan’s children and prepared his daughter for the worst tragedy one can face in life, that being the loss of a child. But not only was she prepared to face the loss of her infant son, she was also prepared to nurture him and it was due to the nurturing she had learned from interacting with the horses:

My little 6 year old grandson was 3 months premature and probably a 95% chance of not living. But his mother was brought up with horses and learned how to be gentle and how to react to serious situations. I think a lot of his surviving is
because of the way she nurtured him and the way she looked after him both in the hospital and out of the hospital those first couple of years. She learned something over the years with those horses, to be able to be a caregiver. Because a lot of the times with horses you are a caregiver. When they get cut or they get bruised, they’re work for you because you have to look after them. If you are not a caregiver with the horses, you probably would never be a caregiver in the real world either. And you have had to accept some losses [death of the horses]. Like this little guy’s brother, the same thing happened to him [born premature] but he never made it. So his mother, my daughter, accepted the death of her little boy. It wasn’t nice to watch, but it ...it made you proud... how she accepted life and death and moved on in her life and is still yet accepting. I know she still goes back to the gravesite and talks to her deceased boy.

According to Morgan, life situations, as hard as they may be, can be less damaging to a person when one has learned to cope with those kinds of situations through their interactions with horses. A large part of interacting with horses is learning to communicate with them, which in turn teaches a person to communicate with others more effectively.

6.2.2 Communication

Participants often mentioned that communicating with horses helped them to communicate more effectively with others. When participants were training horses they were building their personal communication skills because during training the participants had to convey to the horse what they were wanting through means other than language. Largely this meant recognizing feelings they were having as well as
recognizing the way the horse was feeling, thus becoming more skilled in tuning into the person or horse they were trying to communicate with. Annie explains this:

Horses have really made me a kinder, gentler, kind of person… more empathetic to feelings, because horses are feelings. They respond based on their feelings, so you get that instant feedback. They don’t have an agenda, if they are scared of something they will react. If they don’t want to do something it may seem like they have an agenda, but really they are just acting on their emotion. So then you learn how to deal with them knowing that and you figure out, what is he telling me, and what do I need to do?

Many participants also expressed that communicating with other people was easier for them when they were out riding. They felt it was much easier to talk when out riding. Some even saw their horses as a confidant with whom they could communicate their deepest personal feelings to.

During training, helping a horse to understand what you are asking of them comes from hours of working with them but is worth it in the end. Virgil relays:

I get a lot of gratification just out of getting a line of communication established. So they [horse] know where I am coming from and I know what they need to do a maneuver and get them to understand it. I have always found that is what I enjoy the most out of dealing with horses, just the building of that line of communication.

He goes on to say:

We are entering into their world… It’s us being in their world establishing a line of communication that normally and naturally is not there. We are just trying to
adapt to their level of how they communicate to one another to get what we want out of them.

It is clear that people communicate with horses differently than with adults. Belle points out that we also need to communicate with children differently. Belle believes:

Training horses has taught me an awful lot about training children. I have related the two so much. [For instance] how praise works the same with kids as with a horse, if you notice when they do something right and praise them, you get more of that. You know, it is the same with kids, if they do something right and it’s genuine and true, if you praise them for it, then they try really hard to do that again.

Riding horses seemed to facilitate open communication not only between people, but also as a way for a person to openly voice or express their thoughts and feelings to no one, just their horse. When alone and talking to their horse, their horse in essence became their confidant and something that would just listen to them and not tell others or make a judgment or give an opinion. Jane explains how riding helps her to communicate with others and process her own thoughts:

I am usually with somebody else [when riding] and I am talking with somebody else and so you get to know people so much better when you ride because you are all out there together. You are feeling good to begin with, you are just out there blabbing, back and forth and you learn things, little things about people that sitting around a coffee table wouldn’t know. There is more interaction between people because if you have a worry it is sometimes easier to tell somebody when you are out riding….or tell your horse. I have been out and gone for a ride alone
and I will spill it all! The horses’ ears are going back and forth thinking, what the heck are you onto now? They are a sounding board because quite often we don’t want people to go tell about our worries. We just want to talk about them and just verbalize what is in our head.

Virgil too, has found conversation flows much easier when out riding, especially with his nephew who was going through a difficult time in his life:

When we [nephew and I] were going out riding, conversation was just so much easier. It was so much easier to relay feelings of stuff going on, trouble that he [nephew] was having, or difficulties that he was having with different situations. Whereas you would not get that when you would sit down at the kitchen table and try and talk about some of those things. He would always clam up. There wasn’t that same level of comfort. You know it was still just us, still just the two of us talking, there was nobody else, but yet, when you would be out on a trail ride or just be in the arena just exercising some horses, or if he was trying to learn something, or I was trying to learn something, then we would talk about what I was trying to accomplish or what he was trying to accomplish and what we were thinking about and then just other conversation would flow out of that. For whatever reason, just seemed a whole lot easier to communicate between the two of us when we were on horseback. Whether it was out in the arena or out on a trail ride or whatever and it was huge. I felt it was a huge accomplishment for him and for us to be able to communicate.

Ease of communication due to horses was also experienced in Wyatt’s relationship with his wife:
What was interesting to me over the years was, when my wife and I were having marriage problems it seemed to happen in the fall when I had put the horses away for the winter. It was hard to figure out how come that was happening. Then usually by spring when I was back with the horses, that’s when we would get back to getting along with each other. Part of it is I can’t confide with other people like I can connect with a horse. It goes way back to where it has always been hard for me to explain my inner feelings about every darned thing because they [my feelings] are so dabbed darned different than everybody else’s.

As illustrated, Wyatt was able to communicate better with his wife when he was around horses. Essentially, he felt he could connect with horses better than people, he could confide in horses whereas he could not do so with people, but simply being around horses helped him to get along with his wife better. Virgil feels that it is horses that have helped him in communicating effectively with people:

I think the biggest thing that horses have really taught me is how to communicate properly with people because I have to communicate properly with horses to get the desired effects, so that really spills over into my life. I know there are days with my wife or the kids, when I take a look 15 minutes later, and I think okay that was kind of stupid, why did I do or say that? That’s the way you have to deal with a horse because you can have a wild moment and 15 minutes later you can go back to the horse and say ‘okay, let’s try this again and I will do it smarter and properly.’

Bridgette also describes the importance of giving yourself time to pause, to process your thoughts and reactions, which in turn enhances your communication:
Horses are very simplistic in their needs. If you are clear in what you are asking a horse to do, they will do it for you for the most part, so being able to stop and give pause to ask yourself, I want this horse to do this and I am asking it in this way, but it does not understand. How can I be clearer? How can I ask that differently so the horse can understand that? That has also transcended into my interaction with people. It often helps me too, if I am trying to explain something to someone and it looks like they are not getting it. It then makes me just sit back and slow down and say to myself, how can I rephrase this? How can I explain this differently, or better, or more clearly, so that that person can understand it? It works the same way with horses too. It helps, slowing down to think makes me a more relaxed person and that is so much an integral part of schooling or riding horses. I have to slow down and think it through and come up with a solution. So just the slowing down part grounds me, it centers me and helps me to be still.

Enhanced communication for Annie meant becoming more honest with herself:

[Riding] makes you more honest with yourself I think because you are projecting onto the horse and they are reading into you, and so you have to be honest with yourself, whereas people are not always honest right? But with the horses’ emotions, you can tell if you have scared them or if you have acted inappropriately or if you are asking them in a proper way, and it is an immediate feedback to you, it’s an immediate feedback to the horses of course. I know for me, my relationships even at work and my personal relationships have changed a lot because I am just more honest. If I don’t like something, I am more honest, I have more courage in my interpersonal relationships, to say it the way I think it is. You know just applying those principals of courage and integrity, honesty and
compassion. All those kinds of principals, I think I have become aware of how important they are, and how important it is to be honest in interactions.

As has been shown, communication is a large part of the intellectual benefits of interacting with horses because it enhances interpersonal communication which in turn enhances personal well-being. However, another aspect of the intellectual benefits is the rewards of accomplishment.

6.2.3 Accomplishment

Many participants in the study expressed a high degree of pride in their accomplishments with horses. For some it was the accomplishment of training horses, or being able to connect with horses, and for another participant it was having everything neat and tidy, including the horses, the barn and the barnyard.

Morgan talks about how he gets more satisfaction out of training horses than he does dogs and the pride he takes in having trained his horses to such a high degree that he feels quite comfortable with anyone riding them:

We have had a lot of dogs over the years and we have had a lot of horses. I get a lot more satisfaction with a horse. I think they have responded to me quite well and I have responded to them and so I liked horses more because I have had more success with horses. Most of our horses around here anybody can ride at anytime, but they are not that way when you get them. So we have had to work with them to get that and that is a satisfaction of accomplishing something, where I have not done that with dogs.
Jane also speaks of the pride in accomplishment she takes from training her horses:

When you get to accomplish that side pass that you have been working on there is really a good sense of accomplishment. You don’t always get it [the side pass], like it is not a constant, especially if you are not doing a lot of training. So you may only get a really good turn once or twice, but you know it [when you do get a good side pass] and you say, *oh, look what we did!* Actually I say, *oh, look what I did!* It is a sense of accomplishment that you get when all the factors come together and you complete that movement.

However, as Jane explained training and accomplishment is not a constant, you do not always get what you are setting out to do. Furthermore, there is always room for growth and new accomplishments to achieve. Annie explains:

I think humans are teleological beings thus we are goal oriented, but our goals keep moving and the thing with horses is that with riding it [achieving goals] never ends. You can start out with something simple, like it can be a challenge to walk a straight line, to doing a dressage pattern or something. Yet again, you and your horse can grow together. I mean even Olympic riders have coaches! So you can go forever that way and it never stops being rewarding.

Accomplishments mean more than simply achieving goals in training horses for Wyatt. What came through for Wyatt was to his ability to be able to *connect so closely* with horses that it gave him a *sense of value* around other people:

To be able to connect with horses was my sense of accomplishment. I had trouble learning in school and I didn’t want to try because the failure was too great all the time for me. And that’s why I got along better with animals, because they didn’t
really score me or grade me. Then as I learned more [about horses] then I had that sense of accomplishment. It gave me a really good feeling and then when I start mingling with people and I’m feeling so cottin pickin good it just kind of helps out the whole day. I could go working all gall darned day and feel so cottin pickin good about what I done last night [with the horses] it put me in a good mood all the next day because I thought of my accomplishments and everything. And it gave me a real sense of value.

For another participant, Bridgette, her sense of value or accomplishment came from having had a good schooling/training ride and feeling the physical burn in her muscles after:

I think the muscle pain is a good sore because it is tied in with a sense of accomplishment. I have done something. I have had a good ride, or I have had a good schooling ride. Or yes, my shoulders are really sore, but boy the horses look really good because they are groomed up really nice, they are bathed up, cleaned up and everybody looks good. Again it is that accomplishment.

Bridgette also finds a sense of accomplishment in not only having her horses look good but her barn and barnyard as well:

When I close my barn door at night, and the stalls are clean and the isle way is swept and the tack is hanging nicely and the saddles are covered, and the reins are looped just so, so that when I get my pleasure drape that loop is still from where they were hanging in the barn. So things are clean and tidy and the kitty bowl is filled up with food and it’s …? I am like that, I should be more like that in my house, but it is a little easier in the barn. The ducks are lined up, they are all in a
row. To me it is comforting to have order and routine, just to have things where they are supposed to be and how they are supposed to look and to me that is (big sigh) ...there! It is a sense of accomplishment. And that is what it is with the horses. My horses are groomed, they are well fed, my barn is tidy, my pastures are cleaned, they are harrowed, they are mowed, whatever. I have made it nice! I gain comfort from that. I gain a sense of well-being and accomplishment from that.

Wyatt too, echoes that sense of accomplishment he gets from working around the barnyard, “even if we were doing mundane chores I didn’t particularly like, there was still that sense of accomplishment. Also there was that thing to look forward to… Oh goody after supper, I’d be back riding again!”

6.2.4 Challenges

Another aspect of the intellectual benefits of interacting with horses is the challenges that one often faces when working with horses and the processes needed to succeed in overcoming or handling those challenges. Tackling challenges is one way that the participant’s intellect is stimulated, thus when one is successful in overcoming a challenge the person derives a sense of well-being from that because it transfers into their personal lives as well and equips them to handle personal life challenges more successfully. Some challenges may be relatively simple challenges like exploring different ways to get the desired reaction in the horses and learning how to ride properly, to more complex challenges like overcoming deep personal feelings such as; the fear of being judged, shyness, health problems, fear of failure, fear of personal injury and the fear of being unable to control events.
A relatively simple challenge for example is Virgil discovering the different personalities of his horses, “because each horse is an individual, you have to approach different individuals in different ways, ask in different ways and that kind of thing. So I always find it challenging [working with horses] and getting a line of communication established.” Whereas for Annie, the challenge was simply learning to ride properly, “when I got back into it [riding], it was more the challenge of actually learning how to ride, because I never really did that before I just basically managed to stay on.”

However the challenges a person faces often are more complex than they appear and involve deep personal feelings more so than the challenges that present themselves with the actual horses…but interestingly enough, those personal feelings are resolved through activities involving horses. A clear explanation of this concept is explained by Virgil when he talks of the problems his nephew had with the fear of being judged:

Horses can’t judge us. They don’t know what we are talking about, even though they have a set of ears, they don’t judge anybody or anything. They are just there and it is cool to just hang out with them. [My nephew] knew that the horses were not going to judge him, whether he was right or wrong about a situation or a feeling or whatever was going on. There were times when something was going on and he [nephew] would break down and have a little bit of a session, and the horses just kept on doing their deal, they didn’t judge anything he was feeling at that time. Everything was just okay we [horses] were just going to continue on with life. That is, I think, maybe part of it. Horses can just continue on with life. They are not going to judge you, they are not going to hold something against you, whether you felt something one day or said something one day, they are just
going to continue on with life. And that is what we have to do as grownups, as people, is we have to continue on with life, you know, take the good with the bad but keep moving forward. Maybe that was part of it, they [horses] are not judging anybody or anything, they are just moving forward, they keep moving forward. A new day is coming, the next blade of grass is over the next hill and you just need to put your head down and keep trucking through it no matter what you are going through.

A personal challenge for Wyatt was overcoming his shyness:

Horses helped me get over my problem of being shy because as I got better with horses I enjoyed getting around people more and other people with horses as well. I was proving to myself [that] I was getting good with horses and that made me more comfortable around people. It helped me shed that feeling of incompetence.

Whereas for Morgan, interacting with horses helped him with the challenges of daily life and as a result it helped him in dealing with family health issues:

In my mind, the end result of life, as in with horses, is what you want to make out of it and what you want to take out of it. If you just want to get out there and get on your horse and go hell bent for election, and come back and put it away wet and don’t curry it and don’t pick its feet and stuff, nine times out of ten that’s the way you do work too. You get in your truck, you go to work, and you go hell bent for election all day long and you come home and turn the key off and run into the house and grab the closest beer or bottle you can drink and that’s the way your life is. But if you accept the way the horse needs to be treated, then I think that teaches you in life to slow down, look at the realities. Then when you have
unwanted health problems in families and stuff, which we recently have had, I think that whole thing about how you were brought up and how you work with horses affects how you accept things in life, like health problems and how you react to serious diseases.

An additional personal challenge for participants was overcoming fear. For Jane it was the fear of failure:

I was always afraid of falling. It falls in with the fear of any failure… afraid of falling, or fear of not being able to do this and she [horse] took that all away because I fell many times and got up and learned how to ride.

Bridgette’s fear of falling off her horse manifested itself in a deeply seeded, almost irrational fear due to a near tragic accident involving horses. Yet interestingly enough, it was through being with horses, the very thing she feared the most, that she was able to overcome that fear. Bridgette tells her story:

If I was in a situation where I didn’t have control, I would immediately retreat into a fear-based thinking. That fear manifested itself after my first big wreck. Having the wreck and not having any control and being hurt fairly significantly, manifested itself in this fear becoming some giant, totally irrational being. I struggled through another ten months of riding a different horse which could smell my fear, he could smell my trepidation and he would pile me every time he could. I found I couldn’t control these situations that kept causing me so much fear so by the time this last involuntary dismount happened I was ready to be done. I was ready to quit. So when I am not in control, it manifests itself as fear in me. I have not had those out of control moments [recently] largely due to the fact
that I have a very, very trustworthy horse who babysat me for the first two years that I had her. She allowed me to have days where I would go down and I would saddle her up, and then I would think, ‘Okay that is all I can do today. I can’t do any more.’ She allowed me to do what I was comfortable with that day, every day. And so every day it got to be a little bit more, and so before you know it there was one day when I had the saddle on. And then I thought, Well gee, she is all saddled up and got a bridle on and she is just kind of standing there donkey eared. It sounds so trivial, but I will share my story of the tiny, tiny baby steps to get back to where I am because there are so many women out there who have lived through this. I lived with this fear and I lived with this beating myself up. There were so many people who said, Aw don’t be so stupid. Just get back on and ride. I wanted to say to them, don’t you think, if I could do that I would? Don’t you see how badly I want this? Having somebody say those things to me was just like having somebody with a great big sledge hammer bonk me back down into the ground, and make me feel like such a failure because I couldn’t do it. But, you know, that one time, I got the stool and I put it beside her and I thought okay I will put it beside her and I will see, and before you knew it I was on her! And she just stood there! And just waited for me to tell her what to do! I walked her around in a ten foot circle and I stopped and I got off and I thought, Oh my God! I just rode my horse all by myself!

The fear of that wreck and the fear of horses were one and the same, they had become one. The fear of what had happened to me and the fear of the pain, and the fear of what could have happened to me. I mean, if I had of gotten hung
up. I would have been dead because he honked for 5 minutes after that. I could hear him. I was lying on the ground and he came around here and he honked all the way through the paddock and the pen and he ended up in the far corner of the pasture. He honked and hollered like a bronc coming out of the chute at a rodeo. He snapped both his reins, the saddle, it was just a mess. And he was making that horrible wind sucking noise they make when broncs are really working hard. If I had been hung up? I’d have been dead, totally. So that, that fear attached itself to any horse. It didn’t matter how quiet, how docile. They could have been, you know, a half dead, crippled, 34 year old Shetland pony and I would still be scared of it. So they had become one and itself. So when I did ride that horse by myself. And she did do what I had asked her to do. It was phenomenal. It was a real rush. After that first ride….Oh God, I was like a kid that somebody had just said you can go to Toys R Us and whatever you can fit in the 5 ton truck you can have! It was just, it was just… I did it! I did it!

The empowerment that Bridgette felt after riding that horse for the first time was immense. Annie too has experienced that kind of empowerment, but in a different way, in a way that empowered her in the workforce,

After you do some things with horses and you get scared of their speed and movement and then you are successful in overcoming those fears, it’s a new feeling of empowerment. I felt empowerment when I overcame those fears and could control this 1,000 pound beast. Now I have a 1,300 pound beast out there and I can make him do a side pass and I am channeling his energy and I am controlling him! Well then, if some little CEO doesn’t like it….Pfft…like sorry!
You are maybe 190 [pounds] you’re a piece of cake! I am going home to play with a 1,300 pounder! So just the empowerment you get from knowing that you can be successful, I think, is a huge thing… It [being around horses] builds your confidence. If you are afraid to groom the horse or you are afraid to pick up its feet, those are some really big challenges. You are working with a live being, you are working with a powerful being, and you don’t speak its language so you have to use your resources and you have to use them intelligently.

As described above, the empowerment that came from the challenges that horse owners experienced helped to build their self-confidence. However, the building of self-confidence was just one of the many emotional benefits the participants claimed to develop through interacting with horses.

6.3 Emotional benefits

A keen awareness of feelings and personal emotions was passionately expressed by all participants. Awareness of these emotions and how they play out in each individual’s life contributed to the participant’s feelings of emotional well-being. Some of the emotions that were frequently expressed were self-confidence, trust, and enjoyment. Interestingly, the participants also spoke of the emotional benefits of mindfulness or present moment focus when working with their horses.

6.3.1 Self confidence

In describing the emotional benefits of developing self-confidence, it was discovered that self-confidence was derived by various means. For some self-confidence came through the ability to trust one’s own abilities and take control of a situation. For another participant self-confidence was gained due to the successes or accomplishments
that the participant found in working with his horses, which made up for the difficulties he experienced with the education system and going through school, by allowing him to discover that he was good at other things and that he would be okay in life even without an education.

Doc describes what it is like for him to take control of a situation:

What I have found these horses have done for me is self confidence, trusting myself. So now when I get on either one of the horses I ride all the time, I am not scared if someone else is having trouble I can jump in beside them. I can take the four year old [horse] and jump in and help people. It enhances your well being because you can take control of situations. Whether it’s leading the riding club, whether it’s organizing a clinic, whether it’s …uhm…I’m trying to think of something away from horses, but it works there too. If you are confident within yourself, whether I am with a horse or whether I am with horse people, when something comes up you trust yourself to step forward. Whereas if you don’t have that confidence you might have all the right answers but you are not going to tell anybody because, what if somebody questions it, what if I am not quite right? So you don’t trust yourself, therefore you don’t do it.

Annie has also experienced the benefits of having the self-confidence to trust her own abilities and take control of situations. She describes her experience of trying to load a horse onto a trailer:

If you are trying to put them in a trailer and they don’t want to go and you get mad, what are you going to do yell at them? That is not going to be effective. So you have to think of more effective ways to arrive at the result that you want to
arrive at. So you have to channel your adrenaline to be more effective and then you go and you find tools. So you go to this clinic, or you read this, or you Google that, or you talk to people or whatever, and you get more and more tools in your toolbox and you become more and more effective. As soon as you start feeling like you have a little bit of self-efficacy, then it just builds and your confidence builds and you think, Okay, I can do this. There is a solution. I know I can do this. And you just become more and more creative and more and more industrious about finding ways to solve your problem.

Problem solving is an important part of horsemanship and Bridgette contributes this and her accomplishments as being confidence boosters:

All of these tiny little accomplishments, all of these tiny little things I never would have thought I would be able to do are confidence boosters [I think to myself]…There I can do that. Sure we can do that. Look at that, I did that. That is good.

For Wyatt, self-confidence came through the successes he found in working with his horses, and helped him through a difficult time during his school years:

The thing that I disliked about school was that I had such an inferiority complex, that I was not very smart. I had trouble learning and that’s why I didn’t want to go to school because, Oh Lordy, it was making me look like a total dummy. They talk so much about having to get an education so you amount to something, to be somebody. All I wanted to do was be a cowboy, and just chase cows, horses, and be around them and man, that’s way sub standard, according of course, to all these standards. Lordy, I really felt down at the bottom of the totem pole. So to be
able to connect with horses was my sense of accomplishment and gave me self-confidence. When I seemed to be such a failure in the school thing, and when everybody thought I was [a failure], I could still be achieving success with a horse. I guess, a lot of people don`t like hearing me say it, but lots of people don`t need an education if they are the type of person who can preserver and go and get an idea going and then chase it and follow that dream or whatever. Because yeah, you need an education for a lot of things, true. Now I don`t want to say nobody should go to school `cause going to school gives you time to grow up. Mentally, physically and everything else, but at the same time, it`s not the end all [most important thing in life] because there are people who have had bugger all for schooling and have done very well in life. So, that`s what saved my hide a lot too in the beginning years, was I did hear stories of guys who had bugger all for education and that`s kind of what helped carry me through. Knowing, well everybody thinks I am supposed to have an education, well sorry, but I really don`t. Yeah I was plum scared how everything was going to work out kinda. But at the same time, I had a quiet confidence in myself that, oh it will work out, and horses really helped that. Yep.

6.3.2 Trust

An additional component of self-confidence is the component of building trust. For many participants the trust that they had in their horses, that the horses would keep them safe, as well as the trust that the horses had in the participants, that the participants would not ask the horses to do something that was not safe for them, contributed to the
participant feeling confident. A component of building trust is in the connection that is built between horse and rider.

An example of the mutual trust that is developed between a horse and rider is illustrated in Doc’s explanation below:

We started with a three and a four year old that were halter broke and now we got a six and a seven year old that I can throw kids on, I can ride, I can barrel race, I can chase cows, and I can send him into situations that you don’t even think about. A horse has given me that [self confidence] because I trained him and he trusts me. Like if I take him through a dirty coulee, if I ask him to jump over the three foot crevice before they drop. He will do it because I ask him and I only ask him to do it because I know he can do it. So it’s an, I trust you, you trust me. Like I know what he can do, or I think I know what he can do, and most of the time when I ask him to do it he’ll think about it because he is a smart horse, but then he does it. And that…he can only do that because he trusts me to take him where we are going to get out and I have to trust him, if I am going to go in there, that he can get me out of there. We have run into that in a couple of deep coulees when we were chasing cows. I never hesitated to send him down and jump the crevice and come out the other side. The ground was firm. He was like…you asked me to do it, let’s go! So your confidence is a double edged sword, if I don’t trust him it’s not going to work, but if he doesn’t trust me, he’s not going to step through the water either. It is like, if I got him [horse] hurt last time, he’s not going to do it again.
Virgil also talks of the importance of building trust with his horses because of what he does with his horses, in competition and out on the range, demands that a trust relationship is well established:

I am striving for a strong sense of communication and trust. Because when things get hairy and you are going down the fence at 9.0 with your hair on fire after a calf, you have to trust that she [horse] is going to be there for you. I am sure a lot of the time she is thinking, okay I am putting a lot of trust in you that this is what we really need to be doing, and she has always been there and has always thrown her heart 100% into everything that we have done.

Virgil goes on to talk about the trust he had in a big ranch gelding:

I had a big buckskin gelding that had a real ranch type build [big and strong], and in looking back at some of the stuff that him and I did chasing cows in the open pasture, wow, it’s amazing that either of us are really both here! But I trusted his foot placement and that he wasn’t going to step in a hole and he could go flat out across the open prairie and I didn’t have to worry about him. He was always very willing to do whatever I put him into, he never questioned. He was like… if you say so, we’re going! I find that after a ride like that, where things were pretty hairy, almost a little bit more out of control than you realized, the trust that they obviously had in me was…I mean, I was putting trust into them, but at the same time looking at it from their point of view, they were probably putting what they felt, more trust in me, that what I was asking was the right thing to be doing. And that’s what I kind of find the most gratifying out of everything, is getting that
level of communication and the trust. Where they know I am going to give it my all, but I am going to ask them to give it their all as well.

As Virgil and Doc have explained above, it is very important that a level of trust is developed between the horse and the rider. Jane also emphasizes how important it is to have trust when riding:

They [horses] read you and they know you and they get to trusting you. That is a thing that they [horses] teach, is a lot of trust. I didn’t have a lot of trust as a youngster or as a young adult, but I realized that in order to ride and to enjoy my ride, I have to trust who I am riding. So you have to move past that barrier, push past that barrier of trust and actually say, well okay I’ll trust you on this one.

The trust that is spoken about above, is not an easy thing to build, it takes many, many hours of spending time with your horse so that they can trust you and you know them good enough that you know what they are going to do or how they are going to handle a situation so that you can trust them as well. This is described by the participants as developing a communication or a connection or bond with the horse. Belle gives a glimpse into what that connection means for her:

I find the more time that is spent the stronger the connection becomes. At first there is no trust, there is fear, with an unbroken horse, so you don’t really get the same peaceful feeling and connection until they know you and trust you. A broke horse is different, they are more comfortable with people unless they have been abused or something, so you get that [trust] feeling right away. But, I find that if I am working with a brand new horse that is young and hasn’t been trained, it takes a little while to get that connection, they are distant. It’s not there until you do the
round pen work and get them joining up and then you start to get that [trusting] feeling from them. I think there is a barrier of fear and mistrust that you slowly kind of erode, as you get to know each other, if you don’t have that trust [because] you don’t know what they are going to do, that connection is not there.

Bridgette tells of how after her terrible incident with a horse, it took a very long time to develop a connection or level of trust with another horse, to the point that she is at now, where she can once again enjoy riding:

If you don’t have [a level of] trust in your relationship with your horse or if you don’t have an honest horse that you can trust, unexplained, unexpected, or fearsome, actions or events, will cause that trust to diminish totally. You won’t have that and if you don’t have that trust then you have fear. I am probably never going to have a relationship with any other horse like I do with this one because of what she gave me back after having all of those wrecks and being so frightened. I had just been ground into the dirt so many times and picking myself up and I got so tired of picking myself up saying, come on now! Cowboy up! You can do this, get on your horse and ride it. You know my heart was in my throat. I would go down to ride and some days I would be physically sick before I would go down to the barn. But the drive was there… because I know how good it can be. I know the comfort and the satisfaction that it gave me before, and I wasn’t willing to let that go. So that’s what kept driving me down there.

Yet through all of the fear and the many, many times that Bridgette was “ground into the dirt” still the desire to ride was so strong that she continued to work through her trust
issues. The “comfort and satisfaction” that she received from horses was a driving force behind her pressing on as she wanted that enjoyment once again.

6.3.3 Enjoyment

Like Bridgette, all of the participants gained much enjoyment from their horses despite falling off many, many times. Most of the participants had stories to tell of their frequent childhood misfortunes in riding horses, but all stories were told within the context of warm, cherished, childhood memories. Participants also explained that they have loved horses all of their lives and have sought enjoyment from them their whole lives. In fact, for Morgan the very first memory he has of his life involves horses:

I went down to the Livery stable every day and cleaned, and if I cleaned I could ride the horses. The very first thing I remember in my life, I can’t remember before that, it was grade one and I came home from school and went down to the livery barn and they had a newborn baby there that was just halter broke. I said, I want to take that colt home and show my mom. They said, Okay, go. So I had my best clothes on from school and mom said you might want to change. But anyway, I showed mom the colt at home and then I was going to go back to the stable. Well of course you know the little colt wants to get back to its mother and it starts running. Well that colt dragged me for a block and a half because I was too stubborn to let go. I never had any clothes left when I got to the barn because they were all rubbed off. That was the first thing I remember in my life! We had a lot of fun, a lot of fun, at the livery stable and riding the horses and things.
Annie too, had fond memories of her childhood misfortunes with horses:

When I was growing up my uncle lived on a farm and the kids were younger than me and they had Shetland ponies. So I would go out there every weekend and I would help with the peas and the raspberries … slave labor, right! But the reward was that I got to use the horses. So these Shetland ponies were just miserable and you would go ride them on the summer fallow and you would ride them bareback and you would be on them and they would go and then they would turn and try to ditch you and you would fall and try to hang onto the reins cause you didn’t want to have to chase them right! So I mean that was fun right? Or else they would take off with you and go into the barn and you would be ducking, or they would try to rub you off into a tree. But for me that was fun as a kid. I mean why? When you think about it? I think I always liked the speed and the lack of control! So I think a lot of it was there was just something there, something that drew me. I have heard people say that from their earliest memories they were always attracted to horses and always loved horses.

Jane confirms the comments Annie has heard of people always being attracted to horses:

As a kid I rode a pony and I just have always been horse crazy. It has been interesting with horses, because I have loved them from the time I was small. My mother said even at 6 months old she would have to take me out when she went out to get the milk, because we had milk delivery with horse and wagon, and I wouldn’t stay in the house she had to pick me up and I had to pet the horse.
Belle too confirms this lifelong love of horses:

I have loved horses my whole life but I never had the opportunity. I was a city kid and I had cousins who lived on the farm who had horses. So I was riding fearlessly and with no skill for the first probably 20 years of riding. We [brother and I] lived in the city and there was a valley there and there were pastures down there and we would sneak down there at night with binder twine and just hop on any horse we could catch and rip around the pasture.

Virgil’s childhood was quite the opposite of Belle’s; he grew up around horses:

I was raised on a farm that didn’t do anything with a tractor. All winter we fed cattle with a team and sleigh. The first time I was ever put on a horse I think, now I don’t remember it, but as the legend goes so to speak, dad set me up on a horse that was being taken out to be put back after doing chores and the horse stopped, dropped his head to grab a blade of grass and I went sliding down his neck. So the first time I was ever on a horse, I came off! They say I was about 3 years old when that happened. I have just been around them kind of ever since. My uncle always had horses and brood mares and stuff and he would buy a horse from the auction and say, aww they said it was broke to ride and drive. Do you want to bring your saddle down? So yeah… a few of those [untrained auction horses] and getting planted a couple times [bucked off] and riding the occasional one and stuff, but was always just fun. I always just enjoyed them, and trying to figure them out and what makes them tick and how they work.
The enjoyment that the participants received from being with horses is a large component of the emotional benefits associated with interacting with horses. For some, this enjoyment has been a lifelong feeling. Wyatt explains:

As long as I can remember I was nuts about horses. I guess it would really get going when dad would take us to the stampede and I got watching them cowboys out there. Now I never wanted to ride broncs or bulls, it was the calf ropers that I thoroughly admired watching them handle their horses. When I did get a chance to be around horses, well that was a thrill of a lifetime, I just could never get enough of it! I needed something to connect with. I sort of had a difficult time being normal like normal people, and I never was in school sports, partly because I had trouble connecting with other kids. All I could think about was horses all the time. My dad dairy farmed but we never had horses because we couldn’t have a horse around, but I always wanted a horse, so bad. I’d ride the milk cows; I’d ride the calves, which we didn’t dare get caught doin! When I was 22 years old, I had left the farm and got working for a neighbor that ran cattle, 200 head of cattle, and the first darned thing I asked him was, could I have a horse here please? Luckily he said sure. So was I excited, I went and bought my first saddle horse. I didn’t know diddley about horses and this horse was quite a handful, in that man when you would get him going he would go like a bullet. It was interesting, for not knowing a dab durned thing, I never had no wrecks with him. I don’t never remember getting mad at him I … I just was in 7th heaven and I guess if he gave me trouble I never paid no attention to it, I just rode along with him. I never did get in a wreck with him.
The feeling of enjoyment that Wyatt expressed was often expressed as “7th heaven” such as:

Oh Lordy, I was in 7th heaven. I would go over there every night after supper and get playing with this mare. I didn’t know what I was doing but I just got playing around with her, and then the next thing I knowd, pretty soon I was riding her and...

...Whew!

Wyatt also states:

lucky for me I got fired from the crew because I wasn’t doing a really good job paying attention and two days later I was working on a ranch, so I was in 7th heaven. Oh yeah and the feeling I had from these horses, I mean, was just, I could never get enough of it...when I got playing around with that horse it was 7th heaven.

Wyatt tells of being a child and the very first time he went into a gymkhana competition:

I didn’t know hardly how to ride and I certainly didn’t know gymkhana [a sporting event or contest involving horses] but I had seen it and so I go in it, and I won a belt buckle in the potato race! I was in 7th heaven. Wow! Then boy, I wanted to do more of this!

When asked to express what 7th heaven meant to Wyatt he commented, “how do I put into words that good feeling? I mean it’s...yeah it’s...wow ...I don’t know how to put that into words! Gee it's just...Hmmmm..., like heaven.”

All participants claimed that the enjoyment they found when interacting with horses has changed their lives in some way. Bridgette shared how her sisters had made an interesting observation of her when she interacts with horses:
My sisters made an interesting comment when they were watching me and my
great niece riding and interacting with the horses. They said, ‘we never would
have imagined that working, or being, or riding the horses would give you that
much joy. We have never seen so much of your teeth.’

Bridgette goes on to explain, “I am joyful when I am around horses and to be able to
have someone else experience, that joy, that happiness, just makes my day. That is great!
Seeing the joy that horses bring to others gives me big jollies.” Perhaps Doc is able to
sum up what horses do for a person’s emotional well-being best when he states, “you can
have a lot more fun when you are smiling.”

6.3.4 Focused (mindfulness)

Another theme which emerged from the data on the emotional benefits of
interacting with horses, was the experience of present moment focus the participants
encountered when working with their horses. This focus allowed participants to set aside
other worries of the day and to concentrate on the present moment, which in effect made
the previous worries essentially disappear. For most participants, present moment focus
occurred during training sessions with their horses. Belle describes how her fear of
performing for an audience disappears when she is with her horse:

I think the thing I enjoy the most is training. I think it is the mental connection
you get when you are so focused. I am a really nervous person. I am a piano
teacher, but I can’t play the piano for anybody. I get so scared, so nervous my
hands shake and I cannot play. But when I am working with a horse training, I
wouldn’t care if there was an audience of 400 people watching me. I wouldn’t
even be aware of it. I am totally connected mentally with the horse, everything
else just does not exist. It’s just that connection is so powerful that nothing else exists for that time, while I’m doing that. So I think that is the thing I like the most, just, the total connection mentally with the horse.

Virgil also explains how his horses provide the emotional benefits of letting go of worries of the day by requiring him to have present moment focus during training:

> I have a saying that I tell a lot of my friends that are not horse people and that is, I have horses so that I don’t have a psychiatrist! I can have the worst day at work. I can be in just a terrible mood, or you know, something the kids have done or whatever. And I can go out and I can grab my horse and my level of intensity can just drop off. I can become focused. I can take everything out of my mind that has gone on that day that has put me in a bad mood, and I can completely put that out of my mind. I can just focus in on the eight foot radius around me and trying to get a spin, or trying to establish the steps to a spin, or a departure or whatever. I can focus in on that and by the time I am done, it’s like I have had the best day in the world. It’s not about all the crap that happened during the course of the day.

Morgan builds on this concept and mentioned how in order to have an effective training session, you must forget about your worries of the day; it is a requirement for a successful training session:

> I guess my thing with horses is that you have to have full concentration when you are with them. A horse knows when you have tension, knows when you are upset, knows when you are happy and knows when you are trying to please the horse and work with the horse. So if you have brought your tension home and you have brought your worries home, and [then] tried to work with your horse with those
worries in mind, it doesn’t work out very well to train your horse. If you are thinking of other things when you are riding and your mind is wondering, the horses seem to know that you are not paying attention, and if you are not paying attention they are like little kids they are going to do something you don’t want them to do.

Bridgette believes that for her becoming focused involves not only a mental state of mind but a physical state as well. She often uses present moment focus, not thinking about anything else during training sessions to calm and slow herself down so that she can have total absorption in training and thus be more effective:

I just [think to myself], okay I don’t need to be thinking about anything else right now, I just need to be grounded. I just need to be here…This is what I am doing right now… This is what we are going to do…and slowing… and calming… and breathing… and being… still… then…we can start. The minute that I will feel myself gathering up, is when I like to think that I will have the presence of mind to take a deep breath and blow it out, and when you blow it out it just sets you down in the saddle and it sets you down enough that she [horse] feels it and goes …Okay…We are just going to wait for a minute and then we are going to start again. In that moment when I am sitting there waiting, that helps me to think again how can I ask this differently so she understands what I am looking for. Am I doing anything? Am I leaning forward? That’s why she can’t pick that shoulder up? Maybe if I want her to work off her back end, maybe I need to sit back more? So I take that time to help me analyze, what I can do differently, what I can ask
differently in order to achieve what it is I am looking for. I use a lot of deep breathing and I don’t know what that’s called, to me it is just being still.

Bridgette uses the term being still to illustrate her present moment focus during training sessions but other participants in the study used terms like “zoning out” or “total absorption in the animal” and “just being in that moment.” When these terms are used it is not necessarily during training sessions, it can be at any time when the participants are interacting with their horses. Doc explains that zoning out to him began when he was a child:

I can zone out everything else around me, it’s really easy to do. When I was growing up I was really introverted, no self confidence, so probably because of that I could easily zone out and be in my own make believe world or whatever you want to call it. I know as a kid, well even now as a grown up too, because of that [zoning out] you were somebody when you were by yourself. You were a nobody when you were with anybody else. So for me, that is what zoning out is. I can be riding, I can be in a rodeo, I can be in gymkhana, I can be barrel racing, or I can just be off by myself. I am in my world there and you can’t touch me. In an indoor arena, I can just take the horse and go practice up in the corner or ride through people and I’m not interacting with them, I’m paying attention to the things around me but I’m not interacting with anybody. I can go in the arena or I can go into a trail ride with a bunch of people and zone out. My mind goes somewhere else, like I am just in my own world.

For Wyatt, he becomes so totally absorbed in the horses when he is with them, that he can anticipate their very movements:
It just gives me such a good feeling being with something I can connect with that I don’t ever get stepped on. I seem to be so aware of my buddy [horse] that I can almost tell if he is going to step on my foot. It is just being so aware of that animal I guess. Total absorption in the animal I guess.

Wyatt goes on to explain that even when he is away from horses his thoughts will still be on them:

I get totally absorbed with the horse when I’m with a horse, or I can be watching horse shows or whatever on TV, and I don’t miss a beat. But if I watch a football game, I hardly see the plays going on because I’m thinking about a horse all the time.

Although it was illustrated above how participants were able to develop present moment focus during training sessions with their horses, for Virgil, the present moment focus also came after the training sessions, during the cool down time:

There are lots of times where my wife and I will go out after exercising horses in the arena or especially after working with the colts, where we will go on a five minute, ten minute cool down ride. A lot of times people will ask, what do you guys talk about? You know what; I don’t think one word is said. It’s just a feeling of being there, being with a really cool, magnificent, animal that you are working with and it’s like you both know what each other is thinking, actually all four of you. You know what all four is thinking and you don’t have to physically say anything. It’s just kind of a feeling of just being. Just being there in that moment with them and you can just kind of take a moment to look at the stuff around you and maybe appreciate it a little bit more. I guess is the way it kind of feels.
6.4 Social benefits

All of the participants experienced a connection to their horse as well as other people. The social benefits of interacting with horses was significant, with many participants expressing that they thoroughly enjoyed helping others with their horses, they developed new and rich friendships, and that being involved with horses was life consuming and became part of their individual identity unlike any other activity they were involved in. As well, all participants shared the companionship or partner bond that developed between themselves and their horses.

6.4.1 Helping others

Helping others was an action that gave many participants great joy. One participant was able to help people, especially children live out their dreams of becoming a cowboy. However, it was more than that, it also became a way to give back to the community and even help people with physical and cognitive disabilities. Other study participants found that helping others was a way they could share their knowledge as well as their passion for horses with others. Helping others also came in the form of providing actual physical assistance to those who found themselves in precarious positions and actually needed a helping hand. It also provided a forum for families to work together and form a close bond by doing activities together such as feeding, training and riding horses.

Wyatt is particularly proud of the many things he has done for others over the years through his association with horses:

I love giving these kids a chance to live out their dreams through high school rodeos. Boy, if they had dreams like me…wanting to be a cowboy...whoof...that’s priceless to me. Wow, I just love doing it. Whew. Plus the fact that I am giving all
that money [proceeds from events held at his ranch] to Telemiracle makes it that much more valuable and to be able to use horses, and cattle of course, in the rodeo to do it, to be able to live out that dream. Another dream I have too is helping people with physical disabilities. I’ve been blessed with a tremendous amount of physical and good well-being, so to be able to use that to the extent that I can help other people. I want to keep doing more and there is no end to it, I want it so much. It’s just an obsession, a passion it’s… yeah the horses, the rodeo, them kids are living out their dreams, which was my dream. Hmm. Being in the rodeo world was part of my dream. So because we have the rodeo [grounds] set up here, life don’t get any better than that!

Virgil also has found that he has a passion for helping kids out with horses:

There are a lot of things that I find very gratifying, like helping some of the kids to learn some of that stuff [horse related skills] and getting them to learn what other people have taught me. It’s not that I know very much, but I enjoy [sharing] the little that I do know, to try and help out kids with some of those kind of things.

For Morgan, working and being with horses has contributed to helping his family become closer together:

I have been married for 41 years and we have a great marriage. I think a lot of it has to do with the horses because we work together as a family with them, we ride together, we feed them together, we do everything together. It has to rub off on your daily lives. It has to. It just has to, because you are doing more things together.
So working together and helping each other out helps to build bonds between people, but helping others also helps to boost personal emotions as well, such as a feeling of reward, or confidence, or personal enrichment. Morgan reveals:

I can go out on a trail ride with my horse and do things that help other people in some [kind of a] situation. Usually when we are on a trail ride, and for one reason or another I am usually leading them, a lot of times I will have a lariat. We have gone on wagon treks where my horse and I have had to pull people out of dugouts. I pulled a horse out of a dugout one time and I have had to pull wagons when the big team couldn’t pull them anymore because it was just too hot and they just balked. So we have had to hook on with lariats and pull the wagons. That is a rewarding feeling to be able to do that with a horse. It’s a good feeling that you can do that.

Doc agrees that helping someone out is a good feeling:

I guess anytime you can help somebody, or have enough knowledge or confidence to go in and help somebody if they are having trouble, it is satisfying.

I am way more confident in my actions because of horses, because of the confidence that they have instilled [in me]. [Now] I can step into a situation and I can help somebody else who needs it.

For Bridgette helping someone takes the form of putting on an event for others at her ranch and the personal benefits she receives from doing that are phenomenal:

[Things that] enhance or enrich [my horse experience] is when I can share my passion with other people who enjoy it as well. Putting on a function for a group, or the event I have here at my ranch, or being at a show and visiting with people
that I only see at shows, the sharing to me is ... WOW, it is phenomenal! I love it! I just love it! Yeah, so to have something here and watch the smiles on people’s faces is like... to look back at those pictures that were taken at the event and just go, HOLY, look at how much fun everyone had that day! Isn’t that wonderful! And to look back at those pictures when I am a doddering old lady, you know slobbering down my bib at the nursing home and, God willing I will still be able to run my computer and look back at those pictures, and just see the joy that everyone had. Being able to share that is just phenomenal, yep. That is another adrenaline rush for me, being able to share stuff like that. I love it! I love it! I am joyful when I am around them [horses] and to be able to have someone else experience that joy, that happiness just makes my day. That is great. Seeing the joy that horses bring to others gives me big jollies.

6.4.2 Meeting new people

Meeting new people and developing new and rich friendships was often mentioned by the participants as an important social aspect of interacting with horses. It was explained that being involved with horses was life consuming and became part of their individual identity, unlike any other activity they were involved in. In fact, interacting with horses becomes so life consuming and self-identifying that it becomes a lifestyle all of its own. Some participants also felt that interacting with horses taught them how to interact with people more successfully by teaching them to have respect for other people and in overcoming shyness.

Meeting new people came almost automatically and without hardly any effort at all for Annie:
You can be sitting beside someone watching a clinician, and you will just be talking to that person as if you know them, but you have never met them before. But it is because of that [horse] connection that you are watching this clinic or event, and you know that you have such a strong common base that kind of transcends into you being less strange to each other. I mean you are automatically [connected], you are both there because there is a definite bond already. So it really opens doors to relationships with people and it has broadened my horizons in terms of relationships with people and how I can interact with them.

Not only does horse interaction provide a verbal forum for human to human interaction to develop, it also provides a physical forum through events and horse related activities.

Belle explains how being involved in horse related activities has brought her into close contact with many, great, like-minded people:

Horse people, I have found, tend to be more real, less artificial or superficial. The social atmosphere surrounding horse function’s I’ve attended are generally just social –not competitive, except perhaps in a very playful way. Therefore the relationships that are developed, within those kinds of interactions, are very warm, real and fun. I became involved in horses in my early thirties and before that I really didn’t get involved in very many functions with women friends. Now I have many women friends who share the love of horses and we have wonderful times together fellowshipping on horseback. This passion has also brought me out of the city and into the countryside where I have renewed my childhood love of the country, nature and wide open spaces. With friends and horses I have also discovered a real love of the forest, the air, the smells, the colors and the
wonderful peace that comes with only the clip clop of hooves, the calls of birds and the wind in the trees to break the silence.

Bridgette too speaks of the *gifts* she has received through horse related activities:

The gift that I have received through my horse activities of the PEOPLE that I have met is [indescribable]. I never would have met these people, never, ever!

And I can’t imagine my life without a lot of these people! They have just become such wonderful [friends] and not even just [my] friends! [Yes,] my friends are like a super bowl of goodness, but [even] the people that I see once a year at a show.

It is just awesome, it is great! So the *people gifts* that the horses have given me as well, is something that I never would have gotten otherwise.

Annie is able to explain how horses create a very unique venue for interacting with other people because of the time commitment needed for horse related activities coupled with the fact that horses are a *dynamic thing*, unlike any other activity:

Living here with my horses I have the option of going riding on my own, which I do, but I can also haul my horse to lots of places so I can ride in lessons or groups, or ride in social situations. So there is the social aspect of it, as well as even joining [horse type] clubs. You know of course, when you are in anything, like if you do curling or if you do golf, it’s a niche thing right? But the thing with horses, and probably with golf too, is you just don’t go out and do it for an hour like going to the gym and then come home. If you are going out for a ride somewhere you are *there* for three hours. It’s not a quick slam dunk thing. It’s like a golf game, it takes half the day. So I think that makes it a little bit more exclusive because if you do anything with horses that excludes, because of the time it takes,
what time you have for other activities. So it is natural that you are going to seek others that are interested in the same thing. But also because horses are a dynamic thing, I mean a golf club is interesting, but how long can you talk about a golf club! When we go to the [horse] club meetings, I mean it is endless how people talk about their horses. I mean even on Facebook, people identify, they have pictures of their horses on their profile photo. I mean you identify with it so much. It becomes a real part of your social life. I know with young women it can cause real havoc with boyfriends because it is really time consuming right? You can’t do horses part time.

Annie goes on to explain how horses become part of a person’s identity, “I mean look around at horse people they start to dress in little things that give it away, like little horse logos, or the big fancy belts and for English riders it will be the Dubarry of Ireland boots.” Annie goes on to say it becomes so much a part of your identity that, “you start to use horse lingo, or horse metaphors, equine metaphors” and most of her shopping now involves “shopping for equine stuff.”

However, horses do tend to consume participant’s lives’ entirely, some participants revealed the downside to having such a commitment to horse related activities. Jane admits:

Unfortunately there were times when, times if there is any passion, when it will draw you to some and alienate you from others. When I got back into horses, I lost a good friend that I had had for many years, only because she couldn’t comprehend that when I started with horses, I wanted to learn it all, I just wanted to get in there and it became a very time consuming hobby.
Belle also expressed an initial downside to horse interactions:

When I first started working with horses my husband was always very resentful of the time I spent with them because I was not at home. I was away. But he learned over the years that I become a much nicer person after I have been with my horses for an hour or two and he came to realize that I was a much nicer wife when I came home, way better and with more energy.

Another downside expressed by participants was the time commitment needed to participate in, not only fun horse activities but also the many hours of hard work involved. Annie states:

Probably 95% of the people I associate with now are people I have met through the equestrian world and it is because I think, you really have to have character. It is hard work, it’s really hard work. I mean, you are looking after them and if you are showing them, you are up early, and you’re working hard. Sometimes the rewards aren’t there, sometimes it is unrewarding! You know they might step on you or something like that. So I think you have to have a lot of character if you have been in the horse world for a long time because you take the ups and the downs, and the disappointments and the heartbreaks, and the successes and the joys! So [because of that] the people I have met in my associating in the horse world are people that have a lot of character and they can laugh at themselves and have fun and they are really gifted talented people.

In effect, interacting with horses becomes not only a time consuming hobby and a deep commitment to hard work, but a lifestyle as well. Morgan explains:
I hope to be riding when I am ninety years old. There is a man in our club and he is ninety two years old and he can still ride all day long, and he does from time to time. I would like to be that man someday. Maybe ninety two is pushing it! It would be nice to do when you are eighty two though. There are lots of people in their seventies in our club, lots of them seventy five, seventy eight, and they will still ride with us all day long. I want to be able to do that. My horses are my hobby; they are my life I guess more than my hobby. I get a good lifestyle out of horses and I will get a good retirement coming up because I am going to be active and they will keep me active. They [horses] will keep me healthy.

As mentioned previously, some participants also felt that interacting with horses taught them how to interact with people more successfully by teaching them to have respect for other people and how to overcome shyness. Morgan tells of an incident that he had with a horse which quickly taught him why to have respect for other people, perhaps much more efficiently than people did in his youthful days:

I wasn’t respectful to a big Clyde [breed of heavy horse] one time, it was a very aggressive Clyde that I had on a team and it kicked my hand and broke my hand. I knew the horse was capable of it but I wasn’t respectful enough of the horse, well pretty soon after that you learn respect for that horse! That teaches you to respect other people that are aggressive. Back when I was a kid and running around, I was very aggressive, very aggressive and way, way too cocky. I think the horses took that out of me, I really do…that and getting beaten up once or twice!

Wyatt shares how horses helped him to overcome his shyness:
Horses helped me get over my problem of being shy because as I got better with horses I did enjoy getting around more people including other people with horses. I was proving to myself I was getting good with horses and that made me more comfortable around people, it helped me shed that feeling of incompetence.

6.4.3 Companion/partner in horse/human animal bond

An additional aspect of the social benefits of interacting with horses is the bond that develops between the horse and the human. The human/animal bond that was discussed was described in many different ways by the participants; some participants attributed it to a perceived genetic predisposition linking it to a person’s DNA. Others referred to the bond with their horses as a close tie, as a companion or a partnership. It was often described as a deep emotional connection where the horse could feel or sense what the participant was feeling inside or there was a close friendship that developed between horse and human, and the horse became a buddy to them. For another participant, it was as simple or as complex, as two personalities that just seem to ‘click.’ One participant felt the human/horse interaction was similar to having small children, whereas another felt it was like the relationship we may have with a teenager. However the human/animal bond was described, the underlying emotion of all participants was that there was a deep love for the horses they owned.

One participant attributes the human/animal bond to a perceived genetic predisposition linking it to a person’s DNA. Bridgette describes her belief in a genetic link to loving horses:

I do believe that there is a gene in there somewhere that says, you are a horse person or you are not. I do, I really do believe that. Somebody can look at a horse
and say, yeah they are really pretty, but they have no desire to do all of the rest that comes along with, to do all the hours’ worth of work that comes along with the 15 minutes of riding. If somebody told me tomorrow, you cannot ride those horses anymore. To me a true horse person will say, well that is fine, do I still get to look after them? And I would be fine with that. I have said that many times. If someone told me my horse is too old you cannot ride her anymore, I would be fine with that [just looking after her]. So for me, to be able to say that, tells me there is …and I don’t know what it is, and I kind of decided this in my head, there is no scientific proof or anything, there is a gene there…and you are either a horse people or you are not because true horse people, like I say, just need to be around them. They don’t need to necessarily ride them, or drive them, or jump them, or anything, they just need to be around them. To care for them, or groom, or pick manure or do whatever. They just need to be around them.

For another participant, Doc, his relationship with his horse is described as a close tie:

There is a close tie between a person and your horse. When I grew up, if it hadn’t been for my horse, I didn’t have anybody, in my mind anyway, and your state of mind is really what it is all about. There is a close relationship or an affectionate tie between a horse and a human, between an animal and a human. They say a dog is a man’s best friend, well so is a horse.

However, Morgan disagrees with this statement because he believes that the connection between a horse and a human is different than between a dog and a human:

I think a dog is more of a companion, a safety net maybe for people. Whereas a horse is not a guard dog or a companion like that, but it is different things for
different people and a lot of people get very attached to dogs. I get very attached to my horses. If you were ever around here when we have had a couple horses pass away, well I become a blubbering fool. It is not a very good picture. I just get so attached to them. You love them, you know.

Expanding on the comparison of a dog/human relationship and a horse/human relationship, Jane offers more insight into how the horse/human relationship is very different than a dog/human relationship, in her opinion:

With a dog they are totally yours. If they give you what you want, you know that love, they will go in front of a freight train for you. A horse at least has a little bit more sense is what I am saying, if that freight train is coming I [meaning the horse] am going to get you out of there! A dog is like a small child, a 4 year old child. They think you are the best thing since sliced bread. They love you and especially grandchildren. They just love you at 4 years old. You’re the best thing and that’s what I look at a dog as being. Where a horse is more like a teenager, you know, that still loves grandma, but still has their own personality. Dogs have their own personality, but not as much as a horse. I am not sure I am explaining it completely yet? A dog is like, can I help you? Can I do whatever you want blah, blah, blah? A horse is like; okay you want to do this? Sure that sounds like a good idea and I would like to do that with you. But it is not like, what do you want? Can we do something? At least my horses have never been like that, my horses have always been, once they trust and they know you, well, that sounds like a good idea lets go here. Let’s go, let’s go for a ride. Let’s do whatever, but within reason. Like [they may question], you want me to go through where
[referring to water]? That might be a little cold…but…or whatever, whereas a dog would just plain go without question. I think that is what it is, a dog doesn’t question but a horse questions. I grew up with trust issues, so, in order to trust someone you will do what they want but you still have that question. But if you trust that person you do what they want even though it is a question, you trust that person or that animal and you do what it is you are going to do and same with a horse. The horse is thinking, I trust you, but I am still a thinking animal. I am a thinking animal and I am thinking that this…? Are you really sure you want to go there? Or is this what you really want? Or if you are asking for a side pass they are saying, okay you are on my back. I am going to ride with you. What is it you are really asking me? So they are really thinking about it. Whereas with a dog, I’ll ask them to go this way and the dog is there. They just don’t [question], to me they don’t have the same thinking power because they only want to be with me. My dogs have always been basically my shadows, whenever I am out with them they are shadowing me they are right there. My horses have never been my shadow. They have been sort of the partner going right along there beside me that I can talk to. Like I say [to the horses] I don’t know? What do you think? And I guess that’s where I look at it is, dogs are more of a child than a horse. A horse is more of a partner.

Similar to a close tie, close friendship or deep attachment is the idea of a partnership. Annie also describes her relationship with her horses as a partnership, “under saddle, most of them will do anything for you. They are very forgiving and then when you start working together there is that sense of partnership where you are working
towards common goals.” For Annie that partnership needed to come from owning her own horses and having her horses become part of her life, much like her children were:

After I leased a couple of horses I thought, well this is kind of like going out with someone else’s boyfriend, like borrowing a boyfriend to go to the show with kind of thing. I wanted to have my own horse so that I could develop a bond with the horse. So, I guess it progressed from being more than just about the riding, or going for a riding lesson and knowing how to ride to knowing I wanted to have a relationship with a horse and to have a horse to be a partner with. So that has progressed to where I am now, to where they are a part of my life. I guess that is because I live with them and it’s a different experience than maybe people who go out and see them and look after them but are not as responsible for their care. It is like having young children again. I see them every day and in the winter I come home after work to feed them hay and then I clean the paddocks. I pick the paddocks every day and they are around or whatever chores I am doing, you know they come around and we are more a herd. They are my companions in that way.

Another way in which participants found a bond with their horses was through a deep emotional connection to them. Belle explains how she and her horse were so closely connected that they could feel each other’s emotions:

The connection with a horse is both ways really. My horse, he always knew if I was afraid and that is why we were terrible at gymkhana and things. He would think there was a grizzly bear in the area just because of me, my heart rate is increased, my breathing is faster and to him that meant, Oh my God, there is
something here, a reason to be afraid. The same if I was upset or angry, any of those things he always knew what I was thinking, it mirrored in him. His behavior would change to match my mood because we were so connected. Annie was particularly aware of the reactions in her horses when she would groom them resulting in a loving feeling she experienced and felt that they experienced as well:

They are very loving creatures and they are very affectionate. You get to know what each of them likes. I have one horse that loves to be groomed, he just loves to be rubbed and when you see that lower lip just going, something happens to their face, and they become really soft and their eyes just become soft and their lip kind of quivers, you can just feel it radiating back out of them that they are just so happy and they love this and they welcome it and I am sure if they could, they would say, I love you. After I have had a good ride and I have worked them really hard. I will get off and walk them out to cool them and I will sing a little song to them and I thank them and you can just see that they know you are thanking them and they know that you love them.

For Wyatt the emotional connection with his horses comes as an “escape from reality” where there is no judgment placed on him by the horses, as the horses have become “his buddy no matter what he thinks or does.” This escape from judgment has helped him to overcome his shyness and has given him the ability to interact with people in a better way. Wyatt explains below:

Well the feeling I had from these horses I mean… was just… I could never get enough of it! I just connected so much with that horse and they connected with me. I couldn’t get along that good with people in a way. Way back then [in my
youth] I was so cotton picking shy. That was more why I couldn’t get along with people, it wasn’t that I was argumentative or anything like that, I would just withdraw within myself, and they [horses] were my outing. In a sense they were an escape from reality. When I was younger and I didn’t have that horse I did a lot of reading. That was my escape from reality. Now I could get absorbed into western books, cowboy books, and the cowboy world. But I didn’t like to let people know all I wanted to do was be a cowboy. I think part of this big thing against a guy wanting to be a cowboy way back when I was a kid, a lot of the western movies showed them cowboys as drinkin, fightin,chasin women, unsavory kind of guys who ride out of town without paying their bills. I don’t know if I ever did see too many westerns other than at the theatre on Saturdays cause we never had a TV, but I didn’t never want nobody to know cause I thought they’d laugh at me and I didn’t want that. So, I was very safe in the horse world, cause with a horse, and it’s almost the same as with a dog, they are your buddies no matter what.

Although Wyatt described his interaction with horses as a type of buddy experience where the horse is non-judgmental of him and accepts him for who he is and what his dreams are, for Virgil it was more of a bonding through similar personalities:

You know some horses you kind of bond with a little easier than with other horses. I have found it is one of those things that is the same with people, where it is just a personality thing where you just all of a sudden click and [even though only] two words can be spoken, you just automatically click. Whereas with horses it’s obvious the words can’t be spoken, but it is just the eye contact or just the
feeling of their presence. They have a presence about them that kind of attracts you, or you can sense that they are going to be something, or that the two of you are going to be something. There is just something about them that your personalities click or you understand something a little bit more, and it is on a higher level than with other things or other people, or other animals. It is almost like a sixth sense thing. That is a cool feeling as well, where you can be just walking through a pen and all of a sudden it’s like, hey, wait a minute that one is kind of cool. It is just a feeling, a personality kind of deal, where it is like two people meeting and they jelled or attracted. I feel the same thing happens with horses. We end up with specific ones for a reason.

6.5 Spiritual benefits

A final theme that emerged from the data was the spiritual benefits of interacting with horses. Although not always explicitly conveyed through words typically used to express a spiritual belief, such as God or a Higher Power, many participants in one way or another did mention a spiritual benefit to interacting with horses. Often the context was that there was a spiritual benefit from interacting with horses and it was just good for the soul. For some, interacting with horses allowed them to escape from reality or become encapsulated in their own little world. For others horses became a salvation, giving them a reason to get up in the morning, giving them a purpose in life, a sense of value, helping them to cope with serious illness and for one participant interacting with horses essentially saved his life. Another sub-theme to the spiritual benefits of interacting with horses is the connection to nature that the participants experienced. Those who
mentioned their connection to nature found that being out in nature was refreshing to their souls and brought about an appreciation of nature within them.

6.5.1 Escape

There were two participants in particular who expressed that their being with horses allowed them to escape from everyday life stresses. For Wyatt, “horses of course were my salvation all the dab darned time. It was my escape from reality.” Whereas for Doc, it meant that he could get away from everyone else and get away from others being able to talk to him or contact him. But for many participants throughout the study, the ability to become mindful or to have present moment focus that too was a way of escaping, as has been previously discussed. Below is Wyatt’s account of what escape from reality means to him:

Horses were my outing, in a sense they were an escape from reality for me because I could dream and get in that dream world of being a cowboy and ridin’ and tada and all that. It was more fun than [school], well I never liked school for that reason, ‘cause I was supposed to be in reality and I didn’t like reality. Then of course as I got older, and on in life and I got married, then when things got really buggin’ me, mainly my wife coming down on me about this or that, and things gettin’ to be a puzzle in my life, I could get on my horse and go riding for two or three hours and come back and the whole world was straightened out again...as long as I didn’t have to face reality. I was in my little own world. My escape from reality, but it didn’t, in effect, help my relationship with what was going wrong. It’s like an alcoholic, he gets drunk and he thinks the world’s better I guess. But when he sobers up, they ain’t no better and it’s the same with me.
When I was out there, that was my escape from reality. Gettin’ away from the reality was excellent for me, it was. But to get back and realize the problem ain’t no better [wasn’t]. But still I could get along, as long as the problem never got near me again. But that was the only way I could deal with the problems we were having.

For Doc, his escape from reality was the freedom of being able to get away from everything and everyone:

[What I enjoy most about horses is] freedom of being. I suppose the freedom of being away from everything. Nobody can get a hold of you, you are out of contact. Whether you are in an arena, or out riding, it’s just you,… you’re going. I zone out everything else around me, it’s really easy to do. It’s kind of a hidden area. [Zoning out] probably goes back to when I was growing up. I was really introverted, no self-confidence, so probably because of that, I could easily zone out and be in my own make believe world whatever you want to call it. I know as a kid, well, even now as a grown up too. Because of that [zoning out] you were somebody when you were by yourself. You were nobody when you were with anybody else. So, for me, that is what zoning out is. I can be riding, and I can be in rodeo and I can be in gymkhana, I can be barrel racing, I can be just off by myself, I am in my world there and you can’t touch me.

As illustrated, Doc is able to get away from others by zoning out and getting into his own make believe world similar to Wyatt. A large component of this escape is their ability to feel untouchable or that their problems were set aside for a few hours, and it gave them a real sense of spiritual pleasure.
6.5.2 Salvation

The spiritual pleasure that Doc and Wyatt experienced through their ability to escape was viewed in a different way by other participants. Others saw their interaction with horses as a salvation for their souls. The word salvation, for the purposes of this research is defined as the saving of somebody from harm, destruction, difficulty or failure and is not to be linked to the Christian definition as a deliverance from sin through Jesus Christ. Morgan believes horses have changed the way he reacts to things in his life which he feels has been his salvation:

I feel that the horses have really changed my philosophy in life, or my way of reacting to things in life, because of the way my horses react. They have taught me respect. They have taught me to be calmer. They have taught me how to be gentle. If you are going down the road in real life... and something happens at work or something, and you react aggressively and without tolerance, then the situation gets worse. I believe that’s really where the philosophy of my understanding with horses [lies]. I know that without the horses I don’t know what I would be because... they were definitely my salvation for keeping me calm and keeping me in the habit...I don’t know where I would be? I really don’t.

Morgan goes on to say that horses have also given him a purpose, a reason to get up in the morning. Morgan explains:

We went to Arizona for quite a few years and played golf, and walked and shopped and did all the things, all the sporting activities and I just was not satisfied. I probably would not be going as much as I go now except I bought a
horse. Now I have a reason to get up in the morning, to go to the barn, stables, and not even sometimes ride but just curry the horse and feed him.”

Jane also found that horses gave her a reason to get up in the morning, especially after her husband passed away:

Another thing that having horses and owning horses and living with horses do, is they give you a purpose to get up. Especially this last year, [since the passing of her husband] I have needed a purpose to get up in the morning. Some mornings they don’t get fed until later, it is a good thing they are not on a really strict schedule! But they do, because they need that looking after. They give you that sense of purpose, a reason to be, a reason to get out of bed….They just make me feel good.

Along with giving participants a sense of purpose for their life or a reason to get up in the morning, horses also gave Wyatt a sense of value in his life:

Horses gave me a real sense of value. The thing that I disliked about school was that I had such an inferior complex and that I was not very smart. I had trouble learning and that’s why I didn’t want to go to school because, Oh Lordy, its making me look like a total dummy. They talk so much about having to get an education so you amount to something, to be somebody and all I wanted to do was be a cowboy and just chase cows, horses, and be around them. And man, that was way sub-standard, according to course, to all those standards. Lordy, I really felt down at the bottom of the totem pole. I didn’t want anybody to notice me in those days. Sometimes I felt so far out to lunch that I didn’t even want to talk to people. I’m not the mold like everybody else is. Boy, that’s hard mentally to, and
that’s part of why I love horses. I can get out with them and get away from all that criticism. It was a pretty scary thing for me a lot of times and horses were one way I could get away from all of that scary, spooky stuff. Cause boy it wasn’t much fun being so different than everybody. I mean, I just wanted to be me.

Another component of salvation that horses gave to participants was their ability to help people through upsetting or stressful times. It wasn’t that the horses did anything in particular either, quite often it was simply that the horses were there, they were present and by simply being there they offered comfort, sympathy and for some, helped them to feel content and that their life is complete. Belle tells of how her horses help her through stressful times:

When I have bad things happen to me, I go to them [horses]. I am just drawn to them to find peace. When I am upset or stressed, I seem to be able to release that when I am with a horse. I don’t even need to ride, just grooming, or sitting on the stall and being beside them seems to do it. It seems to calm me and clarify my thoughts maybe. It gets rid of all the white noise that happens when I am upset. It just calms me and makes me think more clearly, more quietly in my thoughts… It kind of gives you that rejuvenation or that ability to step back into your life and then you are more prepared to face every day things.

Jane too, seeks her horses when she is going through upsetting moments,

Every one of my horses has provided some sort of comfort. When I had a girlfriend who ended up with cancer, it was interesting how when I was most upset, you know hearing the news and stuff, that is where I went, straight to the barn where the horses were, because of the smell, the … you know? My horse
literally had his head on my shoulder to comfort me. They know that, you know they do. I don’t know [how] but all my horses have at some point touched
me…mentally somehow, whatever ever horse I have ever had. [Perhaps] because of their personalities [they have touched me mentally], but also because they are so in tune with humans as to their feelings….If I am upset, or angry or whatever, I don’t try riding because they are just going to feed off of that. But if you are sad or you are upset emotionally, they are all over you. They are right there. They want to touch you, they are sniffing you. They are a comforting animal.

Jane goes on to tell the story of when her old horse was dying, and even as he was dying he still was able to give comfort to her:

When my old guy [horse] was dying, he was 28 and he was kind of colicing [had a twisted gut] and stuff, so I was trying to administer the Ban amine [painkiller] and I was hoping he would come out of it. But he didn’t. It was interesting how he [my horse], was walking all around me. He came up and laid his head on my shoulder and kind of sniffed and that, and then he walked over to here. As if to say, that’s it. So I went to bed and said if you really love me you will be dead in the morning, and he was. But we spent a whole day together with him going back and forth with me.

Where Jane’s horse offered her comfort, Bridgette’s horses offer her a feeling of completeness in her life. Bridgette shares that her husband is just starting to understand what it is about horses that makes Bridgette so happy:

My husband has taken all these things on in his life that he thought brought him happiness; building business, being busy with business, growing the company, all
these things like that. I think he has seen, since we have moved out to the acreage, that when I am working [with the horses] he sees how content I am around the horses. How complete I am around the horses and he is beginning to yearn for that…So I think that our moving to the acreage, acquiring the horses and my sense of contentment and completion means … I’m okay. It makes me content. He is seeing that. He doesn’t quite know how he is going to get there, but like I said, acknowledgement is half the problem.

Bridgette’s feeling of completeness makes her so happy that her husband yearns to feel those same feelings. For Bridgette, her feeling of completeness makes her also think to herself, I’m okay, and thus helps her to deal with upsetting or stressful times. So Bridgette’s horses have helped her to have an internal feeling of wellness and have prepared her for the stresses of life. Remarkably, as shown in the next participant story, riding a horse was able to give Wyatt such an incredible internal feeling of spiritual wellness that his thoughts of suicide, during an extremely stressful time in his life, never really developed fully. Wyatt tells of a time when he was very concerned that his life’s dream may have to come to an end:

It looked like it was going to be the end of the road for my dreams here. I went riding all by myself many a time ‘cause I…I couldn’t handle losing my dream. By just going, riding, and riding, and riding, and yeah the problem was still there but, it helped keep me going mentally. Well the movement of the horse, even in just walking, even that just helped me and being in time with that horse. I mean it… it was connecting with that horse. Because [even though] I appeared to be a failure on one side of the fence, and then here [connecting with this horse] I am doing,
getting along with this beast of burden, whatever, however you want to word it. It was excellent therapy for me I guess is how you could word it. It was my way of handling reality, of getting away from it in a sense. That was good too because it was giving me something constructive to do; I wasn’t going drinkin, I wasn’t going chasin women, things that can get you in all kinds of bloody trouble. It was healthy for me. It was healthy mentally; it was… I mean I did think of taking a lariat along with me and throwing it over the top of a tall oak tree and you know about the rest of it. I thought things was that bad at times and as bad as I thought they were, I still never, ever, even took a rope along. It sounds scary to admit that but… yeah… emotions are there. I’m starting to enjoy emotions more so because they are part of being a human. I don’t get down in the dumps by having bad emotions anymore and I started feeling good about having crummy emotions even… because that’s part of starting to think good and healthy. That old horse helped me get that way a whole bunch. Cause as bad as I felt about how the world seemed to be kickin me in the butt, mainly back here in and around our set up, that old horse stalled me out from doing what I thought would…and then I never, ever, did get to that extreme part. So… I owe my life to them!

Thus, as has been shown, horses made a huge impact on the participant’s spiritual wellness by helping them to handle the stresses of life by simply being with the participants. Another aspect of the spiritual benefits of interacting with horses is the fact that when people interact with horses they are often doing this interaction outside which brings in a whole new dimension of wellness, that being interacting with nature or feeling a connection to nature.
6.5.3 Connection to nature

Horses are outside creatures, for the most part they live outside their entire life and people interact with them in the out of doors. Of course there are exceptions, such as when a horse is kept indoors exclusively and only ridden in an indoor arena setting. However, for the participants interviewed for this study, the horses that they owned were kept outside and much of their riding and training etc. was done outdoors. All of the participants in some way, shape or form, did mention aspects of nature during their interviews. Participants felt a connection to nature simply by the sights, sounds, smells and feelings they experienced while outdoors and for some it was also a connection to God the creator as Belle expressed:

This passion [for horses] has also brought me out of the city and into the countryside where I have renewed my childhood love of the country, nature and wide open spaces. With friends and horses I have also discovered a real love of the forest, the air, the smells, the colors and the wonderful peace that comes with only the clip clop of hooves, the calls of the birds and the wind in the trees to break the silence. That brings me to the one other thing that I have discovered on my horse, the spiritual aspect of riding. When I am out riding, just me and my horse, it’s the closest to God the creator that I have ever been. Just the peaceful, steady moving pace, the wind in your face, the smell of horse sweat, the sound of hooves, makes you feel very prayerful, grateful, joyful and appreciative of life. It involves all your senses, sight, hearing, touch, smell, a total experience in worship and praise.
Jane also loves to be outside with her horse, and she too finds that when she is outside she feels God’s presence. Jane describes what a good ride means to her:

A good ride is you get on and you head out into the field or wherever you are going and your horse is with you and you are looking at God’s creation. You are not worrying about [anything], you let those worries go. Of course, when you are feeling happy and the horse is feeling happy and you can get into a trot, then you go into that lope and you just smile and breathe deeply. There have been times I just get loping along and I drop the reins and up goes my hands and I am flying! It is just like a bird flying and it is the best, free. That to me is a good ride!

Virgil explains his connection as a recognition of his insignificance and the appreciation of the horse as a gift that the world has been given:

There are lots of days walking back to the trailer, after tacking them down, petting them and letting them graze a little bit, when I just take a step back and watch them for a minute. It kind of makes a person feel a little insignificant because they are such cool creatures that we have been given. The stuff that they can do and the natural athleticism and the ability that they have, is amazing to actually sit back and look at.

The peace and quiet of nature is what draws Doc when with his horses:

Anytime that I am away from people, out in nature and it’s quiet, I feel good. I did that golfing, I do that riding horses. Six in the morning is the best time because nobody is around, the birds are singing and it’s peaceful and it’s quiet. It goes back to that being in your own realm thing, if I am out riding down the road or out through the bush, nobody can get a hold of me. Nobody can contact me, nobody
can be in conflict with me. You are in a protected spot. You are isolated and you are peaceful and you are relaxed and your mind is at ease along with the rest of you.

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 Perceived benefits to personal wellness

The results of this study suggest that interacting with horses is an activity that did in fact contribute to the personal well-being of the eight participants. Interpreting the experiences of the participants offered an understanding of what occurs when interacting with horses and how that interaction contributes to their perceived sense of personal well-being. The study results indicate that, for the participants, interacting with horses encompasses, elements of, if not all, the five aspects of personal well-being as defined by Feral (1998). Personal well-being is obtained and health is optimized when all aspects of a person’s life are in balance. Such aspects include a person’s psychological, emotional, social, environmental, spiritual, and physical needs (Feral, 1998). This is echoed by Friedmann, Son and Tsai (2010) whereby, “health comprises the integration of psychological, physical, social, environmental, and spiritual aspects of an individual into a functional whole. Maximum health and well-being is life lived to its fullest….Healthy individuals live in harmony with themselves, others, and their environments” (p. 85).

The five themes which emerged from this study data were: physical benefits, intellectual benefits, emotional benefits, social benefits and spiritual benefits. In this study, some of the themes which emerged were the same as the aspects of Feral (1998) and Friedmann, Son and Tsai (2010) and new themes also emerged. Feral (1998) used the term psychological aspect for the same phenomena that I labeled as the intellectual
theme. As well, what Feral (1998) labeled as the environmental aspect, I have included in my spiritual theme as referring to a connection to nature. In alignment with Friedmann, Son and Tsai (2010), what they have labeled as psychological, in this study I have divided this aspect into two themes the one being intellectual and the other being emotional. As well, Friedman, Son and Tsai’s (2010) environmental aspect is also included in my spiritual theme as a connection to nature, which is similar to Feral (1998).

In this study it was important to distinguish the psychological aspects into two distinct themes of emotional benefits and intellectual benefits as the participants revealed a difference in how they experienced emotional benefits (often by just being in the presence of horses) and how they experienced intellectual benefits (through training horses). My spiritual theme includes environmental aspects because it is through interacting and being in nature that participants experienced a spiritual benefit. However, these themes were intricately woven together to form a whole concept of personal well-being. Often one theme would overlap with another theme, and in many instances all five themes were occurring simultaneously. Since the essence of a phenomenon represents the true nature of the phenomenon being studied and is described as the features of a lived experience that is common to most persons who have had the experience (Lopez & Willis, 2004), the essence of this phenomenon was that all five areas of personal well-being were enriched through interacting with horses and was experienced by all participants. No gender-specific experiences of well-being were identified by the participants.

Physical benefits evident in the participants’ descriptions of how their bodies were directly affected physically, such as weight loss, joint lubrication and movement,
muscle tone, breathing and posture. Karol (2007) notes the physical benefits of actually riding a horse, “can serve as a therapeutic change agent through the actual [felt] body experience in conjunction with the emotional and psychological connection between the human and horse” (p. 82). This is true as participants expressed how interacting with horses was very relaxing and effective in relieving stress by helping the participants to become present moment focused. Another physical benefit was the arousal or heightened awareness of the body’s sensory system through the four senses of smell, touch, sight, and sound. (Interacting with horses did not involve the sense of taste.) To summarize, this study has shown that when interacting with horses a person, “is actually forced, through the bombardment of a variety of stimuli, to stay present while riding...senses are stimulated by changing sights, sounds, smells, temperature, and the physical feel of the horse under them” (Tyler, 1994, p. 144). Kruger and Serpell (2010) also affirm, “the idea that the presence of, or interactions with, animals can produce calming effects in humans and is commonly cited in the animal assisted intervention literature” (p. 37).

An intellectual benefit was evident in the participants’ descriptions of how much they learned from the horses themselves and how these lessons could be transferred to their everyday relationships with people. The lessons included lessons in controlling anger and aggressiveness, becoming more assertive, learning patience, and not only learning how to win gracefully but also how to accept losses in life. As well, participants conveyed a real dedication to striving to become better horsemen and women through effective communication not only with their horses but with others in their personal life. When participants were able to accomplish more effective communication it made them feel much better about themselves. However, the accomplishments did not come without
challenges. Participants discussed that when faced with various challenges they were required, by the horses, to explore different ways to get the desired reactions they were wanting. By doing this, participants realized personal growth and empowerment and were then able to achieve intellectual well-being.

Emotional benefits were evident in the participants’ descriptions of the self-confidence they gained through interacting with horses. Self-confidence came in many forms, for some it was through achieving something with their horse, while for others it was in believing in themselves or developing self-efficacy, and being able to take control of a situation and knowing that somehow things would work out. Emotional benefits also tie in with developing trust, not only in yourself but in your horse as well. Many participants spoke about the deep trust they had in their horses and how their relationship with their horses depended on that mutual trust to be present. Enjoyment was another huge emotional benefit to interacting with horses. Many of the participants shared childhood memories of the joy they had with their horses when they were young despite the many bad experiences they had such as falling off, getting bucked off or even dragged through the streets by a young colt. Interestingly mindfulness and present moment focus was an underlying component of the emotional benefits of interacting with horses.

Mindfulness has long been suggested to promote well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003). However, as stated in the literature review, few research studies have come from the theoretical perspective of ‘mindfulness with horses’ and how mindfulness in conjunction with the interaction with the horses, contributes to personal well-being. In the past, the theoretical frameworks guiding research into equine assisted programs have been attachment theory (Karol, 2007), human-animal bond (Porter-Wenzlaff, 2007;
Yorke, Adams & Coady, 2008), social support theory (Beck & Katcher, 2003), biophilia hypothesis (Beck & Katcher, 2003), ecology and ecopsychology (Beck & Katcher, 2003; Ewing et. al., 2007; Garcia, 2010; Kirby, 2010) and person-in-environment (Garcia, 2010; Kirby, 2010). This study has shown that mindfulness or present moment focus in conjunction with interacting with horses is a major component of emotional well-being for the participants. There are some who agree and note that part of the experience of interacting with horses is that they require individuals to be in the moment and have present moment focus or presence (Pelletier, 2009; Parelli, 1993; Kohanov, 2001; Kohanov, 2003). When referring to using horses in a mental health capacity, Jane Karol (2007) emphasizes that paying attention to the ‘here and now’ and developing the client’s ability to be aware of him or herself while they engaged in daily life is important for gaining personal insight. This results in clients employing new ways of interacting with others and being in the world. Karol (2007) asserts that a horse is able to facilitate self-awareness and presence. The findings of this study suggest congruence with Karol’s theoretical position.

Social benefits were evident in the participants’ descriptions of how they enjoyed helping others and meeting new people. Helping others took the form of sharing what they learned with other people and often this knowledge was shared with children. The sharing of knowledge or as one participant put it, sharing his dream with children, was especially important to participants. Along with helping others there were the social benefits of meeting new people which was very important. Many participants mentioned that due to the time and labor demands of horse ownership, the people that one interacts with soon become people who share the same passion for horses and they quickly
become a niche group of people. Participants mentioned that their very identity and lifestyle becomes centered around their horses and people with the same interests. Participants often marveled and greatly appreciated the types and kinds of people they have met through the horse world.

In addition to the bonds that participants made with other ‘horse people’, the bonds they developed with their horses was also cited as a social benefit derived from interacting with horses. This bond is commonly referred to as a human/animal bond. The human/animal bond has been defined as a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals (Fine & Beck, 2010). This relationship is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both the person and the animal. For the participants, the benefits included but were not limited to, emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, other animals, and the environment. (Fine & Beck, 2010, p.7). The participants of this study mentioned that they developed such a close tie or friendship with their horses that they considered their horses as their companions, partners or buddies. It was also expressed that they loved their horses. Participants enjoyed the work that went along with horse ownership such as feeding, grooming, and caring for their horses as well as the riding and training of them. Annie sums this up quite well when she states:

You know the relationship [between a horse and owner] has a lot of different elements and a lot of different dimensions because on the one hand, because I look after them I am their servant! I mean I groom them, I feed them, I clean up the feed, I put them in the barn at night… so they are the last thing I see at night and the first thing I see in the morning. I go out and clean stalls and they consume
a big, big part of my life There is a part of you that says, really?… did I sign on for this? Do I really need this? So, there has definitely got to be something rewarding in there, you know, that keeps you doing it.

Garcia (2010) suggests, “The horse human relationship may facilitate a positive re-framing of the individual’s relationship to self, to others, and to the greater ecology of the Earth” (p. 86). Perhaps it is because of the positive re-framing of an individual’s relationship with others that contributed to the social benefit of interacting with horses. As mentioned previously, intellectual benefits were identified as the horses teaching the participants lessons on how to interact with people in different, more positive ways. Other participants mentioned the human/animal bond as being genetically predisposed. Two of the participants believed that there was a gene in their DNA that contributed to their love for horses. These findings may offer support for the assumptions of the biophilia hypothesis (Kellert & Wilson, 1993). The biophilia hypothesis asserts that there is an existence of a biologically based, inherent human need to affiliate with life and lifelike processes (Kellert, 1993). Kellert (1993) explains that the human need for nature is linked to the influence of the natural world on our emotional, cognitive, aesthetic, and even our spiritual development.

The occurrence of a spiritual benefit was evident in the participant’s descriptions of how horses were able to give participants an escape from reality or allowed them to be in their own little world, as well as giving them a reason or purpose in life and offering them salvation from emotional pain. Coupled in with escape and salvation was a feeling of a connection to nature and an admiration of nature which also brought the participants a spiritual benefit.
As has been shown, this research study has captured the essence of what the research participants experience when they interact with horses that they feel contributes to their personal well-being. Essentially what the participants experienced was a general feeling of personal well-being that encompassed all five aspects of wellness and served as a complete package for health and welfare.

7.2 Limitations of the study

Every effort was made to recognize and reduce researcher bias through bracketing or epoche techniques. Moustakas (1994) describes bracketing as, “setting aside our prejudgment, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” (p. 85). I minimized the effect of researcher bias and worked to enhance the trustworthiness of the study by asking participants to review the transcripts and make amendments or adjustments and comment as to the authenticity of the interview. I received few comments, amendments or adjustments to the transcripts of the interview. I used the participants’ words in the data analysis and in the representation of results. Copies of the researcher’s analysis of the textural-structural descriptions of participants’ experiences were sent via email to each participant to increase the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research. I received two replies back out of the eight participant analysis sent and both replies indicated no changes needed.

7.3 Implications for future research

This study focused on the experiences of adults while interacting with horses. It did not include children or adolescents, nor did it include equine-assisted activities or an evaluation of an EAA. This research study focused solely on the human/horse relationship. Garcia (2010) notes that most equine related research (in this area) has
focused on measuring the effects of clinical equine facilitated sessions, in which there is strong anecdotal evidence in support of the effectiveness of equine facilitated practices. Smith-Osborne and Selby (2010) state that, “literature on equine-assisted activities has been largely descriptive or anecdotal and is still relatively sparse in empirical studies, qualitative or quantitative, showing the psychosocial benefits of the human-horse relationship” (para. 9). This research addresses this gap and offers a starting point for further research into the psychosocial benefits of the human-horse relationship. Increased research in the area of the human-horse interaction may be useful for practitioners using horses in therapy as it may provide deeper understanding of the experience of equine therapy programs and add to program development.

It is also important to note that the bulk of human-animal studies has focused on the relationship between people and their pets or companion animals (Fine, 2010; Risley-Curtiss, 2008; Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010). An exploration of the perceived meaning of the human-horse interaction from the perspective of the human participant and how this meaning may be understood as a contributor to well-being is an identified gap within the literature which has been addressed by this study but still needs to be expanded upon.

As well, the bulk of the literature on equine activities has focused on studies of children and adolescents (Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010). This study also addressed this issue by exploring the experiences of adults when they interact with horses. Further research into what adults experience is also needed.

Currently, research into the efficacy of using horses in the mental health field is emerging. Creswell (2007) states, “research can lead to a better understanding of the way things appear to someone else and through that insight, lead to improvements in practice”
A study by Selby (2009) revealed there were more social workers utilizing equine-facilitated techniques in direct practice than any other group of helping professionals. Fine (2010) states that, “animal–assisted therapy is defined as a form of therapy that involves using an animal as a fundamental part of a person’s treatment.” He also notes that using animals in therapy assists in the healing of psychological and emotional problems. However, mental health practitioners who are attempting to introduce animals as co-therapists and facilitators of therapy are in need of evidence of efficacy (Taylor, 2001). Garcia (2010) addresses the need for a multidisciplinary approach to research in equine facilitated practices and further research into the human-horse relationship to increase our understanding of what happens, and how it happens, instead of just the effect or results of horse-facilitated activities on human behavior. This study revealed an understanding of what happens when humans interact with horses (a sense of well-being is obtained) and also showed how this happens (through caring for, training, riding) as well as the results on human behavior (people changed the way they interacted with others).

7.4. Implications for professional social workers

Social work practitioners in Canada are increasingly using horses, as co-facilitators in the field of mental health and learning programs (Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010; CanTRA, 2011). This study may have implications for social workers who incorporate EAA into their mental health practice. A number of authors (Garcia, 2010; Karol, 2007; Kirby, 2010; Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010; and Tyler, 1994) report that clients develop improved psychological and emotional health as a result of participation in equine-assisted programs. The profession of social work requires an adherence to
ethical principles requiring practitioners to remain current on practices and skills and critically examine emerging knowledge relevant to the field (Selby, 2009). Competence in professional practice is a key value in the Code of Ethics for Canadian social workers (CASW, 2005). Social workers are encouraged to find innovative, effective strategies and techniques and to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession (CASW, 2005).

This study contributes to the social work knowledge base by creating an opportunity for discussion about the human-animal bond, and how animals, and more specifically horses, may contribute to human well-being. With regard to therapeutic benefits and well-being, Kruger and Serpell (2010) express concern that animal-assisted interventions lack an accepted or empirically supported theoretical framework explaining how and why relationships between humans and animals are potentially therapeutic. This study begins to address this issue by offering a model of well-being based on five areas of wellness; physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual.

Results of this study may be helpful in explaining how mindfulness practice and the human-animal bond may be incorporated into social work practice to enhance not only client well-being, but also current social work practice. Interventions based on training in mindfulness skills are becoming increasingly popular (Baer, 2003; Hick & Bien, 2008). Saleebey (1992) states, “for social work to ignore the body compromises the quality of both theory and practice” (p. 112). Thus this study into how mindfulness occurs in the horse-human interaction could be a stepping stone into how social work can begin to involve the body in direct practice. Hick and Bien (2008) explain how recently a mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MCBT) was developed as a treatment approach to reduce relapse and recurrence of depression:
Two controlled clinical trials demonstrated the MBCT can reduce the likelihood of relapse by between 40 and 50% in people who have suffered three or more previous episodes of depression….MBCT emphasizes the acceptance of thoughts as thoughts, rather than strategies to change the content of thinking. Instead of learning to replace negative thoughts with positive thoughts, MBCT focuses on noticing the effects of negative thoughts on the body in terms of body sensations (p. 8).

In this study, it was revealed how negative thoughts have a negative effect on the horse-human interaction as well.

This study explored the meaning that interacting with horses has for some individuals. What was evident in the study is that bonding was an aspect of importance to the nature of the relationship between horses and their owners. Further research into the human-animal bond is needed due to the growing popularity of animal assisted therapies and the increasing inclusion of horses in these therapies (Netting, Wilson & New, 1987; Fine, 2010).

### 8. Conclusion

Through this study, I discovered that each of the five themes of wellness is also a part of my own horse experience. Research is transformative. Phenomenology requires a return to the self and employment of a self-reflective process that enables the researcher to gain knowledge of their own experience, within the experience being investigated (Moustakas, 1994). Until this study, I did not realize how important, for me, the theme of intellectual wellness was until I had interviewed participants and all at once it became clearer for me. I have never participated in competitions or shows, yet I did begin to
I understand that learning was a big part of my experience. I had not considered intellectual wellness as a possible theme that could emerge.

I was not surprised however that the physical, social, emotional and spiritual themes developed. What was interesting to me though was how little the spiritual connection was made in reference to a metaphysical being. The spirituality theme emerged out of the data as an element of personal wellness, yet often it was described as a connection to nature, or an escape, or their salvation. I pondered why people didn’t mention the spiritual aspect of being closer to a metaphysical being when you are interacting with a horse, to the degree that I feel it. This made me wonder if the lack of talking about a metaphysical being has more to do with spirituality being a private matter or something people don’t feel comfortable talking about, or if it was simply a matter the participants did not think about. This also leads me to wonder why social work does not include spirituality in therapeutic processes if it is an identified part of personal well-being.

I also found it interesting that Karol (2007) as mentioned earlier, believes the emotions a client experiences for the horse can be a motivation behind therapeutic change. The emotions the participants felt for their horses was not often verbalized, as few times they said they, “loved their horses.” However, in listening to their interviews it was very apparent that they truly did love their horses.

As this research study ends, many new questions and opportunities for illumination appear. My journey with my horses continues to take me to places I could never have imagined and when I stare into their eyes I see other worlds reflected.
REFERENCES


http://www.narha.org/resources-education/resources/eaat


Appendix A

Formal Letter of Participation

Date: _____________________

Dear _____________________

Thank you for your interest in my thesis research on discovering the meaning of the experience of interacting with horses. I value the unique contribution that you can make to my study and I am excited about the possibility of your participation in my research. The purpose of this letter is to reiterate some of the things we have already discussed during our initial contact and review and discuss the ‘Informed Consent Form’ that you will find attached.

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of adults, who have directly interacted with horses, to discover the meaning of this interaction. This study will also fulfill the research component of my Master of Social Work thesis. I am using a qualitative method of research that will allow me to understand how to make meaning of your experience. In this way I hope to answer my research question: “What do adults experience when they interact with horses that they consider contributes to their well-being?”

Through your participation, I hope to gain an understanding of, the meaning of a horse/human interaction. You will be asked to recall specific moments, episodes, situations, or events that you experienced while interacting with horses. I am seeking portrayals of what these experiences were like for you: your thoughts, feelings, and
behaviours, as well as situations, events, places, and people connected with your experience.

If at any time you wish to withdraw from the study you may do so. In reporting results or findings, participants will be given a pseudonym (‘code or made up name’) to protect their identity and anonymity.

I value your participation and thank you for your commitment of time, energy, and effort. If you have any further questions before signing this release form or if there is a problem with the date and time of our meeting, I can be reached at [306-567-8562 cell or 306-544-2855 home].

With warm regards,

Suellen Mills
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

**Project Title:** Discovering the meaning of the experience of interacting with horses.

**Researcher(s):** Suellen Mills – graduate student

Faculty of Graduate Studies & Research

Department of Social Work

University of Regina

suemills@sasktel.net

**Supervisor:** Ailsa M. Watkinson

Faculty of Social Work

Phone: 306-664-7374

Ailsa.Watkinson@uregina.ca

**Purpose and Objective of the Research:**

The purpose of this qualitative study will be to explore the lived experiences of adults, who have interacted with horses, with the purpose of discovering the meaning of their experience of this interaction. This study will attempt to create an understanding of what adults may experience, when they interact with horses that may contribute to an increase in well-being.
**Procedures:**

The procedure for the research will follow the phenomenal analysis used by Moustakas (1994). The data will be collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews (between 1 and 2 hours in length) with between 6 and 15 participants. The interviews will be audio-taped and take place in Saskatchewan, at locations convenient for participants. The interviews will then be transcribed by the researcher and analyzed. After your interview, and prior to the data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview, and to add, alter, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit. Copies of the researcher’s analysis of the textural-structural descriptions of participant experience will also be sent to each participant. A request for each participant to review this analysis and make additions, corrections, or comments will be made but will not be a requirement of participant involvement if they choose not to. Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.

**Funded by:**  _NOT APPLICABLE_

**Potential Risks:**

- There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.
- Participants are encouraged to only answer those questions that they are comfortable answering.
- Risk(s), should they develop, will be addressed by debriefing with researcher.
- Debriefing procedures that will take place will include talking with researcher and if the participant determines they are in need of further assistance, a referral for counseling and/or other services, within easy access to participant, will be provided by the researcher.

**Potential Benefits:**

This research will benefit participants by creating an opportunity for discussing horse/human interactions and may create an understanding of the relationship the participant has with their own horse(s). This research will have implications for social workers who want to incorporate equine-assisted activities into their practices and will contribute to the social work knowledge base by contributing to an understanding of the essence or meaning of the horse/human relationship.
Compensation: NOT APPLICABLE

Confidentiality:

- Confidentiality will be maintained by not disclosing identifiable information about the participant in the research findings.
- Anonymity of participant will be maintained by using code names for participants with only the researcher and the supervisor (if requested) will have access to data and identity of participants.
- Given the large size of the horse-owner community and the interactions within, with the potential use of snowball sampling it may be possible that others will know of a participant’s participation which could limit the confidentiality of participant involvement.
- Participation in the study is voluntary and the participant may withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. When a participant withdraws, his/her data will be deleted from the research project and destroyed.
- Consent forms and master lists will be stored separately (in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home) from the data collected, and destroyed (via shredding then incineration) when it is no longer required (after 5 years).
- Confidentiality will be protected by only the researcher having access to data and data storage.
- The research project results and associated material will be safeguarded and securely stored in a locked file cabinet by the researcher (in the researcher’s home) for a minimum of five years. When the data is no longer required, it will then be appropriately destroyed via shredding and incineration. Audio recordings will be erased.
- The data from this research will be used for the purposes of a thesis. The study may at some time be published or presented at conferences; however, your identity will be kept confidential. Although the researcher will report direct quotations from the interview, the participant will be given a pseudonym, and all identifying information will be removed from the report.

Right to Withdraw:

Your participation is voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw your data until dissemination has occurred (April, 2012) for any reason without explanation or penalty. However, if you withdraw from the research project once dissemination has occurred, the researcher will be unable to remove your data.
Follow up:

To obtain results from the study, please contact the researcher through email at suemills@sasktel.net. to request a copy of the research study.

Questions or Concerns:

- Contact the researcher using the information at the top of page 1.
- This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the U of R Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee at 585-4775 or research.ethics@uregina.ca. Out of town participants may call collect.

Consent

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

________________________  ______________________  ____________________
Name of Participant          Signature              Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.
Appendix C

Thank You Letter to Participant

Date _________________

Dear _________________

Thank you for meeting with me in an extended interview and sharing your horse experience. I appreciate your willingness to share your unique and personal thoughts, feeling, events, and situations.

I have enclosed a transcript of your interview. Would you please review the entire document. Be sure to ask yourself if this interview has fully captured your experience of your horse and human interaction. After reviewing the transcript of the interview, you may realize that an important experience(s) was neglected. Please feel free to add comments, with a different coloured pen, which would further elaborate your experience(s), or if you prefer we can arrange to meet again and tape record your additions or corrections. Please do not edit for grammatical corrections. The way you told your story is what is critical.

When you have reviewed the verbatim transcript and have had an opportunity to make changes and additions, please return the transcript in the stamped, addressed envelope. Please make all revisions to your transcript within 2 weeks of receiving it and return to myself within 3 weeks. If I do not receive your transcript the assumption will be made that you have no changes.
I have greatly valued your participation in this research study and your willingness to share your experience. If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to call me.

With warm regards,

Suellen Mills

306-567-8562 cell

306-544-2855 home
Appendix D

Horse venues where recruitment posters will be displayed and clubs contacted through emails.

**Venues**

Claypool’s Boot and Jean  Bronco’s Western Wear

Early’s Farm and Garden  Prairieland Park Agriculture Center

Saskatoon Livestock Sales

**Recreational Clubs**

Sask. Valley Riding Club  Grasswood Fillies

Christian Cowboys Association  Prairie Quarter Horse Breeders Group
Appendix E

Interview guide

The phenomenological interview will begin with a social conversation to create a relaxed and trusting atmosphere. Following this conversation I will suggest that the participant take a few moments of silence, to focus on the experience of their interaction with horses and bring to mind moments of particular awareness and impact, and then to describe the experience fully (Moustakas, 1994).

Interview guide:

Try to remember one of the times you interacted with horses and tell me about the situation, what you did, and how you felt and acted.

- What activities with horses are you involved in?
- How long have you been involved with horses?
- What do you experience inside yourself when you are around horses?
- How would you explain this experience?
- What feelings were generated by this experience?
- What are some factors, conditions or events that lead to (enhance/enrich or detract/interfere with) your experience?
- What factors, conditions or events may also have contributed to your experience?
- What thoughts have stood out for you?
- Have your actions or thinking changed as a result of your experience with horses?
- What result does this experience with horses have on you? (Would you consider any of these interactions as contributing to your personal well-being or therapeutic? If so in what way?)
- What bodily changes or states were you aware of during your interaction with horses?
- How has your experience with horses affected significant others in your life?
- Have you shared all that is significant about your interaction with horses, or would you like to share any other information?
Appendix F

Initial Telephone contact With Participants

The following information will be shared with potential research participants upon the first telephone contact. The participants will be screened to determine if they meet the selection criteria (participants must live in Saskatchewan, be over age 30 and have experienced direct contact with horses over a period of at least 5 years). Participants will also be informed that they will be asked to share personal contact information.

**Research Purpose:** The purpose of this research study is to explore the lived experiences of adults, who have directly interacted with horses, to discover the true nature of this interaction. This study will attempt to create an understanding of what adults may experience, when they directly interact with horses, and how this may contribute to their view of personal well-being.

**Research Question:** “What do adults experience when they interact with horses that they consider contributes to their well-being?”

**Voluntary:** Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

**Procedures:** Participants will be asked to participate in semi-structured interview with the researcher. The interviews will be audio-taped using a digital recorder. Each interview will be 1 to 2 hours in length. The interviews will be held at a time and location convenient to the participant. After the interview, the interview will be transcribed by the researcher and the transcript will be mailed or emailed to the participant for their review. The participant will be allowed to make amendments or adjustments to the transcript and then return the transcript to the researcher, in a pre-stamped envelope provided by
researcher or via email. Time required by the participants would be a maximum of 2
hours for the interview and 2 hours for participant to review their transcripts. Copies of
the researcher’s final analysis of the textural-structural descriptions of participant
experience will also be sent to each participant. A request for each participant to review
this analysis and make additions, corrections, or comments will be made but will not be a
requirement of participant involvement if they choose not to. Time required by
participants to do this will vary, but may take approximately 2-3 hours.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: All identifiable information about the participant will be
held confidential when reporting the findings from the research. Only the researcher and
the supervisor will have access to data and data storage. Transcripts, paper data and
taped interviews will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home and on a
password protected USB stick, also stored in the locked file cabinet. Although the
researcher will report direct quotations from the interview, participants will be given a
pseudonym, and all identifying information will be removed from the report.

Questions or Comments: At this time the participant will be asked if they have any
questions or comments regarding this research study.

Interview Date Setting:
Participant Name:____________________________________
Date: ____________________________________________
Time: ____________________________________________
Place: ____________________________________________
Participant Phone Number:__________________________ (home)
________________________________________________ (cell)
Participant Address: ____________________________________________
_________________________________________
Thank-you: The participant will be thanked for volunteering to be part of the research project.
Appendix G

Ethics Review Board Approval Letter

OFFICE OF RESEARCH SERVICES
MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 23, 2011

TO: Suellen Mills
    Box 117
    Hanley, SK S0G 2E0

FROM: Dr. Bruce Plouffe
      Chair, Research Ethics Board

Re: Discovering the Horse/Human Interaction (File #103S1011)

Please be advised that the University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed your proposal and found it to be:

☐ 1. APPROVED AS SUBMITTED. Only applicants with this designation have ethical approval to proceed with their research as described in their applications. For research lasting more than one year (Section 1F), ETHICAL APPROVAL MUST BE RENEWED BY SUBMITTING A BRIEF STATUS REPORT EVERY TWELVE MONTHS. Approval will be revoked unless a satisfactory status report is received. Any substantive changes in methodology or instrumentation must also be approved prior to their implementation.

☐ 2. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO MINOR CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB.** Do not submit a new application. Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.

☐ 3. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB.** Do not submit a new application. Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.

☐ 4. UNACCEPTABLE AS SUBMITTED. The proposal requires substantial additions or redesign. Please contact the Chair of the REB for advice on how the project proposal might be revised.

Dr. Bruce Plouffe

cc: Dr. Alisa M. Watkinson – Social Work

** supplementary memo should be forwarded to the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at the Office of Research Services (Research and Innovation Centre, Room 109) or by e-mail to research.ethics@uregina.ca

Phone: (306) 585-4775
Fax: (306) 585-4683
www.uregina.ca/research