

Horses, Humans and Confidence - What's The Connection?

by Vanessa Hancox

Regardless of age, riding or training level or even discipline, most horse owners acknowledge the special bond that they share with their horses; that extraordinary relationship formed with an animal who without the capacity for speech, is able to change a person's thoughts, behaviours and emotions. The perception people have of their ability to control their thoughts, behaviours and emotions and to influence their lives, is known as self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy refers to the individual's belief in their capacity to exert control over themselves as well as the situations which impact upon them: a person's perception of their self-efficacy influences *cognitive* development, *behavioural* capacity and *emotional* states.

Cognitive self-efficacy refers to how capable a person feels in controlling their thoughts: a perceived loss of control over cognitive/thought processes is a major feature of several common problems presented to mental health practitioners, the most obvious example of which is seen in Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD).

Behavioural self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in their ability to perform the specific actions needed to gain control over problem situations. Consequently, behavioural self-efficacy plays a major role in many programs which address compulsive or addictive behaviours and relapse prevention, as it relates to the confidence of the individual in their ability to control their behaviour and therefore effect change within their lives.

Emotional self-efficacy refers to the perceived ability to control emotions and emotional responses, such as the ability to control feelings of sadness, nervousness, anxiety or aggression. Research has indicated that a diminished sense of emotional self-efficacy is a precursor in the suicide attempts of many young people.

Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of recent research was the recognition by the horse owners involved in the study of the need to regulate or control their thought processes, emotional states and behavioural responses whilst around their horses. Due to their sensitive and intuitive nature - emotions such as anxiety, anger and aggression are instantly recognised by horses, who will often react negatively. The degree of control that a person feels able to exert over their behavioural, cognitive and emotional responses increases their perceptions of self-efficacy.

A recent study researched the link between horses and the self-efficacy of adolescent women (aged 13-17 years). Without exception, all the young women involved in the study spoke of consciously controlling their cognitive processes, emotions and behaviours around their horses and expressed that this helped them feel more able to control their emotions and behaviours *in other difficult situations*.

Thus, the emotional, behavioural and cognitive self-efficacy of the young women involved in

this study increased as a result of their active involvement with horses.

What effect does self-efficacy have on our lives?

Beliefs about personal efficacy at any age, influence the goals people set for themselves, the strength of their commitment to those goals, the strategies they employ to achieve them and the amount of effort they put into in the endeavour. Studies have shown that when confronted by difficulty, people with a strong sense of self-efficacy intensify their efforts to overcome challenges, however those with a weak sense of self-efficacy often doubt their ability to carry out the task at hand and concede defeat easily.

Horses and self-efficacy; the link.

Although several studies have explored the influence of animals on perceptions of self-efficacy, research which has specifically focused on the influence of horses is limited. While the use of animals as therapeutic tools is not new (cats, dogs, rabbits, guinea pigs, birds and fish have been used in therapy with children and the aged with great success), horses present a quite different challenge for the humans who interact with them. Horses are historically animals of prey; they are naturally intuitive and have an innate ability to detect anxiety, fear, nervousness or aggression. Although horses are often regarded as unpredictable and potentially dangerous, they also have the capacity to be enormously gentle. Interacting with horses requires the individual to develop self-control and self-confidence in order for the relationship to succeed. Working with such challenging animals creates situations whereby the individual explores their self-concept and belief in their abilities and capacities.

As an adjunct to this, horses are now being used to teach humans various skills in areas such as business for building leadership, in special riding programs for the disabled, therapy for depression and other issues and for confidence and self esteem building in street kids.

Perhaps horses have a lot more to teach us than we realise!

Extracted from HORSEPOWER: A study of equine influence on female adolescent self-efficacy. Edith Cowan University by Vanessa Hancox BSocSc (Hons).