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## Self-experience... the best way of becoming a therapist

Self-experience in European qualification framework  
for practice and training in animal mediated assistance and therapy  
(AMAT) – program Leonardo da Vinci



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## Preface

Animal mediated assistance and therapy with horses becomes increasingly popular therapeutic method.

Therefore it is important to think about appropriate education of those who work with this method. Therapists themselves should experience the processes between the human being and a horse and also the activities we usually propose to our clients. As therapists, we often talk about our clients and also about horses, though avoiding looking into the mirror at ourselves. In the therapeutic processes and interactions there are always at least three participants: our client, a horse and a therapist.

Whether we want it or not, we, the therapists, “bring” ourselves, our feelings and experience with horses into the work with our clients. There is no chance for us to “hide behind” the methods. Our own feelings when being with these animals and also our internal experience become the key therapist’s competencies for the entire therapeutic process of the client. Even if we could, for example, stand upside down on our heads on a galloping horse, successfully complete a show jumping course or teach a horse to perform the piaffe, etc., it would not help us. The key competency is to feel the processes and the interactions of the entire triangle: client-horse-therapist.

This is why self-experience is so important for AMAT therapists. In this booklet we want to familiarise you with what we mean by **self-experience** and **meeting your (the therapist’s) true self**. We also want to show you the importance of this experience in our work.

We realise that education is the most effective when we experience things and undertake actions personally gaining our own experience in particular area. “Research conducted by psychologists shows that we remember 10% of what we hear, 15% of what we see, 20% of what we see and hear, 40% of what we discuss about and as much as 80% of what we experience ourselves, what we do” (PETLÁK, 1997). This booklet is entirely devoted to this innovative approach in educating AMAT therapists.

So far there has been no such a publication which could help AMAT therapists became familiar with at least basic ideas, meaning and principles of self-experience. We hope this publication will help. We would like to thank all who helped us, above all to **Ivana Szamaranszká** and **Katarína Holasová**. Also we would like to thank **Lucia Galbavá** and **Vidal Eliott** for voluntary language consulting.

### Self-experience – the best way of becoming a therapist



Photo: Petra Černá Rynešová, CZ

*In AMAT with horses, we shift between the ‘professional field’ – where we care about safety, define structure, accompany the client in the process of therapy and between ‘zone of unknown’ – which forms between the horse and the client. Nobody has access into this zone of unknown only the horse and the client. To allow this situation to happen and work with it takes a lot of humbleness. It’s much easier for therapists to work with this situation, the more self-experience they have with this zone themselves.*

**Agata Wiatrowska**

AMAT therapists need space where they can:

- Gain the first-hand experience with horses – i.e. self-experience;
- “Meet themselves” when being in contact with horses – i.e. meeting the true self (whenever they want to and are ready for this challenge: from learning about themselves up to working on themselves – self-development).

*When I hear people saying: „No one knows us better than we ourselves“ I usually feel very embarrassed. I learn all the time that our knowledge about ourselves is very limited. The progress is inhibited by the belief that it has already taken place.*

**Mark W. Baker**

Processes of „self-experience“ and „meeting the true self“ enable us to deeply understand the theory and practice in our work. All this happens thanks to our personal experiencing and our own reflections and also thanks to feedback from horses, supervisor and group members. Such experiences allow AMAT therapists discover both new horizons related to the influence of the method – animal mediated assistance and therapy with horses and the knowledge important for practice.

Therapists should include and implement the information (about themselves, AMAT, horses, etc.) they gained through “self-experience“ and “meeting the true self“ into their every-day practice with clients.

*Thanks to self-experience workshop with horses I have fundamentally changed the way I look at this type of therapy. I have discovered many new findings about myself and thanks to that realised the value and depth of AMAT with horses.*

Horses cannot speak but they talk to us if we only want to listen to them.



Photo: Martin Minařík, CZ

Horse will make you aware of anything you need to learn about yourself.



Photo: Katarzyna Lubbe-Kwaśniak, PL

*Horse assisted self-experience always provides me enormously strong feelings. I meet my true self by the contact with a horse, its reactions and interactions with the group. All this is a kind of reflection in the mirror of who I am, what I do and how I deal with this internally. In such situations I very intensely experience the value and the power of this information about myself. The interaction with a horse makes such information unquestionable – on contrary, it is deeply true and defines exactly who I am. This is always an extraordinary experience for me. I realise that in interactions with a horse I am unable to censor my behaviour, sooner or later I will have to become just myself – and this is what I believe to be the enormous value of horse assisted self-experiencing.*

Petra Černá Rynešová, JO Kněžmost, CZ

## Self-experience and its reflection in practice

*Horses somehow force the contact with the neglected parts of our personality*

Agata Wiatrowska



Photo: Andrea Hulalová, SK

*Thanks to horse assisted self-experience we become more natural and authentic. Is it okay to require others to do things we have not experienced ourselves? Is it okay to pretend that everything is fine if I am scared and I cannot cope with a horse? Is it okay to pretend that I am a therapist who knows everything? Horses know where the truth is and react to it. Client may not catch this on the conscious level but his/her unconsciousness will tell him or her that there is something wrong, there is a lie somewhere. Do we have the right then to expect our client to tell the truth about himself/herself and how he or she feels?*

Lenka Kňazovická, Hipoškôlka, SK

Self-experiencing is closely connected with the every-day work of therapist. We will show you on simple examples the benefits that can be offered

even by a single situation experienced by a therapist. Each experience will guide a participant as far as he or she is ready to go.

### Example I

My task was ground work with an unleashed horse. I was supposed to change the directions and the pace of the horse movement. I started to put pressure on myself: "Well, I am the one who can work with horses and therefore I should do this activity properly and show the others how good I am." The pressure I put on myself was also exerted on the horse. It was running as far away from me as possible, sometimes even stumbling. Then I received feedback from the group that I exerted inappropriate pressure on the horse. I realised that when I encounter resistance or feel extensive need to solve a problem in my every-day life, I start pushing. It often becomes non-productive or even destructive. Sometimes it manifests in the use of physical force and consequent fatigue. Since this experience, I have been trying not to put any pressure on my clients when I encounter their resistance. Instead, I describe the situation, define what is happening, and instead of pushing them, I wait, observe and consider what can be done in such case. This experience has taught me that I should restrain my natural impulse to put pressure and look for other ways of effective contact with the clients.

### Example II

When I was longeing my horse on a meadow, it was trying to escape, pull me away and eat the grass. In the result I started to develop a fear of wide-open spaces. I didn't believe in myself. I allowed the horse to pull me when longeing. Then I realised that I had to be the one who decides what the horse has to do. I should therefore be assertive and decisive, and start to control the situation. My aim was clear. And then the horse bowed down its head with respect and ... started to snort quietly. As a result, I have learnt how it is to stand my ground, how not to let others push me aside and how to express what I need in a clear manner. This experience has transformed in my therapeutic practice into higher self-confidence and, when necessary, more decisive leading. It happens sometimes that you have to set clear boundaries in relations with clients. It is not a problem for me anymore. Now I don't allow myself to become dominated or intimidated by parents of my clients trying to shift on me the responsibility for their unrealistic expectations from the therapy. I clearly formulate the rules that are respected by the other party.

## What is self-experience?

- Personal experience/feelings/sensations of specialists that have their reflections in their personal and professional development and in better performance of their work with clients.
- In the strict sense of the term, during the „self-experience” process one may „meet with his or her true self”.

Self-experiencing does not necessarily lead to meeting the true self. On the other hand, when meeting our true self, we always undergo the self-experience process.

As the integral part of education of AMAT specialists, self-experience is a process within the confines of which experts participate in real situations and interactions with horses with the emphasis put on their own inner experiencing.

Such process can be carried out individually or in a group, always under supervision of an experienced AMAT therapist. The essential elements of this process are feedback and reflections.

As result of such personal experience, therapists more deeply understand the mechanisms and impact of method (AMAT with horses). Therapists also learn more about themselves and develop their professional workshop and therapeutic skills.

### III.1. What have we learnt from practice?

*Self-experience with horses activates all functions of consciousness.*

Agata Wiatrowska

All experienced specialists know that their abilities to react in the proper way and to help their clients are shaped by their every-day work and practice, personal experience and the development of their self-awareness and self-reflection with the help of supervision. It takes years.

Self-experience – including “meeting the true self” – is a broadly understood proposal for therapists of personal participation in real situations and gaining first-hand experience. This allows them to acquire deeper understanding of AMAT as a method.

For example, experiencing the feelings/activities focused on understanding the ethology of horses – i.e. their way of perception; first-hand experience of different forms and methods of work in AMAT; and also – as the beneficiary of AMAT activities – experiencing of deeper feelings and this way learning the impact of AMAT. It allows to better and deeper understand the therapeutic process and the changes occurring in this process.

*I discovered problems that I was suppressing for some time. It took me by surprise how they kept coming up to the surface during the workshop. I felt that they kept blocking me deeply down. I was leaving feeling ready to make many needed changes in my life.*

The results of so understood self-experience may assume the form of the knowledge gained through or without deep emotional experiences or feelings. Such feelings are for the participants the source of their self-awareness and professional development.

*I have realised that things can be captured and described without assessments and interpreting. My personal experience: when I take into consideration both my needs and the needs of horses, the co-operation becomes more effective.*

In case of very deep experiences/feelings resulting from such situation, experts may even develop a secondary psychotherapeutic effect. Very deep changes of their personality can take place. It will be then visible in their thinking, behaviour, the way of inner experiencing and their attitude towards themselves, the world and their work.

**Deeper process of self-experiencing may take place only when a therapist is ready for this and feels the need for it.** That is why participation in activities focused mainly on deepening of self-awareness (meeting the true self) and personal development must result from the participants’ free choice.

The effects of such self-experiencing usually manifest by:

- more developed self-awareness and self-reflection of AMAT therapists – including, what is of fundamental importance, by increased understanding of how they influence the interaction between client and horse and the therapeutic process of client,
- Therapists’ deeper feeling/sense for the therapeutic process and the interactions between client and horse, and their better responses thereto.

This is the way how authentic professional awareness and authentic professional competencies of specialists – gained based on own experience and activities – are shaped.



Photo: Agnieszka Zawodzińska, PL

*A person developing in this way will be able to communicate and co-operate with the surrounding in a mature way and will be capable of supporting the process of interaction between a client and an animal. Thanks to self-reflection, therapists gain knowledge about the context of their own interactions. They are able to react to the interactions between a client and a horse in order to facilitate the client's development. AMAT therapists start to understand and feel the influence of their own attitudes, values and intentions, and the way they think about the world on the course of the therapeutic process. (Tílešová, 2012)*

#### Example:

During the work of a therapist with a client, the horse kept running away. After the analysis of this situation with a supervisor, it was found that the horse responded to therapist's uncertainty. She was unconsciously dismissing the responsibility for the effects of the work with this particular client. She was frustrated and was not sure whether she would be able to help him. The animal partner

was showing the therapist in this way that it was not going to get involved until she assumed appropriate attitude and stopped evading the situation. When the therapist realised the connection between her attitude and the behaviour of the horse, she changed her approach and the horse started to co-operate. This example explicitly shows that horses will not co-operate during work with clients until therapists start to successfully cope with their own problems and the situation.

If we are able to respect horses as partners in our work – partners who give us a lot of information about our clients, the processes and communication in a therapeutic triangle or about ourselves – it means we have internally developed/reached a certain level of self-acceptance.

Without this self-acceptance, there is no space for authentic, tolerant and open attitude towards others, or towards the horse and its reactions. A human being can enter into genuine interactions based on partnership (I'm OK – You're OK) only when his/her SELF is developed enough.

**We are able to give others only what we are able to give to ourselves.** Only when we are able to accept ourselves together with our weaknesses, when we are able to forgive ourselves, we can then accept our clients without judging them – and give them enough time and space. There is a basic psychological principle: our relation to others (including our clients and horses) is the same as to ourselves. **We can compensate and use defence mechanisms, but then we cannot say we are authentic. In contact with horses this relation is clearly manifested – horses are catalysts and diagnosticians not only for clients but also for therapists. This reflects in the therapeutic process of client.**

#### Example from self-experience workshop:

I am galloping on a longed horse. My embarrassed friend holding the longe of the horse on which I seat says: "Leave it to me. You're interfering".... I did not understand.... "Me?" "Yes, you! You are sitting there and the horse does not know who to listen to! It does not want to follow instructions and even resists. It does not want to co-operate. You are doing too much also for the horse." ... In fact, I wanted to control the situation.... Fortunately, I realised it. During the work I wanted to control even the part of the therapeutic process belonging only to my clients – 'just' to have the work progressing. I made efforts for everyone, which in result was not helpful. On the contrary it was an obstacle. It happened many times that my health suffered from such attitude. Now I allow clients to

“sweat” doing their job and to decide “which direction” they want to go. I am not trying to work for myself and for my client together. This is the only way a healthy therapeutic process can take place.

Besides, we all know that most of the processes and interactions occur nonverbally. In contacts with horses it is more noticeable – that is why the processes taking place in the therapeutic triangle with a horse are deeper and stronger.

How we communicate with a horse is a reflection of where we are in our personal development. If we are not able to listen to our inner-self, automatically we will not be able to listen to either our client or the messages from a horse. „My attitude towards myself is the same as the one I automatically contribute to the interactions with others”. If, for example, I demand from myself and I push myself, I unconsciously do the same in relation to my horse-partner and my client. That is why it is so important to be aware of our weaknesses. Only then we can control them during our work.

*Horses can survive in their natural environment thanks to their extraordinary abilities of nonverbal communication – mutual, effective exchange of information and co-ordination of herd without words. Horses are able to sense and respond to changes of such parameters as our pulse, blood pressure, pupil diameter, etc. even from the distance of several metres. It is confirmed by scientific analyses. (Gundlach, Stumpf, Pfunst, 2006).*

Therefore horses react to our emotions, thoughts, etc. Thanks to it we can learn a lot of important information about ourselves and what we bring to our work. The turning point in professional development of AMAT therapists is the moment when they are ready to listen to a horse as to a valuable and communicative partner. A horse is no longer a tool as soon as therapists become aware of and open to what it „says” – they become aware of how much valuable information they can receive and they start to take it into consideration during their work. When this takes place, therapists start to accept the value of the „horse speech”. They start to observe it carefully and use it therapeutically.

#### Example

I was working with mentally-handicapped woman. She had huge problems with learning how to lead horse. The animal was putting a pressure on her and even was trying to push her. I was really surprised because I knew that the horse would not behave normally that way. I decided then that once a week we would work with the

woman on setting her personal boundaries. Later I called her therapist. He told me that this woman always was crossing the personal boundaries of others... Lexa Voss z Těšová (2012)

“If I refuse to see myself truly, to accept myself the way I am together with my weaknesses, I will not be able to respond to my client’s needs with authentic acceptance. I will not be able to teach my client the attitude of self-acceptance. It will also be difficult for me to respond to the signals of a horse and to work with them.” In such cases therapists will not be able to notice and accept that horses send them clear and comprehensible signals – important messages (it’s enough to notice a gaze, an eye movement, expanded pupils or nostrils, the way it breathes, the slightest changes in muscles tension, in skin, etc.). For therapists, these are important messages about themselves, about their clients, the process, etc.



Photo: Wiktor Maciejewski, PL

These are the horses that through the messages communicated in their language show us more information about the therapeutic process and interactions in the therapeutic triangle than we are able to realise during our work with client. The use of this potential of horses in our practice brings incomparably better results of our work. That is why it is worth to observe the messages communicated by horses – their slightest reactions during our work – and to try to understand them and respond to them.

### III.2. What do statistics reveal?

From metaanalysis we know that the personality of a therapist is the most important tool at his or her work. **“The results of psychotherapy do not depend on the psychotherapeutic method or direction, but on the therapist’s personality.”** (Ackerman, Hilensroth, 2003). We must remember it during the process of the therapists’ training for their profession. Our true self is revealed during this work even if we do not want it to happen. Horses will quickly “decode” us and tell us who we are. Additionally they stimulate and “force” us to work with our weaknesses.

### III.3. Specificity of AMAT with horses

An Arabic proverb says: “The horse knows his knight the best.” Ray Hunt describes the informative value of messages horses give us: „A person will tell you his or her opinion, while a horse will tell you the fact”.

*All we “know”, we first filter through our subjective beliefs based on our experiences. If we start treating a horse as our partner, whose reactions we respect and value in our relation – taking into account that these reactions are objective and provide feedback about who we are and how we influence horse-client interactions – then we are on the best path to develop ourselves in all aspects of our work for our clients’ good.*

Stanislava Tílešová  
Stowarzyszenie „Strapate Ranczo”, PL

In the interaction with horses it is not possible to pretend – whether we really want to learn from them or we just need to calm our ego. In contacts with horses our attitudes become very clear and totally perceptible, even if we do not want it to happen. That is why Agata Wiatrowska (horse assisted development programmes, [www.horsesense.pl](http://www.horsesense.pl)) talks about inwardly directed work – aimed at the calming of our ego. Then we are ready for the development work directed “outside” – in case of an AMAT therapist – the relation with a horse and a client.

“The specificity of therapists’ approach to horses is the main factor in their work as the method they use is the animal mediated assistance and therapy with horses. The horse is a mirror. It reacts the same way with therapists as with their clients. Therapists have no chance to »hide« behind the methods and techniques. We should consider this when we interpret the therapeutic process of our client. Therapists, similarly to their clients, trans-

fer their attitudes and approaches during work to horses and the reactions of horses are like a reflection in a mirror.” (Čermáková, S., Papendieck S., Rušig D., Szamaranská I., Tílešová, S., 2012). (As we already mentioned in the example with a horse escaping from the workplace on page 12.) Therapists should be aware of the huge impact they have then (through the above issue/ ethological mechanisms) on the results of work with their clients. Therefore therapists should reach higher levels of self-reflection. When working on themselves, therapists should focus first of all on their own relations with horses and the knowledge of their ethology.

*The communication with horses takes place not through the social mask, but through deeper resources.*

Agata Wiatrowska



Photo: Petra Černá Rynešová, CZ

*When horses and humans are partners, they can learn a lot from each other. Humans can be “present”, can be themselves and respect horses at the same time being respected by them. Otherwise horses will immediately bring the humans back to reality and presence. Horses do not analyse, they respond to what happens here and now. They do not care of what was yesterday and what will be tomorrow. That is why they are such excellent teachers for us. When we earn their trust and respect, they will do for us even things that are not natural for them. It is great to feel that horses leave you space and to stand with them here and now, in silence.*

Lenka Kňazovická, Hipoškôlka, SK

Let's look at two examples of situations from the huge range of challenges faced by therapists at work. Both of them require awareness and skills that may be gained only through own experience.

#### Example I



Photo: Andrea Hulalová, SK

ing the horse like a trustworthy partner does not come automatically.

Therapist and client clean the horse's hooves together – one of numerous situations experienced by a therapist every day. Being authentic, relaxed and supportive for the client, simultaneously responding to his or her needs and to the needs of the process and treating

#### Example II



Photo: Andrea Hulalová, SK

authentically only when we are able to give ourselves this kind of freedom and choice.

Here we see the therapist responding to the boy's needs. He had a wish: He wanted a large branch – as large as the horse itself. The therapist respects the horse, giving it the space necessary to sniff and inspect the branch. We are able

“Self-experience is important at each level and in different fields of education of AMAT therapists. AMAT may take place in various settings (riding hall – outside in the forest; group work – individual work; therapists' team work – therapists working alone), in combination of varied methods (i.e.: horse riding, games, vaulting, horse carriage ride, theatre, circus, dance with a horse, horse training, discussion in the presence of horses, caring for a horse, work with various didactic materials, ground work, communication with a horse, horse observation, etc.). This is why it is so important to ensure the possibility of self-experience at every stage of AMAT therapist education – both when learning different methods, styles, models and directions

of work and under the supervision of different teachers and at different therapeutic institutions.

Students should have the possibility to experience different psychological, pedagogical, medical and equestrian approaches on their own to gain necessary interdisciplinary knowledge and to shape their individual style of work” (Čermáková, S., Papendieck S., Rušig D., Szamaranszká I., Tílešová, S., 2012).



Photo: Andrea Hulalová, SK

### III.4. Difference between self-experience and practice within education programmes

Within the practice, we acquire skills, train, improve ourselves and learn how to implement the theory.

Self-experience means living through different situations, feelings and experiences that touch personal inside. In consequence we internalise and understand the theoretical and practical knowledge much deeper.

Of course, spontaneous process of self-experience can also occur within practice, yet it focuses on practicing. On the other hand, self-experience focuses on internal feelings and consequent deep understanding of the subject.

## Principles of professionally guided horse assisted self-experience

Prior to the commencement of the work on self-experiencing with horses, we always familiarise the participants with its principles.

### Participants:

- feedback from horses is honest, true – we accept horses as coaches,
- each participant is responsible for the process and safety at work; for his/her attitude, behaviour and interpretations brought into the process,
- we work in the circle of trust; we are discrete and do not spread any information outside,
- I undertake any activity if I agree with it,
- I have the right to say “no” during activities – to refuse to take part in an activity,
- I have the right to say “stop” during activities – to stop or to interrupt given situation,
- I have the right to withdraw from an activity,
- I share only the thoughts and emotions I want to share and only when I feel the need to do so – we do not push people to speak out,
- Interpretations are allowed only to the extent, to which “the person being interpreted” agrees,
- I have the right to show my genuine responses and reactions,
- We accept “no” from others and we do not cross our own or the others’ boundaries.

### Supervisor:

- cares for safety of individual situations and for the needs of horses,
- gives to participants and horses the space they need to self-experience,
- does not interfere/influence the role and responses of the horses,
- develops only the subjects raised by the participants,
- emphasizes the positive traits of personality, the resources of the participants and the processes,
- cares for transposing of the participants’ experiences during the activities to their professional and private life,
- all feedback should be concluded with emphasizing both on positive aspects of participants and on the process the participants undergo themselves,
- approaches the activities and situations without any attempts to “programme” the process – i.e. without any expectations of what participants should for example learn, acknowledge, or how given task should be done, etc.,
- works only on the situations/issues which the participants are ready to start themselves,
- provides clear and understandable feedback.

## Examples of professionally guided self-experience of horse assisted situations

The following examples of self-experience work have been selected at random. We have chosen them from numerous activities of our everyday practice just to show you the possibilities, the variety and the mechanisms of self-experience. The descriptions present authentic situations.

### Task example No 1: Leading a horse (“Line”)

This task may form a strong stimulus for revealing group processes, dynamics and hierarchy. We do not tell the participants though what this task focuses on. We do not want to artificially influence the processes, the awareness of which the participants develop in fact during the group session when they discuss their reflections from the experience, how they felt, what they experienced. This way, the participants may freely experience this activity without focusing on its actual “discoveries”. The realisation of certain things may also occur during the activity – it depends on the individual ability to observe and the level of self-awareness of each particular participant.

*Instruction:* Each participant first chooses what he/she would like to use to lead the horse (a rope, a bridle, a halter, a horsewhip, etc.). Then he/she chooses how he/she wants to lead the horse and the point from where the horse will be led on the path. The path is defined (in our case it was a path in the woods). Each participant does this task the way he/she feels it to do. When he/she wants to end leading the horse, he/she hands the horse over to another participant and takes the place in rest of the group. Participants change in discretionary order until everybody completes the task – i.e. leading the horse. As long as one participant is leading the horse, the others are following him/her forming “a line” and trying to keep it up.

### Description of an authentic experience

In the described case, the group consisted of experienced AMAT therapists, equinologists and an AMAT student.

**The situation when the first person was leading the horse** – no “line” was formed. People were talking to each other and completely forgot about their task. The person leading the horse was aware of that, but it didn’t both-

er her. The horse was in full harmony with the leader, and it was led with respect and ensuring necessary space.

*I had an impression that we are equal and I liked it. I enjoyed the freedom of each of the participants as well as the feeling that I do not need to have everything under control.*

**The situation when the second person was leading the horse** – the perfect “line” was naturally formed without a word. Everyone was focused on the task and followed the person leading the horse. No one was overtaking anybody or felt the necessity to change his/her place in the line. The horse respected the leader.

*I enjoyed the situation of me and the horse leading the entire group. The horse was like a real partner I could rely on. There was a true equality between me and the horse, and in the same time everybody behind us was marching one after another. I felt great that everyone was following me. However, it was a little surprising for me because so far I thought that when I was leading people I was making decisions for them, the same somehow forcing them to do things. This time I truly enjoyed the situation. It found its reflection in my work. When I am with a horse in balance based on partnership, it actually responds to my thoughts and snorts with pleasure during the therapy. We both enjoy our work.*

**The situation when the third person was leading the horse** – the group distanced from the leader right away. The group followed the leader in a disciplined manner and in silence. The communication between the leader and the horse was good.

*I did not care. I accepted the task as it was. This is how I did it. End of story.*

**The situation when the fourth person was leading the horse** – the horse was led with authority and the group followed the leader in a disciplined manner. Suddenly, leader No. 1 felt the necessity to be as close to the current leader as possible. She moved from the last position to the first, immediately behind the current leader, and started to exert pressure marching very close to her (like “glued”). The current leader managed the situation calmly. She was distanced and did not lose her temper. Finally the competing participant moved to her previous position, at the end of the line.

*I was doing my job responsibly, and even though I was surprised when you were so close to me, it was not the reason for hesitation. I am quite a dominant personality and I am quick to mark my position.*

**The situation when the fifth person was leading the horse** – the horse was led gently and confidently at the same time. Leader No. 1 moved from the last position to the first, behind the current leader. She followed the leader with satisfaction and in a disciplined manner. Next, leader No. 2 copied the behaviour of leader No. 1. Leaders Nos. 1 and 2 started to passionately overtake each other – they both wanted to take the place directly behind the person leading the horse. The situation did not make the current leader lose his temper even though there was a real “fight” for the place behind him. Finally, leader No 1 moved back to the end of the line.

*It was strange to me. I didn't understand what you wanted, but I saw that the situation did not require my intervention. I left you to deal with it on your own and that was it. My task was to lead the horse.*

*I felt really good behind you. It was a pleasant space. I would submit to your leadership.*

**The situation when the sixth person was leading the horse** – the group was very close to her. The horse responded to her well, but participants started to breach the rules of this task. One participant wanted to mount the horse, another to walk before it. Discussions started about who can do what – “how far” each participant can go. The participants did not know that the leading student did not have any experience with horses. Nevertheless, she decided to do this task.



Photo: Andrea Hulalová, SK

*I was leading a horse for the first time in my life. On one hand, I was afraid, but on the other, I really wanted to try this. I was not sure whether I was doing it right and whether the horse was treating me as an authority.*

### Statements of experienced AMAT therapists:

*I felt strong need to be close and to secure safety, although I didn't know why.*

*I felt the need to mount the horse. I felt this could give me more security than staying on the ground.*

*I felt internal chaos. I didn't understand what was going on, why we behaved that way and meddled with the competencies of the person leading the horse.*

### Reflection and resources of individual participants:

The attitudes of all participants (their interactions, actual attitudes towards themselves, the others and the world) have been revealed tangibly during this task. One could observe the group's empathy, responsibility, creativity, flexibility and ability to adapt. Every participant noticed both the responses of the horse and other group members. They were taken into account and the participants were adjusting to the situation. The group dynamics was revealed very intensely and without any words. During the task, such issues as competition, domination, respect, natural authority, protection and the need for own space were noticed.

### The resources of individual leaders:

- No. 1 – giving people the choice through her attitude based on partnership, following the motto: "Live and let live".
- No. 2 – focus on the goal, leading people, focusing them.
- No. 3 – responsibility, focus on the task, clear presentation of the need to set boundaries.
- No. 4 – good tolerance of frustration, focus on the task, persistence.
- No. 5 – leadership skills associated with creating of pleasant space and atmosphere for others.
- No. 6 – courage, ability to confront the task against the anxiety, focus on the goal.

### Task example No. 2: „Tyre”

*Instruction:* The group should reach the goal without touching the horse and without verbal communication. The goal is to make the horse to put its leg into a tyre. The horse is in a limited area without the leading rope.



Photo: Andrea Hulalová, SK

### Observation, reflection and resources of participants (authentic situation):

The group members were able to form a good team surprisingly quickly. They co-operated on solving problems. They did not give up in case of complications and were looking for the way to cope with the task. At one point, the group put too much pressure on the horse and it started to resist. The group immediately realised they made a mistake. The participants acknowledged it and took responsibility for their behaviour. The situation was remedied by the group to the possible extent.

Two important aspects were revealed during this task: effective teamwork of the group even in problematic situations; and the ability to adjust to the situation with focus on co-operation and the goal. It was not important for the group members who took what role and who reacted how. The group found the teamwork to be most important as well as the ability to complement one another. The team members realised that they had tendency to exert inappropriate pressure and to cross the boundaries.

### Examples of individual reflections of the participants of this experience:

*I was unpleasantly surprised by my fight with the horse: the sense of responsibility that we had a task to be done and the feeling that I 'had*

*to' do it by any means. I felt fear, I gritted my teeth and I was angry. Although it took just few seconds, I was working with this experience for a long time – from total disaffection to full comprehension of how much I push myself.*

*I have been crossing the boundaries of others and allowing the others to do the same for years. Many times I had to 'pay the toll', also during my work with clients. Even my awareness of this problem was not helpful. It was this particular experience with the horse – a spontaneous being beyond our patterns – that convinced and changed me. I did not feel the necessity to explain anything because the horse is just itself and does not judge me. It just wants to have some comfort and its rights. It showed me the reality – how I sometimes exaggerate.*

### Task example No. 3: “The world through the horse’s eyes”

*Instruction:* Take a horse for a walk to the woods on a loose leading rope. Make sure it has the freedom of movement. Copy the horse’s movements as well as you can – both using your head and your whole body. Observe what is happening inside you.



Photo: Alicja Rychlewska, PL

### Reflections:

*Since I was a child, I was taught to keep the horse tightly, not to let it bow its head, watch behind, etc. I not always followed these rules, but I automatically perceived such behaviour of horses as signals of danger. So I was vigilant ... Until Doris Russig from Germany gave me this task.*

*She also instructed me to put a mask with big ears – also making the nose and mouth longer – to bring me closer to the way how horses perceive the world. I was supposed to bow my head and extend my neck like the horse, and to move my head exactly as the horse did. I was supposed to pretend that my arms were my legs. It was a shock for me. I realised how much we constrain natural needs of horses treating them as some sort of machines. We associate innocent behaviour and responses with bad intentions, etc. It does not even come to our minds to look at things from 'the horse's perspective'. How can I teach my clients empathy personally giving a completely different model?*

Stanislava Tílešová  
Stowarzyszenie „Strapate Ranczo”, PL

**There is no one proper way – the only right methodology of self-experience. There is only the process and the effect – i.e. who we become thanks to the experience and what we are able to personally bring in to our work.**

It depends on us whether we want to see it, to take it into consideration, to reach into our deeper resources and consequently to be able to help better. Whether we will be able to support 'the zone of unknown' between horses and clients and simply not to interfere with it thanks to the fact that we had a chance to experience such "zone" ourselves. Clients sense, whether we work on ourselves and the model we provide.

*If you are sure you are right, think it over again ... Knowing the real self is possible only among human beings. You cannot escape from your 'real self' but you can discover it.*

Mark W. Baker

What we “know” is just a tiny part of the reality seen from our own perspective and encumbered by the constraints of our own subjective cognition. **We unconsciously filter the therapeutic process through “the sieve of our own experiences”.** That is why the humbleness is essential in our work with clients. Thanks to it, we learn to approach the above issue with awareness. Humbleness is mainly the result of self-experience and working on ourselves. The true humbleness is noticeable after years of practice. It has nothing to do with self-humiliation. On the contrary, it is the effect of true self-acceptance

and self-confidence. It is the sign that we do not fight for acceptance and recognition. The “fight” for recognition is the sign of own uncertainty. Humbleness may be noticed in the attitude: “I do not need to know better. I do not have to prove anything, assure my position or be afraid of mistakes and failures. I’m ok, you’re ok... I know that ‘I know nothing’... I am imperfect, we are all imperfect, and this is completely ok.”

If we are able to give this all to our clients, it is the result of our personal development, true wisdom and not just mere acquisition of knowledge. If clients would only need to acquire knowledge, the contact with therapists and horses would have been unnecessary. Books would be sufficient.

*Horses easily and sometimes directly open the doors to changes. They will not tell us how to live or how to become better therapists. They will just show it all to us.*

# VI

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