

# InStyle

## Why Equine Therapy Is Becoming Hollywood's Go-To Treatment for De-Stressing



BY: **KIM PEIFFER**

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When *InStyle* September cover girl **Selena Gomez** revealed to the world that she spent 90 days in a treatment center recovering from emotional health issues and exhaustion, she credited Equine Therapy as a big part of her recovery process, and she's not alone.

Many people turn have been turning to horse therapy (a process that includes grooming, feeding, haltering and/or leading a horse) to help a patient develop feelings of trust and self-confidence as well as a host of additional emotional and behavioral improvements.

Although Equine Therapy seems to be rapidly growing in popularity in the world of therapeutic treatments, the concept is nothing new. We turned to Wyatt Webb, Director of Equine Programs at **Miraval Resort**, to share why this experience is such a powerful and effective way to heal the mind, body, and soul.



### **Why did you start the Equine program?**

I had been a therapist for about 10 or 12 years at the time when I witnessed a 16-year-old boy trying to clean a horse's hoof. He was pushing the horse around and was really frustrated, which naturally made the horse very frightened. I realized that this was how the boy had been living his life; he had developed a survival skill by becoming a bully, and his natural stress response was to push people around. I walked into the horse's stall and showed the boy how to clean the horse's hoof by approaching the horse without fear or intimidation. In that moment, the boy learned how to problem solve and connect without pushing people away, and I, in turn, found my calling in life. Two years later, I heard from the boy's mother and learned that he was clean of all chemicals and stayed out of trouble with the law. My suspicion is that if he hadn't gotten that intervention, he would've gone to jail. That moment changed him. Soon after, I started a private practice doing equine therapy, and when Miraval was founded and I joined the organization and was given the opportunity to lead the **equine programming**. I've been working with guests at Miraval's stables ever since, and I've seen so much change and growth in thousands of guests over that time.

## **How does it work?**

The program is based on the premise that all human behavior is learned and that how we do one thing is how we do everything. For example, the way someone interacts with an animal is the same for every animal, even other humans. With a horse, you must be authentic, because horses can read our energy. Horses are prey animals and want to know that they are safe. Only if they feel safe and are approached with total authenticity and vulnerability will they cooperate with you. This may sound simple, but it's a very difficult task for humans in our society. In this culture, we have been trained to believe that the world is not a safe place; we are fear-based and we are shame-based, which makes us disingenuous. If you don't allow yourself to tell the truth about yourself and experience vulnerability, you won't be able to connect with the horse or with other people. You don't have to get rid of the fear or shame – you just have to stop keeping it a secret.

## **Why is the emotional connection to horses so much different of an experience?**

Unlike people, horses don't want anything from you. They're not making up stories about you. They simply see you for who you are, which is extremely powerful in helping people break down walls and question learned behaviors.

## **What is it about horses that makes them such a great way for people to work through their life challenges?**

A horse's feedback is so pure. You can't hustle one of them or bribe them with food or sweet talking like you might do with another person or even with a pet. They're above all that. All they want from you is to feel safe, and they'll let you know immediately if they don't.



### **How has Equine Therapy helped you personally?**

It has genuinely given me an opportunity to do something that I believe in in the core of my soul. I know that it works and that it matters. Everybody needs to do something that matters, and this matters to me. It's a gift to do this work and to keep people safe, present and focused on their internal selves. I've seen things happen that are incredible.

### **How have you seen it help others?**

So many people have told me that equine therapy has made a difference in their lives. I've had people tell me that it causes them to change careers and that they've stopped being doormats for other people. They tell me that they've started to look at and evaluate their own stories and realized that that is what matters in life, not the stories told by others. The work is very empowering.

**Is there an amount of time (say a couple times a week etc.) that one should be doing equine therapy? Is it helpful/effective to just do it one time?**

Equine therapy is like any other type of therapy in that it's not a one-time fix; if it's working for you, then it's best to stick with it and do it as often as you can. Several of Miraval's return guests participate in our equine programming each time they come to the resort, and they say that the experience feels different each time depending on the stage in their lives. They believe they are empowered in different ways and ask different questions and find different answers. While you may start to feel the benefits after your first time working with a horse, it's not a one-time fix. If I had such a cure, people would line up from Seattle or New York! There's no magic fix – it's a process.

**Why do people get so emotional when simply trying to pick up a horse's hoof?**

I don't think it has anything to do with the hoof. I think that people get emotional because they suddenly feel safe. They realize that they are standing in the space of a creature who wants nothing from them and that all of their defense mechanisms don't work. They must be authentic in that moment, and that realization can be overwhelming. They are in the present time, and that is the sweetest place there is. People say they get lost in the presence of a horse, and I say no, you were found.

**What do you think of it all now that the idea of equine therapy is becoming popular lately?**

I think word is getting out that the process works, that it's not some sort of "woo woo" deal, or fashionable trend. I've devoted the second half my life to this process, and it's a gift to see so many more people benefitting from it.

## **What has been the best experience during your many years doing this?**

There honestly isn't one particular experience that stands out. There is something every day that shows me why I started to do this and the power that it has on people. I believe that we provide people with the opportunity to rewrite their original scripts that were given to them by family and by culture. We offer them the power to change and become their authentic selves, and that's a beautiful thing.

## **What's the most valuable lesson a horse has taught you in life?**

Horses taught me that anytime you are in a relationship with anything or anybody and you have the need to win, then the possibility of closeness and connection is over. Somebody will have to lose in the end. I learned that lesson while riding a horse, and if I hadn't had a helmet on that day, then it would've killed me. On the way home that day, I realized the importance of creating relationships where no one has to lose.