



# *Equine Assisted Therapy*

A summary of research into the efficacy of Equine Assisted Therapy provided by Equine Learning Experiences Australia (ELEA)

RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY FEDERATION UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA  
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## What is Equine Assisted Therapy?

Equine-assisted therapy (EAT) encompasses a range of treatments that include activities with horses (and other equines) that promote physical, occupational, and emotional growth. The therapy is suited to persons with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, autism, cerebral palsy, dementia, depression, developmental delay, genetic syndromes (such as Down's syndrome), traumatic brain injuries, behavioural issues, abuse issues, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), drug and alcohol addiction, and other mental health problems.

In conjunction with, and facilitated by, human therapists, the horse has come to prominence over the past decade as a therapeutic assistant.

As prey animals, horses are particularly sensitive to changes in human body language, breathing and vocalizing. Horses sense when a person's thoughts, feelings or behaviours are incongruent, and perceive them to be a threat.

In a therapeutic setting, horses respond positively when participants exhibit calmness, a sense of confidence and fair leadership. EAT provides a vehicle for enabling participants to recognize, understand and focus on their emotions, especially if impacted by anxiety, or a heightened and unregulated nervous system.

## Equine Learning Experiences Australia (ELEA)

*Based at Napoleons in Western Victoria, Equine Learning Experiences Australia was developed by Ms Emily McVeigh. ELEA has worked with a range of employment service providers, disability services, government organisations, schools and community service providers since 2010.*

Feedback on the ELEA program has been extremely positive, with service providers and education practitioners reporting positive changes in participants who have consistently resisted other forms of therapeutic intervention.

*"Although I have observed, learnt and participated in all forms of treatment for mental illness, Emily's approach and her results stand out as one of the most successful I have seen, with almost immediate results. As a clinician, I was doubtful of the success. My opinion has changed and I would not hesitate to recommend her and her business to any client or health professional looking for something innovative and successful."*

(MENTAL HEALTH CLINICIAN: GRAMPIAN PARTNERS IN RECOVERY)

As referral agencies, case workers and schools strive to re-engage their clients in services that promote further learning and personal development, ELEA participants are reporting, and demonstrating, significant positive shifts in their engagement with education, work and relationships.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive feedback and current strong demand, a lack of funding and/or rebate provisions, are prohibiting individuals from self-referring for the ELEA program. This report aims to surmount funding and referral barriers to participation.

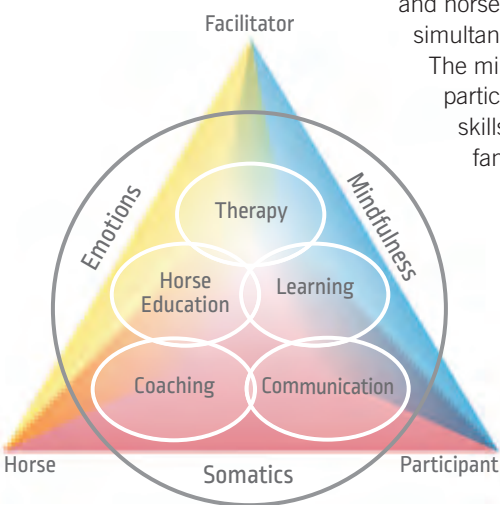
# ELEA program: a multi-faceted approach.

*ELEA method is an emerging form of trauma-informed practice, contrasting against established forms of human services and therapeutic relationships.*

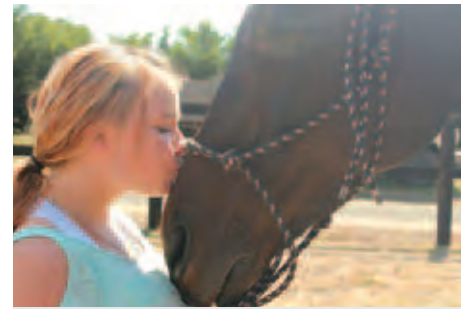
While the horse plays a central role in the process, it is the philosophies, experience and role of the ELEA facilitator, the flexibility to adjust the program to maximise individual engagement, and the ability to recognize trauma (by both humans and horses) that allows the process to work.

Learning is a crucial aspect of the ELEA program which requires the intuitive practitioner and the horse to exercise intensive observation and three way communication. Horses are able to pick up on a participant's subtle biological responses that may not be detected by a human practitioner. The feedback provided by both horse and practitioner guide and coach the participant to use this information constructively, with new awareness.

Emily McVeigh's skills and education in transpersonal counselling and life coaching mind/body (somatics), and horsemanship are all brought together simultaneously in a participant centred approach. The mind body awareness that is gained by participants of the ELEA program provides skills and techniques for individuals and families to utilize in everyday life.



This diagram describes the multi-faceted factors that are part of the process during equine assisted therapy and learning programs at ELEA. Each program acknowledges the trauma of the participant and engages in a range of mind-body experiences that are participant-centred and based on techniques from other therapeutic frameworks.



## Federation University Australia's Research Approach

Federation University Australia research addresses the perceived lack of empirical data surrounding the efficacy and outcomes of equine experiential learning and interventions.

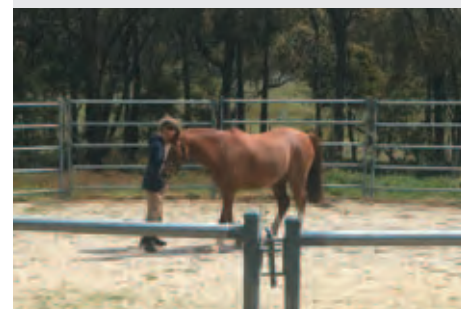
### METHODOLOGY

Academically rigorous, this research used the Most Significant Change Technique (MSC)<sup>1</sup> to assess significant change (SC) stories collected from people directly involved in the ELEA program. The MSC research method enables analysis of diverse outcomes produced by complex programs such as ELEA, and allows for the unique voice of the respondent when capturing the impacts of the program.

### FINDINGS

The most common outcomes from the Equine Learning Experiences Australia (ELEA) program as expressed from the MSC (Most significant Change) case studies and the thematic analysis in this report includes.

- Behaviour changes
- Stress relief
- Mind and body awareness and control
- Forming a relationship with an intuitive practitioner
- Guided meditations as a means of creating independent meditation techniques
- Re-engagement with education
- Re-engagement with employment
- Engagement in friend and family relationships



1. Davies, R. J. (1996). An evolutionary approach to facilitating organisational learning: An experiment by the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh. Swansea. UK: Centre for Development Studies [online]: <http://www.swan.ac.uk/cds/rd/---.htm>.

## The ELEA approach

<b>Participant referral to ELEA</b>	Adult participants are self-referred via the ELEA web-page or Facebook page. Adolescents and children are referred to ELEA from school well-being officers, DHHS, employment agencies where problem identification (PTSD, anxiety, social isolation, negative behaviours) has occurred via case-worker.
<b>Session 1</b>	The participant's ability to 'orient self as safe' is assessed in the relaxed, bush-setting of the ELEA outdoor venue. This session may include activities to get the participant to focus on their breath and breathing, to slow the heart rate and calm emotions.
<b>Sessions 2, 3, 4</b>	The participant chooses a horse to work and develop a relationship with. Mindfulness activities, involving a series of attention-training practices and cognitive strategies, can help individuals unhook from unproductive thought patterns and behaviours, as they learn to pay attention to the present moment rather than dwelling on the past.
<b>Sessions 4-8</b>	Participants engage in mind and body activities, known as somatics, with a horse guided by Emily. Activities concentrate on resilience and survival strategies against a background of views, habits, ways of relating, and automatic actions that have become 'normal' even though contributing to anxiety, social isolation, depression, anger.
<b>Sessions 8-10 or 8-12</b>	Focusing on emotions; these sessions facilitate learning new processes for managing destructive, negative emotions that produce stress, anxiety, isolation, anger and associated behaviours.
<b>Refresher sessions</b>	Participants often require refresher sessions in the 6-12 months following the intensive ELEA program if previous emotions and/or behaviours slowly re-emerge..

The ELEA approach is described here as a linear process, even though for many participants it may be a circular process.



## Case Study One

### Residential worker perspective

"I was working in residential care with kids between 10 and 17, I chose one kid, he was 11 at the time, he had significant trauma history.

I was blown away from the very first (ELEA) sessions. As a professional watching, our kids are incredibly traumatised, and being able to see the work happening as the horses give instant feedback...it was incredibly powerful... a horse isn't going to hurt them, so it works... they build a relationship with that horse, and the horse loves them back.

This boy... he was really proud of how well he was doing because he felt like he was learning to control a horse. But actually what he was doing was regulating himself, and in turn the horse would then do what he wanted the horse to do. You get instant feedback."

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES (CAFS) HOUSING SUPPORT PRACTITIONER

### Participant perspective

"I've got panic disorder and had panic attacks for the last 10 years, I've done lots of therapy and one of the things I know about myself is that I'm not particularly mindful... I saw that the way the horses engage with you when you're grounded and in the moment...if you're not present and mindful, they don't want anything to do with you.

*ELEA is a different experience... it feels more practical... I think having a horse to help regulate that fear. I can see it happening. I know when I'm doing it right and when I'm not.*

It doesn't mean that we're broken, it just means that we acknowledge that we've got stuff and we're going to deal with it. I think everyone in the world should go to equine therapy because it doesn't even feel like therapy. It feels like a practice, not an intervention."

## Case Study Two

### Worker perspective

"[One 13 year old was] violent with this mother ... notorious for not engaging. Not at school, escalating violence at home... mum had a history of domestic violence. I thought... 'This young person needs some really intense intervention, and the traditional methods are not going to work for him'. So... I got my young man into ELEA equine therapy.

I would see him go out with the horses and it was like he was able to shed a weight. He completely relaxed and was in the moment, not thinking, not worrying... that was really quite astonishing to see... whatever emotion they were feeling... was reflected back to them straight away. The horses don't fudge that stuff... That was a huge eye-opener... to be able to understand, 'Oh, what I do really affects other creatures in the world'.

His behaviour at home in that time while he was participating was 100 per cent better... he was able to use the techniques that he was learning to combat... to de-escalate himself so he didn't trip into his over abusive behaviour towards his mum.

Through ELEA, he developed a clear insight to his behaviour... whereas before he was completely closed off.

He's a very intelligent young man with a lot of potential... (through ELEA) he's not only stayed out of the court system, he's also had stable home life, and he's had a positive experience with the service system.

*If I had the funding I would have most of my clients doing it (ELEA). The results that I saw were incredible. ELEA is really, really good with young people... able to communicate in a way that's authentic, real, and isn't condescending or patronizing at all.*

That recognition that your emotions affect other people... And getting feedback straight away... The horses, they're going to let you know straight away, whether you're feeling good or bad about yourself, confident or not confident... That's so important for young people, especially if they're having issues around regulating emotion. Very often they're so locked in their own little space, that they can't think outside that. To have that fed back to them straight away is a huge deal."

BALLARAT COMMUNITY HEALTH – YOUTH JUSTICE CASE WORKER





## Case Study Three | Participant perspective

"I was in a toxic place... toxic boyfriend... toxic friends, my whole life was toxic, and now through the (ELEA) journey, I became employed. I stopped taking drugs, I left that toxic boyfriend and all the friends behind.

ELEA shows you or gives you the tools to show you, and then you know it works instead of some doctor sitting on a chair opposite you, trying to tell you how things should be, or giving you medication.

ELEA actually teaches you to honor everything that was going on inside you... you're not aware of until the horses tell you that... when you're like, "I've got nothing going on", they're like, "Yes you do". Once you know it's there, then you can let it go.

After ELEA, I got a job... I was in that job for three and a half years, I'd never been employed for that long before, not even close... I came off medication.

*It was just a total turn around. I'd see doctors and psychiatrists so it's not like I hadn't tried... they just can't offer you what ELEA can.*

Instead of dealing with things, I used to just run from it.. Being congruent, true to yourself, I now have the ability to think about things before I react, I can reason instead of react."

DES (DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT SERVICES) PARTICIPANT

## Case Study Four

### Worker perspective

"After 5 weeks of ELEA... (she)...was able to stop the post-traumatic memories and start breathing and thinking positively... someone actually heard her stories, and her stories didn't define her... learning how to separate her bullying memories to her being herself, ...being a person. It was amazing.

Her anger outbursts became less, because she could stop and scan her body when trouble was arising, she could feel it building... take herself away, compose herself and then come back to the situation, which was life changing.

She was a different child... proud she could get this massive animal (ELEA horse) to do these things just by willing it, that she was in control and these people that had ruined her life, to her words, were no longer in control, that she could own it. So her whole aspect on her life changed.

She wanted to give school another go, and now she wants a part time job...Just the confidence in her...the transformation was unbelievable... happy in her own skin.

For this teenager, other services and programs... multiple school counsellors and psychologists.. nothing else worked. ELEA was the only program that made any change at all. Getting her out in the open environment one on one with the horses worked for her."

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES (CAFS) FAMILY SERVICES CASE WORKER

*You have mental health plans, where's the mental health plan for the horse therapy. to make it feasible for families? If they worked the pricing out, I'd pretty much have a child in every family that I work with.*





## Case Study Five | Parent perspective

“The school wasn’t confident that they could educate her, keep her safe. Her psychologist had given her mindfulness exercises... But with the exercises from the ELEA program she was practicing them off her own initiative. Big moments for us was she’d say, “Mum, when I’m feeling stressed now, do you know what I do? I just go to my room and I lay down and breathe”.

It’s not that magic little pill that fixes everything, but it’s this awesome tool that she’s been given and I can see her progress. I get teary, but I can see her progressively using that. She’s full time at school now.

*The ELEA program has been life changing for us.*

Seeing her realizing and accessing tools that she didn’t know she had and utilizing them, just her overall sense of wellbeing is amazing. There are still going to be things that she struggles with, but that empowerment of having those tools... you can see the impact that it’s having on her friendships and experiences at school, education full stop.

She’s aware of what she struggles with, but she also knows she can cope with it now. It’s massive, really, really powerful.

From a parent’s point of view, that’s amazing, because I think that it gives me a lot of confidence that she has had this experience, I think that’s something that she has learnt so much about herself and I know adults who don’t have the same sort of self-awareness that she has now. It’s something that I know that she’s going to carry through life and be able to utilize and access when she needs to.”

MOTHER OF 12 YEAR OLD DAUGHTER PARTIALLY ENGAGED AT SCHOOL

## Case Study Six

### Participant perspective

“The first day I went to ELEA was the best day of my whole life. It was a beautiful environment, it’s out in the bush and you can look out across the meadows. I went out there lost, my son went out there lost, his girlfriend went out there lost. ELEA accepted us into its space and changed our lives for the better. We have understandings now of the whys and the how? You go out there feeling one way and just in five minutes of this therapy, you’re feeling totally at peace.

My son continues saying ELEA’s the key mum, it’s the key. You’ve got to practise, it’s a lot of hard work but you know it’s worth it because it feels good. You feel reborn again and your mind’s reborn, I’ve learnt to love myself and accept myself.

It’s gradual, you carry this heavy energy and the horses don’t like it. I had this panic attack at ELEA and the horses all started kicking and bolting around, the arena was like a storm. As the facilitator brought me around, the horses calmed down. That was enough proof for me that these horses feel us more than we feel us.

I remember how bad it feels to be where I was and never ever want to go back there. So I’ve got proof of something that works and I’m sticking with that. I’m almost drug free as in my health, I was on so many different medications and vitamins, I was deficient in every single nourishing goodness in the body because of bad thoughts. Bad, heavy thoughts, that I used to carry around. For 40 years I carried them around . Within one year, I look back and I just go, “I can’t believe that I used to feel like that and now I don’t, just in one year”. It’s amazing.

DMS (EMPLOYMENT SERVICE PROVIDER) PARTICIPANT



*“Why did I have to spend 40 years not knowing this, it just works. I’m frustrated that it’s not accessible in every single school and every single work environment.”*



*...a greater awareness that honours mind, body and spirit of both the horse, the individual and the interaction between the two of them.*



The ELEA process works, and is proven to be beneficial for a wide range of conditions and ages, as has been independently verified by Federation University Australia research.

- A relatively new field of therapy that uses horses as a co-facilitator that picks up on subtle biological responses from participants that often human therapists often can't detect.
- The ELEA program has been uniquely developed by Emily McVeigh and uses a range of coaching, therapy and intuitive practices based on what is presenting in that moment.
- A holistic form of therapy drawing upon mind/body awareness.
- It's experiential, meaning participants get to experience a different way of being instead of just talking about how they can be different.
- Workers in the Education, Employment, Health and Welfare sectors are unable to refer the people they support in sufficient numbers which would benefit the community due to funding limitations.

Summary of observed and reported benefits

- Positive behavioural changes.
- Improved mind and body awareness.
- Improved mind-body regulation.
- Stress relief.
- Re-engagement with education, employment, other support programs, friendships and family relationships.



## Get involved!

*Independent scholarly research shows that Emily McVeigh's ELEA program has been extremely beneficial for numerous trauma affected participants*

- Find out more about the program by contacting Emily
- Make space in your program plans for some Equine Assisted Therapy for your clients
- Budget for your clients to participate in Emily's program

## Contact

### ELEA

Emily McVeigh, Director,  
Equine Learning Experiences Australia

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Contact Emily for further information about the ELEA program and outcomes, or to make an appointment.

### Federation University Australia

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Contact Dr. Townsend for further information about the specific research project and report.

### Buninyong and District Community Bank

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Phone 0419 115 684

Contact Steve for further information about how Community Banks can have a positive impact on building communities.

## Testimonial

My 10 year old son and I, on reaching our appointment, [saw] open valleys and mountains in the distance, the serenity is one to be held in memories.

We were greeted by Emily of Equine Learning Experiences Australia in Napoleons. After introductions and a cuppa, my son and I were introduced to 'Mia' and 'Summer', both lovely mares, who in return greeted us both with a few licks. The joy in my son's smile said it all. You see, my son has ADHD and associated behaviour differences.

After the loss of his sister, my daughter, to a traumatic road accident, his and my own mixed emotions of grief and loss are needing another form of therapy. I had an open mind that my son would fully understand what was spoken about in regard to our equine sessions. Emily's professionalism in entrusting methods to deal with my own and my son's issues have been practiced now on a daily basis. And in doing so, has bought my son and I, to a point in our lives which allows us both to breathe much easier in our approach to daily activities.

The connection between horses and human (Mia, Summer, Emily, my son and I) has truly been very honest, knowledgeable with powerful body sensing, mindfulness and emotionally healing feelings. My experience in joining in on my son's equine learning program ... has brought out in a controlled manner all of my traumatic PTSD and grief issues, all that was building up inside of me which is affecting my physical and mental wellbeing. I am now able, through methods taught by Emily and my horse to channel my deepest darkest feelings that have affected my personal life, and to deal with them and release them, instead of bottling them all up inside.

The reality of learning to change has been very welcoming and rewarding. Finally to see and notice the change in my son and I, will always be a big part of our lives. In thankfulness.

PARENT AND SON

Disclaimer: Information contained in this report was correct at the time of printing (December 2016).

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*Horses helping humans*  
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