

The relative also learns fundamentals of riding and caring for a horse and benefits from the social interaction between the horse, therapist, and horse handlers.

Horse Handlers assist by preparing the horses and setting up grounds for therapy and provide safety for the relatives, horses and therapists during therapy.

Some Benefits of Equine Therapy

- The horse is a nonjudgmental honest friend
- Improves confidence and self-esteem
- Builds therapeutic relationship
- Creates opportunities to experience and feel
- Enhances problem solving skills
- Provides immediate cause and effect situations
- Opportunity to practice new skills and transfer what is learned to peers and family.
- Decreases feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and self-abusive behavior
- Captivates and holds attention
- Promotes change from dysfunctional patterns to successful ones
- Helps a relative to learn empathy
- Empowers, gives sense of control
- Social skills development

The TGKP EAMHT program has been designed to benefit from the special, emotional, and spiritual relationship as well as the unique knowledge that the Sicangu Oyate have with the Sunka Wakan Oyate (Horse Nation.) We know that our children live with multiple layers of trust, trauma, identity, and social skills issues to overcome. With culturally relevant support and healing opportunities and by bringing our knowledge, strengths and values together to address these issues, new doors to healing are opened. Working with the Sunkawakan Oyate, TGKP has seen the success of this process.

When a child is referred to TGKP and receives an assessment, if interested in ET, TGKP Clinical Supervisor will assign child to an Equine Therapy Group that meets during school hours. TGKP transports children to ranch from school and returns after sessions. Although children miss 90 minutes of class time once a week for therapy, When they return to school they are in a better frame of mind to learn.

TGKP is also offering Sunkawakan Oyate camps in summer for community children interested in learning and riding horses.



For more information, please contact us at 605-856-8163

Sinte Gleska University

TIWAHE GLU KINI PI

"Bringing the Family Back to Life"
Equine Therapy Program



"Sunkawakan (Dog like Animal that have a powerful energy) it's a respectful term. When working with the horses a person must be in a respectful mode. Horses understand the mood of the person that works around them. Horses have a strong energy that has the good and bad in them. Grandpa always told me when I handle horses, be respectful to them, be nice to them and to those who work with you. If you mishandle them or don't understand them, stand aside and learn from others who do know how to handle them. Aho!!"

**-The late Francis Cutt,
Late SGU Lakota Studies Instructor**

The horse provides a bridge for trusting, communicating, and learning how to give and receive emotional support. The horse will readily bond and form a relationship or “spirit connection” with relatives.

Horses will tolerate behavior from a relative that humans find difficult to accept.

The horse provides instant feedback of kindness and affection or frustration and confusion depending on the relative’s actions. This is different from therapy in an office. It’s natural, comfortable and fun.

Horses have a unique ability to mirror human body language. They reflect the internal state of those around them. Due to being in captivity, they have transferred this skill to relationships with humans.

A horse is aware of what an individual is working through often before the relative is even aware.



Horse responses can provide immediate feedback about a person’s nonverbal behaviors, which helps to increase awareness in a relative’s behaviors and emotions.

“Within this Lakota culture that evolved around the horse, the children played an important role. The grown-ups cared for the needs of the camp, while children watched the herds, moving them to better grass and water as needed. They played with the mares and colts, assisting in the “gentling” of the horses that were going to be trained. The horse also helped in the training of the children. The children had to be responsible in caring for the wealth of the family, making sure the horses were not hurt or attacked by predators. The horse nation also brought healing spiritual power with them. Many “Medicine men/Interpreters” had horse spirits that assisted them. The Oyate had a strong spiritual connection with the horse.”

-Ben Artichoker

Today, among the Oceti Sakowin, there is a movement to restore this spiritual connection with the horse for the healing of our children, families and communities. At TGKP, Equine Assisted Mental Health Therapy (EAMHT) is an approach in which activities with horses are a part of the therapy process. EAMHT can be used with individuals, groups or families.

How it Works

In individual work, relatives learn about themselves through interactions with a horse. In sessions with more than one person, the relatives interact with the horses and other group members. The learning happens during therapy and in the processing that follows the activity.

Working with the Sunkawakan Oyate, the therapist is able to address the serious mental, emotional and behavioral health issues that our young relatives are experiencing today.



Horses, because of their size, power, and sensitivity to humans, are great for therapy. In their natural environment, horses are prey. Their survival requires that they are extremely sensitive to the environment.

Over time, they have developed an ability to assess the intentions and emotional states of their herds, other animals, and predators. Horses also have strong social bonds and being a part of a herd is crucial to survival. The herd is based on a cooperative form of living and each horse in the herd has an important role just as in a Tiospaye. In therapy, each horse has a gift they bring for healing of particular issues.