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## Equine-Facilitated Counselling and Women with Eating Disorders: Articulating Bodily Experience Le mieux-être facilité par le cheval dans le counseling chez les femmes souffrant de troubles de l'alimentation: articuler l'expérience corporelle

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Hillary Sharpe  
*University of Calgary*

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### ABSTRACT

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored the experiences of 14 women with eating disorders who took part in an equine-facilitated counselling group. The participants engaged in group and individual interviews that helped to articulate a language for understanding their bodily-relational experiences. Through dialogic movement and communication with their horses, the participants were able to attune in different ways to themselves and their worlds, thus interrupting some of the habitual practices of disordered eating. These changes and the moments that made a difference are explored through a description of the horses and their environment, my reflections as a researcher and counsellor in this context, and a short story pertaining to one of the women and her horse. Implications for counselling theory and practice are discussed.

### RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude herméneutique phénoménologique a exploré les expériences de 14 femmes souffrant de troubles de l'alimentation ayant participé à un groupe de counseling assisté par le cheval. Elles ont participé à des entrevues de groupe et individuelles, qui ont permis d'articuler un langage permettant de comprendre leurs expériences corporelles relationnelles. Grâce au mouvement dialogique et à la communication avec leurs chevaux, les participantes sont parvenues à s'accorder de diverses façons avec elles-mêmes et ce qui les entoure, interrompant ainsi certaines habitudes associées au trouble de l'alimentation. Ces changements, ainsi que les moments qui furent déterminants, sont étudiés au moyen d'une description des chevaux et de leur environnement, des réflexions de la chercheuse et conseillère dans ce contexte, et d'un court récit se rapportant à l'une des femmes et à son cheval. On y présente une discussion des implications pour la théorie et la pratique du counseling.

The problem of eating disorders has taken centre stage in recent years within helping professions and the larger public arena. The current diagnostic system (i.e., DSM-5; American Psychological Association, 2013) describes anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder (BED), and eating disorder not otherwise specified. Eating disorders affect a variety of populations, but they are largely issues that affect women of Western cultures (Blood, 2005). Although rates for these problems vary from context to context, it is estimated that between 1% and 3% of the popula-

tion in Canada and the United States suffer from an eating disorder (Garfinkel et al., 1995; Levine, McVey, Piran, & Ferguson, 2012; Walters & Kendler, 1995). However, many researchers consider eating disorders to be more widespread than these rates suggest, due to the secretive nature of these problems (Malson, 1998) and issues inherent in the diagnostic system (Novotney, 2009; Swanson, Crow, Le Grange, Swendsen, & Merikangas, 2011). These problems exist on a spectrum ranging from socially acceptable behaviours such as diet and exercise to more extreme practices characteristic of what we define as eating disorders (Russell-Mayhew, 2007). The line between these problems is becoming increasingly blurred as evidenced by the rising number of individuals who live with what are termed “subclinical” eating disorders and the high preponderance of diagnostic crossover (e.g., from anorexia to bulimia; Eddy et al., 2008; Tozzi et al., 2005).

Despite an explosion of research into the nature and treatment of eating disorders, these problems continue to be prevalent, chronic, debilitating, and sometimes life-threatening (Levine et al., 2012), suggesting that there is a gap in our existing knowledge base. Scholars and researchers in the eating disorder field have turned toward exploring the concept of embodiment to address this gap (e.g., Piran & Teall, 2012; Sanz & Burkitt, 2001; Stanghellini, Castellini, Brogna, Faravelli, & Ricca, 2012). *Embodiment* is a term that has been taken up within a variety of disciplines and refers to the many tacit ways that people go about their day-to-day lives. This includes sensations, visceral experiences, gait, posture, movements, and one’s general engagement with the environment. While these modes of being often go unnoticed, they create the very means by which people construct their experiences (Shusterman, 2008). This lived and process-oriented approach has typically fallen to the wayside in favour of a cognitive-behavioural approach that emphasizes control of the body and the separation of human experience into discrete states that can be measured and objectified (Bigwood, 1991; Gremillion, 2002).

In this research, I draw from an embodied understanding of eating disorders, which allows for a different grasp of these problems compared to more traditional conceptualizations. It is important to note that, in keeping with this embodied understanding, I use the terms *attunement* and *corporeal*. Attunement refers to people’s prereflective ways of existing in the world. Although embodiment and attunement are similar concepts, the key distinction is that attunement corresponds more closely to a relational process, or the ways that individuals alternately engage with and respond to their social and physical worlds. This can be understood as an ongoing circle existing between bodies and the world in a reciprocal dialogue; thus people are continually adjusting to a terrain or milieu that is always changing (Abram, 1996). This emerging discourse of the body encourages a shift from understanding eating disorders as individual pathologies, as espoused in the traditional medical treatment model. Instead, women who struggle with eating disorders and related problems are seen as people who accordingly express their life and relation to the world in active and communicative ways (Sanz & Burkitt, 2001).

Similarly, the term *corporeal* refers to the bodily and communicative dimension of experience. It can be traced back to the verbal root meaning “to appear” and

the words for belly, womb, or abdomen in ancient languages (Harper, 2012a). My aim in exploring participant experiences is to invoke a visceral relation to the stories that have been created, to make manifest a new way to grasp the topics explored, and to give the reader not only an intellectual understanding, but also a felt understanding or “gut sense” of the moments that made a difference for the women who participated.

From an embodied perspective, eating disorders can be understood as a series of habits, or ways of attuning to oneself and the world that have become stuck. These habits include ways of being that are typically associated with disordered eating such as restricting food intake, bingeing, purging, and overexercising, as well as a whole host of other patterns that manifest in movements (e.g., gait and posture), relationships (e.g., with self and others), and visceral sensations and experiences (e.g., hunger, numbness, anger). Individuals who live with these problems have come to embody habitual ways of attuning that limit other possibly preferred ways of attuning. It is exactly this type of bodily knowledge or attunement to corporeal experiences that the traditional approach to conceptualizing and treating eating disorders has not adequately explored. This study offers another approach to addressing disordered eating through a focus on how equine-facilitated counselling (EFC) can encourage new ways for women with eating disorders to attune to their bodies and the world around them.

Throughout history, nonhuman animals have been portrayed in various cultures as facilitating health and reaffirming our connection to the natural world (Fine, 2010). In recent years, it has become widely accepted that animals, especially domesticated ones, can have a profound positive impact on the health and well-being of people. Research demonstrates a number of positive gains that stem from animal-human interactions, including improved confidence (Dimitrijević, 2009), social skills (Thompson, 2009), emotional well-being (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007; Rowan & Beck, 1994), decreases in anxiety (Barker & Dawson, 1998; Barker, Pandurangi, & Best, 2003), and depression (Souter & Miller, 2007). These advances have led to the birth of a new field in psychology: animal-assisted therapies (AAT). Special interest groups have developed within both the Canadian Psychological Association and the American Psychological Association whose aims include further research into this promising new therapeutic approach.

Within AAT, EFC has emerged as a forerunner in terms of practice and research. In Canada, there are currently over 100 centres or private practitioners offering EFC to a variety of client populations. In the field of equine interventions and therapies, there are a range of terms used such as hippotherapy, equine-facilitated psychotherapy, equine-facilitated learning, and therapeutic riding. In my research, I use the term EFC to denote a specific type of intervention that is facilitated by a mental health professional and incorporates equines as change agents in the therapeutic process. EFC is considered metatheoretical as practitioners do not subscribe to one single theoretical approach; rather, EFC is practiced within a number of different approaches and theoretical orientations (Karol, 2007). Activities can include riding (either outside or in an indoor arena), horse care, grooming,

and saddlery, as well as advanced skills such as jumping/vaulting, participating in rodeos, and various other activities to strengthen the bond between horse and client (Cumella, 2003a). Therapy may take place individually or within a group/family setting, and clients may work with one horse over a number of sessions or different horses according to therapeutic needs.

Interventions that incorporate horses have been used to address a variety of concerns, including substance abuse and addictions (Dell, Chalmers, Dell, Sauve, & MacKinnon, 2008), health concerns such as cancer (Haylock & Cantril, 2006), depression (Bray, 2002; Frame, 2006), anxiety (Moreau & McDaniel, 2000; Scheidhacker, Friedrich, & Bender, 2002), relationship problems (Russell-Martin, 2006), posttraumatic stress disorder (Yorke, 1997, 2010; Yorke, Adams, & Coady, 2008), exposure to domestic violence (Schultz, Remick-Barlow, & Robbins, 2007), and eating disorders (Christian, 2005; Cornelius, 2002; Cumella, 2003b; Lutter & Smith-Osborne, 2011). A recent meta-analysis on therapies and interventions involving horses indicates that the research in this field is promising, but highlights the need for further study, especially in the areas of longitudinal research and comparisons with other treatments (Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013).

EFC has gained recognition and support in recent years, and has been incorporated in a number of residential treatment centres for eating disorders in the United States and abroad (e.g., Centre for Discovery—[www.centerfordiscovery.com](http://www.centerfordiscovery.com); Remuda Ranch—[www.remudaranch.com](http://www.remudaranch.com); Rosewood Ranch—[www.rosewoodranch.com](http://www.rosewoodranch.com)). In Canada, there are no known EFC services offered for residential treatment for eating disorders, but there are currently more than 100 centres or private practitioners offering EFC to a variety of client populations with diverse therapeutic needs, including body-related concerns (e.g., Equinox Therapeutic and Consulting Services—[equinoxtherapeutic.com](http://equinoxtherapeutic.com); Healing Hooves—[healinghooves.ca](http://healinghooves.ca)).

A number of characteristics make this type of therapy unique, when contrasted with traditional talk therapy and other AAT. EFC incorporates touch and movement into the therapeutic process, aspects that are largely absent from more traditional talk therapy. The sheer power and physicality of horses lends a different type of corporeal awareness to interactions with them and requires greater attention to the “here and now” to ensure the safety of horse and rider. The environment is also vastly different than a traditional counselling setting, taking place outdoors or in the sometimes chaotic setting of a barn, typically in the presence of other horses or other animals. While a counsellor or other helping professional is always present during the interactions, it is the relationship between horse and client that is emphasized in such encounters.

As prey animals, horses are highly attuned to the environment to sense potential sources of danger (Karol, 2007), and as such, they perceive the world very differently from humans. Horses possess a keen sense of smell, hearing, and sight, and have often been described as highly attuned to emotional cues of others in their environment (Brandt, 2006; Kohanov, 2001, 2003). Working with horses requires a very different way of communicating and relating. The close physical contact provided by activities such as grooming and riding requires a whole new

set of bodily skills, a type of “physical sign language” between horse and rider (Edgette, 1996). The interactions between horse and person rely on this language and require a heightened sensitivity to corporeal-relational engagement. This bodily knowledge is then explored and thickened through dialogue with a counsellor, bringing about further understanding of how attunement, or ways of thinking, being, and relating, can be expanded.

#### METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research draws from a variety of theorists in the areas of hermeneutics and phenomenology. Hermeneutics is understood as the theory and practice of interpretation (Paterson & Higgs, 2005). People communicate interpretations in and through texts, which include language, art, and music (Laverty, 2003). The term *hermeneutics* comes from the Greek *hermeneutikos*, which is defined as “interpreting” and related to the root *Hermes* (Harper, 2012b), the Greek god of borders and boundaries (Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2003). This is significant, as understanding in hermeneutics is constructed in places of “in-betweenness,” in the boundaries that define differing perspectives or ways of knowing. These ways of knowing are always situated in our prereflective and taken-for-granted ways of going about our daily lives (Laverty, 2003). Phenomenology is concerned with describing these interpretations within such a context. The purpose of phenomenology as an inquiry is to explore these experiences and come to new or forgotten understandings of lived experience.

The starting place of any hermeneutic phenomenological study lies in our curiosity; we are called to wonder and question. The primary question that guided and shaped this research is *What are the bodily and potentially transformative experiences of women who address problems with disordered eating through EFC?* The objectives included an exploration of the following: (a) the concept of attunement as experienced by women with eating disorders, (b) how the horse-human interaction in EFC can foster reattunement to the self and the environment, and (c) how such knowledge can inform our current understanding and treatment of eating disorders.

#### *Research as Transformation*

The focus of this research was the bodily and potentially transformative moments that took place between the women and their horses. The very nature of transformational moments fits well as a topic of investigation in hermeneutic phenomenology as these moments are necessarily bound up in our corporeality and are often remembered vividly. When asked to recall moments of transformation, most people are able to remember not only when and where these moments took place, but also the sensorial landscape surrounding such memories; the sights, sounds, smells, and feel associated with these moments are clear and evoke a felt connection to that time (Miller, 2004). The time that the women spent with the horses seemed to evoke such moments. They recounted times when a shift oc-

curred in a movement, a touch, an intake of breath, something that felt different. These shifts first came to be in the preverbal realm, through the corporeal and emotional connection between horse and participant. The moments that stayed with the women were then explored through dialogue and “talked into being” (Strong & Massfeller, 2010, p. 14).

These moments of new possibilities are well suited to hermeneutic phenomenological study, not only in a scholarly sense, but in the sense that hermeneutics *is* transformational. As Jardine (2006) wrote, a hermeneutic project “wants to listen, to affect and to invite, not merely inform” (pp. 1–2). These moments of communion and transformation can be understood as a “fusion of horizons,” a term introduced by Gadamer (1989) that refers to the melding of differing experiences or understandings and the creation of new ones. In positioning this research within the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, I have come to understand our corporeal engagement in the world as a series of fusing horizons, constantly evolving and offering the potential for transformation.

### *Participants*

The women who participated in this research were invited to cocreate a “dialogue of the body” through participation in one of two concurrent EFC groups, which included individual and group interviews pertaining to their experiences with the horses. It is important to note that the participants were asked to speak to unique experiences and that they initially did not have a language for their corporeal engagement with the horses and the ways that this impacted them. These understandings draw from a variety of narratives, including my own and the women who shared their stories with me.

While 14 women took part in this research, I chose to focus on five of their stories, one of which will be included here. This was a difficult decision to make, but necessary as telling all 14 stories would have been a time-intensive process, and may have diluted the power of the stories in some ways. The participants were self-referred after learning about the research project through a variety of means including posters, pamphlets, local newspaper articles, radio interviews, and word of mouth. The women who participated came from a variety of different backgrounds, ranging in age from 19 to 49, and each had been diagnosed as having an eating disorder (either anorexia, bulimia, or eating disorder not otherwise specified). The women held a number of roles including mother, daughter, partner, friend, student, working professional, athlete, and volunteer. Of the 14 women who began this research, 12 were able to complete the EFC groups. Two of the women decided to stop attending the group counselling sessions to address issues with addiction after our second session.

The 6-session EFC groups took place during the spring and summer of 2011 at L. L., an AAT site in Alberta (name of organization withheld for confidentiality). The sessions were two and a half hours in length and were held on weekday evenings. Each of the groups included 7–8 participants, Lori (name changed)—the owner of L. L. and a registered counsellor, 3–5 volunteers with



backgrounds in a helping profession such as psychology or social work, myself (in the role of researcher and counsellor), and four horses (Skye, Prancer, Shiloh, and Dubh—pronounced “do”) who had experience working with clients in the context of EFC. Each group session included a mix of discussion within the group and activities with the horses. The participants typically spent an hour to an hour and a half with the horses working in pairs (with another participant) or individually during each of the six sessions (please see Appendix A for an outline of the sessions). Participants were also asked to take part in two individual interviews and one group interview. The first individual interview was scheduled between the second and third group session, the second interview between the fourth and fifth session, and the group interview took place during the sixth and final session.

*Articulating bodily experience.* Exploring corporeal experiences can be difficult for anyone, but may be especially difficult for those who struggle with body-related concerns. Women with eating disorders often experience a disconnection from their bodies as a source of pleasure and nurturance (Piran, 2002), and attuning to bodily sensations, movements, and knowledge may be frightening or uncomfortable. Rather than concentrating on the participants’ corporeal experiences of interacting with the horses at the outset of the interviews, my intent was to slowly move toward this as the interviews progressed, allowing time for the women to become more comfortable with the horses and exploring their experiences with me. At the time of the first interview, all of the women had met their horse and spent a few hours getting to know him. While participants were told that they could work with any horse that they wanted to, most chose one horse and worked with him throughout the group.

Our interviews followed a progression from a focus on the horses, to the women’s developing relationships with the horses, to the corporeal dimension of experience (from a more outward focus towards inner experiences—see Appendix B for a list of the interview questions). During the second interview, I described my initial perceptions and understandings to the women who participated. Each participant was asked to comment on my understanding and offer any corrections, clarifications, or additions that they wished.

Throughout the interviews, the women were asked to reflect back on their time with the horses and connect to the “felt-sense” of those experiences if they were comfortable doing so. Sensory cues can help us recall certain times and experiences, so during the interviews I had a number of such aids available, including photos of the horses and their environment, a small bundle of hay, a lead rope, a horseshoe, and a halter. This type of sensory elicitation has been employed throughout the social sciences and includes research methods such as stimulated recall (a form of memory elicitation through the use of objects; Calderhead, 1981), photo elicitation (using photographs and other images; Harper, 2002), and even audio elicitation methods (using audio recordings to explore everyday sounds and their meanings; Feld & Brenneis, 2004). My participants were invited to either flip through the photos or close their eyes and handle any

of the objects to help them connect to certain memories of their time with the horses.

After the groups ended, the women were encouraged to seek out further support if needed and were given a list of resources available to them (including further individual counselling/contact with myself, Lori, and the horses). Although many of the women could not continue the relationship with their horses, they were given the opportunity to connect with other horses through volunteering with a horse rescue organization nearby. The final phase of this research involved transcribing the interviews, reading and rereading them, and writing short stories detailing the participant's experiences. After writing these stories, I asked the 5 women whom I wrote about to read "their" story and offer any feedback, revisions, or additions that they might have. While each story is unique, there are a number of themes or common experiences that came up in most of the women's stories. The participant story recounted here touches on some of these. Before we turn to this story, I offer a description of L. L., the horses, and a moment from one of the groups that has stayed with me.

### *Rain and Bones*

To understand the relationships between the women and their horses it is necessary to understand the setting of L. L.: the modern barn amidst rolling prairie land, the mountains in the distance, and the hum from passing vehicles along a highway behind the pasture. Modern architecture/ways of being were juxtaposed with the more primal rhythms that come from living away from the city, connected to the land and expanse of sky. This teeming undercurrent of life was present in every happening, every moment that might have made a difference; from the insects buzzing in the air, to the cats stalking mice in the barn, to the horses themselves, running as a herd through the field.

I want to recount a moment that made a difference for me during one of the groups. The first things I connect to when I think of that day are the wide open skies and a sense of the world opening up differently. There was an energy in the air that the horses seemed to pick up on and communicate to the participants and staff. Dubh kept edging his way toward the gate leading out from the barn to the paddock, while Shiloh sidled closer to him, nickering softly. Prancer tossed his head back and forth and Skye was wide-eyed, his neck straining as he looked about the enclosure. The air felt different—instead of the calm that normally accompanied an evening spent with the horses, there was an electricity to the air. I remember later on, after the horses were led back to the pasture, the smell of rain and a strong cool wind blowing in from the mountains. Large thunder clouds were churning in over the horizon, dark grey and ominous, and I felt a shifting in the air, heavier and more fragrant as the smell of rain blew in. I looked around and noticed that the horses were already standing together in their shelter, their manes and tails whipped by the wind. Skye, the leader of the herd, was watching ever-vigilant across the fields, while in the barn the cats hunkered down in nooks and crannies to wait out the impending storm. The wildness of the world was all-



enveloping, heightening my senses and connecting me to the sublime experience of the moment.

The session had ended, yet the women seemed reluctant to leave, perhaps caught up in the same sensations that had me entranced. We milled about, collecting our things slowly and wandering outside to watch the storm as it rolled in. I did not want to leave, and I had the distinct sense that many of the women who lingered did not want to either. Miranda, one of the participants, sighed beside me as we watched the horses through the open barn door; “I can feel the rain in my bones,” she said. We stood together watching and waiting, rubbing our hands together against the chill. I am not sure why, but her words have stayed with me. I could feel something in my bones too, throughout my whole body in fact—a strange, almost contradictory feeling of calmness and a comfortable heaviness grounding me to the earth, but also a sense of electricity, as if the approaching storm had somehow already reached me, an energy I could feel coursing through my body. The promise of a warm ride home, back to the comfort and safety of our beds, was not enough to entice us away in that moment. Eventually we did pile into the vehicles that lined the driveway in front of the barn, but in a sort of reverie, not punctuated by the usual chatter about the week ahead. It was as if a spell had been cast and the magic of this place was made manifest.

As Abram (2010) articulated, our bodies are where worlds collide and life teems—a place where things pass through us and sometimes reside. We are open to the world and it lives within us and through us, changing us. The moment recounted here has changed me and has become an important “touchstone” for this research in many ways. Despite the lack of a physical presence that the term touchstone denotes, the moment nonetheless has certain contours and shadows, a substance and weight to it. The smell of the rain often brings me back with stark clarity to being in the doorway of the barn with Miranda, looking out at the horses, toward the rising storm—a shared felt-sense that connected us to each other and the world in a way that I cannot quite explain. The feel of electricity in the air when a thunderstorm is approaching evokes the same strange feeling throughout my body—a sensation of my bones being connected to the bones of the earth, rooting me to it and sensing it with an energy not wholly my own. I feel the lines dividing myself from the world and other beings dissipate during these times, and the convivial world opens up for me. It is as if this moment resides in me now, flows through me, conjured through my own musings and reflections on it, and brought about unbidden when certain elements in the natural world align around me and through me. The women who took part in the groups experienced their own moments that have stuck with them, residing in them for a time, making the hidden linkages between themselves and otherness palpable. The moments that took place between the horses and the women were small ones, often occurring in the span of minutes, but they led to changes in their experiencing that flowed through them, and sometimes stayed with them.

## RESULTS

*More Than Words Can Say (Katie and Dubh)*

Katie was an animal lover. She had an infectious laugh and a way of putting others around her at ease. Despite struggling with alcohol addiction for a number of years, she had just celebrated 9 months of sobriety. At the time of our group, she was 49 and had lived with anorexia since she was 16. Katie was completing an intensive day-program treatment at a local hospital and was starting back at work after a leave of absence, a transition that worried her as it was a major source of stress and a likely trigger for disordered eating.

During our first night at L. L., Katie met Dubh and described feeling a bond with him despite his shy nature: “There was something about Skye that held my attention but it was Dubh that I was drawn to. So as we started walking and talking to the different horses, I kept coming back to him.” She also noted the many ways that they were similar: being the “older” members of their respective groups, carrying “scars of the spirit,” and needing to feel safe (in terms of the physical environment and others in it). This need for safety was one of the driving forces in Katie’s life:

I never realized that my life was about safety, but there’s always a constant tension that arises from the necessity of, well, the ongoing awareness of safety because when you come into the world and as far as you can remember, your experience of it is not being safe, then safety is always in the back of your head and you don’t even realize it and with that comes the tension. It becomes that constant fear, that’s what my life has been like, but as you get older it just becomes a just second way of being, you’re not even aware of it.

This second way of being, and the tension and alertness it entailed sustained eating-disordered ways of being as well (e.g., being vigilant of her body and eating, structuring her postures and muscle movements in small and contained ways, maintaining a tension throughout her body that limited sensations/feelings). These practices and habits of disordered eating were safe for her, they structured her life and grounded her, and they also filled a void—a yearning to feel a sense of self-worth. She grew up believing that she was “worthless,” a central tenet of her life that stretched and twisted its way through her identity, her past, and her present; yet the power of this belief had been slowly eroding as Katie embarked on her recovery. Katie recounted a moment with Dubh in our first interview that further shook this belief:

He fell asleep on my arm last session while Lori was talking. Like he just nodded off and then he just ended up, like with his face right here (pointing to the crook of her elbow), sound asleep. I’d been rubbing his side and so I kind of stopped to listen, kind of moved a little bit over and he kinda moved over into me. So I started rubbing him again and trying to listen and it was hard. I mean I missed half of what Lori said ’cause I was so, I immediately went to

what he was doing 'cause he was just kind of starting to nod off, right. So I'd listen a bit then he'd nod a little more and he just, you know, he just kept going down, so I was totally into feeling what he was doing ... my attention just totally went into feeling, feeling the weight of his head and I think just being a bit astounded and then I think I felt a little proud, I figured there must be a high level of trust for him to do that.

When I asked Katie if this moment could be summed up in a word, a phrase, or an image, she replied "unconditional love." She reflected on the importance of this later:

It's just reminding myself that it's possible. I'd never thought of it. I was just thinking of the trust and the peace and the tranquility but also I think it's a reminder of how important that is to me. How difficult it is for people to manifest that, but how important it is to me, in my life to have that. 'Cause I certainly give it but it's really hard to get back. I mean it's hard for people to define but ultimately for myself too I understand that I haven't perhaps been open to it in the past 'cause I have, one of my fundamental tenets of belief is that I'm worthless, so. Worthlessness and being unconditionally loved, don't exactly go together ... Yeah, you know then I guess I kind of have to accept that, yeah. He wouldn't be doing that if I was, if my spirit was, was negative or horrible.

While Katie could understand intellectually that she was worthy of love, it was a vastly different experience to feel it. She remembered the weight of Dubh's head tucked against her arm, his eyes closed to the fading sunlight. It was a simple act, but filled with meaning. For Katie, Dubh's tacit trust and acceptance of her marked a change that she felt throughout her body—a warmth and heaviness in her heart and a tranquility that enveloped them both. She described this tranquility as relating to Dubh on "an energy level, beyond words":

There were no words. I had a feeling. I had a reaction. And then I try to put that into words if I can. But I didn't even have to for the first little while. And I still don't even have the words. It just, it felt good, it's hard to describe the immense value that I place on it ... I don't think that that experience could ever be replicated with group therapy or individual therapy or anything I've done to this point in terms of treatment.

For Katie, these felt, embodied emotions that defied words were a profound experience, one that she had previously numbed herself to. Katie explained that she used language and humour as a coping mechanism—a way to avoid feeling uncomfortable or intense emotions, as she explained in our second interview:

I think words took the place of emotions for me, so especially in any awkwardness or anything, there would be words and very often my humour if other people were upset or I was upset. Like people have always come to be me because I'll hug them and listen to them, but then they'll leave laughing. So they'll come angry or sad or whatever and then they'd leave laughing. But I just

recognize now that, I just never went to that emotional place, like I cared and could empathize, but never, like I don't know if you experience it or not, but if you know what a person is feeling you can be exceedingly empathic but not actually connected to it. And certainly when I would feel something scary then immediately the words would come to take that place and so it's just for me incredible to just have this openness and this trust and be able to exist without words ... it's just refreshing from the rest of the world where it can just take just an immense amount of work to communicate.

Katie and Dubh coexisted without words. They learned to communicate with each other through a shared "language" of emotion, touch, and intuition. Katie was surprised and proud of how quickly they picked up on what the other was feeling or intending. She described practicing communicating to Dubh that she wanted him to move forward while riding—she leaned forward slightly in the saddle, clenching her thigh muscles. The more they practiced this, the more responsive Dubh was, until Katie barely had to move at all: "It was like he could sense where I was looking and he just went."

Katie's pride in her responsive relationship with Dubh was also a novel experience for her. She noted it after Dubh fell asleep in the crook of her arm ("I think I felt a little proud"), and again after her first ride with Dubh. She was able to name her feeling after talking about the importance of her time with Dubh with others in her life:

So I thought about it that night, but I think it was the next day that I would be able to define it as pride, when I was sharing it with other people. And just, I don't know that they appreciated it or not but they certainly could see my experience of it as you know, as something awesome. So yeah, I think it was just in the telling, the sharing with others that I named it.

Katie was able to name this feeling after experiencing it with Dubh and exploring it with others—"talking it into being" in a sense (Strong & Massfeller, 2010). Her embodied feeling of pride and the possibilities it conveyed were born of a special kind of "poiesis" or bringing-forth that occurs in our spontaneous interactions with others (Shotter, 2012), generating new embodied sensitivities and capabilities.

For Katie, this was an important experience as she had learned that being proud of herself was not acceptable growing up:

[I]t was just a gift that I was born with and it's not something to be prideful about. You just do your best and if your score is perfect then you continue to do that. That's just a gift you were given. It's not about your own self accomplishment, so I struggle with that, with that emotion. So that was the first time in a long time that I felt it ... but I think that kind of opened up the exploration of what that emotion was because it was kind of a little growing kind of warpsy thing, you know? And I wanted others to recognize it. You know, "Is this what this is? And if it is, wow!"

Katie could sense her feeling of pride growing: a small warmth in her centre, a slow kindling of feeling that spread—first in Dubh nestling his head into her body, showing his trust in her, and then in coordinating their movements together and communicating as one while riding. Katie's pride, once a small, "warpsy thing," started to grow, in part because of what she accomplished and felt with Dubh, but also because disordered eating/ways of being were never the focus of attention in her time with him. Katie connected more easily with Dubh and to her own feelings/sensations when she was free to be with him in the moment, without the constraints and tension associated with disordered eating. It needed to "take a backseat," as one of the other participants explained.

Katie felt proud of herself in other moments with Dubh, and also in her daily life (e.g., the simple pleasure and pride that came from making a new recipe to share with others). She allowed herself to name it, talk about it with others, and claim it as her own. Katie's movements opened up, and so, too, did her repertoires of being. I noticed at times that her movements with Dubh seemed more expansive, more confident—leading him around the arena, grooming him in long broad strokes, her arms reaching around him. When Katie rode with him it was clear that she was lost in the rhythm of his movements, her body swaying in time with his steps, her legs tensing and relaxing.

Katie experienced her time with Dubh as imbued with positive and powerful feelings such as love, pride, trust, and acceptance, experiences that challenged her fundamental belief that she was worthless. Feeling worthless engenders a deep sense of shame, resulting in what Fuchs (2003) described as an "alienation of primordial bodiliness," or a disruption in spontaneous corporeal performance. In shame, one's body is perceived as an object, "the sluggish obstinate or fragile body which I 'have'" (Fuchs, 2003, p. 224), rather than the primordial, felt body of first-person experience, the "body-self." Experiences of shame, worthlessness, and an "objectified" body are common ways of being/relating for those challenged by eating disorders (e.g., Bordo, 2003; Daubenmier, 2005; Goss & Allan, 2009; Skarderud, 2007). In Western society, emphasis on conforming to certain size and body shape norms have played a role in shaping these experiences, not only for women labelled as eating disordered, but for the vast majority of women in the general population as well (Wong-Wylie & Russell-Mayhew, 2010).

For Katie, these ways of being were closely tied into the patterns of food restriction and bodily control that governed her life. Katie's moments with Dubh were small instances where her regular ways of being and feeling were interrupted by the potent and tacit attunement that she experienced with Dubh. She described one such moment of communion during her first ride with him:

I just felt like a part of him, like I didn't feel separate from him. I don't know how to describe it, but like when he moved it was just kind of like, it's oversimplified to say, but it felt like his legs were my legs. But like, I could feel him moving and I knew he was my legs, it was kind of like, I don't know how to describe it, but like even when Prancer got a little carried away. Were you there

when he did that? No, no, you were in the group room. It almost looked like he got a little out of control on Lori and it seemed like she was trying to bring him down and he was wanting to gallop and we were right by him and I had, I mean I could feel Dubh, he was okay, he was kind of paying attention, but I just leaned down and I was rubbing him and it was just totally, like Joanna [a staff member] had him, but it was kind of like, like Joanna wasn't even there most of the time unless she talked to us, I was so totally just with Dubh. And we just stood there as one and we waited.

This was a rare moment of connection and joy for Katie. She described being aware of her legs stretched over his broad back, almost straining her thigh muscles before she found a comfortable position, and then as Dubh began walking, finding a rhythm in her own muscle movements to match his own. In the cadence of their movements together, Katie's sense of being separate from Dubh faded away and was replaced by feeling that they were one. Her body was whole, it was part of her, and part of Dubh, and likewise his body was hers. In this melding of being to being, Katie articulated an opening up of possibilities, a feeling of calm and excitement at the same time. When I asked her more about this, she said:

I think the excitement is translated into possibility at the same time because it was like now you're up on him and as I'm learning all these things it's possibility right? I don't know how to better articulate that, but it's just sort of like now we're learning to stop, now we're learning to go, maybe at some point we can learn to trail ride, do you know what I'm saying? So in that excitement, in that novelty of experience here's another experience of possibility and that is so still new to me, because being so closed and careful and planning ahead and not particularly living in the moment, but just always having to be so very careful and contained, it was kind of like, this is okay, I'm in the moment. And that translates into possibilities and so yeah, so definitely there was that excitement as well as calm.

Merleau-Ponty (1964) described an array of possible movements or "motor projects" that radiate from each individual into the environment, structuring how he or she moves in the world. Katie's motor projects were limited by the practices and habits of disordered eating that structured her life in ways consistent with old beliefs (e.g., believing that she was worthless) that constrained her further. Being in the moment with Dubh meant that she could not fall back on these habits of policing her movements, being small and contained, thinking and planning ahead, and being closed off from a felt-kinaesthetic sense of herself. Instead, she had to be fully present, attuned to herself/what she was communicating, and attuned to Dubh's movements and intentions.

Through her interactions with Dubh, Katie experienced a new array of motor projects or ways of moving, that in turn shaped other ways of being and feeling. Once Katie experienced this newness or reconnection to forgotten ways of being, she wanted to experience more of these moments in her life. She remarked during our final interview:



Now that I have a feel of it, I want to always have a horse in my elbow. I know that, I know the feeling. And so now that I have parameters around those feelings, I think I can just search until I find what brings that ... I'm still just learning how important my relationship with Dubh is and I want to continue doing that, like I feel that there's more that's gonna happen for me now that these six weeks are over.

#### DISCUSSION

For the women who participated in this research, living with an eating disorder was associated with a host of corporeal patterns or ways of attuning that took root in their bodily comportment, motility, spatiality, and sense of self. EFC provided a different kind of bodily experience for the women who took part. Our experiences, identity, and understanding of the world are always, already bodily. The difference that the newness of EFC made can be considered transformational in some ways, but I prefer the word *igniting*, as do many of the women who were interviewed. Some of my participants noted igniting moments in their interactions with their horses—times when they became more attuned or responsive to themselves, their horses, and the world. This responsiveness became a small part of them, perhaps only for a time, but it created a ripple of difference that they felt and noticed in other areas of their lives.

The women who experienced igniting moments described them in a variety of ways: a sense of time slowing or stopping; noticing new sensations, feelings, movements, and kinaesthetic qualities; and a quietening of eating-disordered thoughts/ways of being. Spending time with their horses seemed to allow many of the participants to experience emotions that they had not been able to feel at a corporeal level, or that they actively avoided feeling. Many of the women experienced a sort of reattunement to themselves and the world through their horses that interrupted some of their habitual ways of attuning. In these moments of grace, participants felt shifts in corporeality (e.g., feeling one's body/self in a positive way or, conversely, "forgetting" one's body in relational-movement with the horses) that enabled possibilities reaching into the future (e.g., regret or grief shifting to hope) and also a restorying of certain aspects of their pasts. It was more than simply being near or with the horses, though; igniting moments most often occurred when dialogically moving with the horses (through riding, touching, grooming, leading, etc.). This kinetically articulated dance offered a basis for change, subverting particular ways of being/relating and providing fertile ground for new ones.

#### *Implications for Counselling Theory and Practice*

This research highlights various experiences and elements that are relevant to specific counselling approaches such as EFC, other AAT, body-oriented therapies (BOT), nature therapy, and mindfulness practices, as well as more general counselling theory and practice. In terms of EFC and AAT, this study adds to a growing body of research that affirms our connection to other living beings and the op-

portunities that are created in communion with them. EFC is a type of AAT, but it also shares many features common to BOT and movement therapies, as well as nature therapy. For instance, some of the women described how interacting and moving with their horses, surrounded by fields, skies, and mountains, reaffirmed a sense of vitality with nature or the sublime.

There was a type of mindfulness or attunement to the present moment that occurred between the women and their horses. Being immersed in the natural world was part of this, and many of the women noted a heightened sensitivity to their senses, experience of time, and relational attunement with the horses. Traditional mindfulness practices or approaches to heighten awareness of the present moment such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), meditation, and yoga may be helpful in fostering attunement. AAT such as EFC can provide a type of relational attunement to another that is largely absent in mindfulness research and practice (Falb & Pargament, 2012). EFC may have a unique role in fostering this attunement to another and the present moment through the practice of riding—an activity that arguably requires full participation and attention to the “here and now.” EFC and other AAT can open a window into exploring new concepts in mindfulness and attunement practices that incorporate the importance of attuning to oneself through another.

Touch and movement between the women and their horses was another critical element in this research. As a novice counsellor, I know that the ethical implications and potential dangers of physically touching clients was often a topic of conversation in graduate courses and practica. Knowing when to offer a hug or a handshake, a light arm squeeze or a smile—these are examples of the myriad dimensions of corporeal engagement that are negotiated between counsellors and clients. This terrain can be difficult to navigate for counsellors (novice and expert alike), and it is usually the safer ethical road to err on the side of not physically touching clients (even when this type of contact may be therapeutic). The horses that the women interacted with offered this physical contact unreservedly (e.g., Dubh placing his head in Katie’s arms), allowing for a corporeal experience of warmth, comfort, acceptance, and love.

This physicality also allowed for a very different type of subversion of problematic ways of being. The women learned to “speak” a novel relational language in their interactions with their horses, as they attuned to each other through their bodies in a kinetically articulated way. This enabled the interruption of problematic corporeal habits at a muscular level, one that was felt before it was understood or discussable. I argue that there is the need to bring this type of learning into counselling theory and practice. While most counselling typically takes place in an office setting, and touch and movement between clients and counsellors in such settings are often limited, this type of interaction can still be brought into the context of more traditional counselling modalities by creating a space to explore and talk about clients’ corporeality.

As some of the women alluded to, EFC is a unique approach, particularly when compared to more traditional talk therapy that is largely confined to the

limits of language and the physical confines of an office. As Cromby (2012) explained, the “extra-discursive” is an aspect of human experience that counsellors must endeavour to explore in the context of therapy. The visceral, sensual, and embodied phenomenological self of lived experience is a source of meaning that is of central importance in counselling work and can aid in discovering new or forgotten experiences and narratives. This might include exploring everyday habitual practices and ways of being, discussing means to challenge problematic habits at a corporeal level, and intentionally engaging in embodied experiences (both within and outside of the counselling office) that can create a difference for clients. This is not to say that traditional counselling is not an embodied experience or that corporeal-resonant events cannot happen in a typical counselling office—they can and do happen, but I believe that counselling can be enriched when such corporeal experiences are purposefully made part of our explorations.

Such purposeful exploration is evident in a number of counselling approaches including Hakomi (Kurtz, 1987), “awareness through movement” or the Feldenkrais method (Feldenkrais, 1972), and adapted physical activity (Sherrill, 1998). Common interventions within such approaches include guided or self-directed movement lessons/explorations, kinaesthesia or feeling the body move, and fostering a deeper awareness of one’s bodily engagement within the environment. Counselling practitioners need not subscribe to such approaches to bring corporeally resonant exploration into their practice, however. Through intentional focus on feelings/sensations in the moment and embodied memories, the extra-discursive can be explored and thickened in session. Examples of such explorations may include guided visualization of a calming encounter/experience in the client’s day-to-day life (e.g., “What can you sense when you bring yourself back to that time?” “What could you see/hear/smell while you were walking home from the beach?”), reflection on the corporeal dimension of a relationship (e.g., “What comes up for you when you connect to that experience of snuggling with your cat?”), and facilitation of bodily awareness in the moment (e.g., “Where do you feel that emotion in your body?” “Does that sense change when you put your feet flat on the ground or stand up?”).

### *Implications for Addressing Disordered Eating*

In eating disorder theory and research, the primary way of understanding and subverting these problems rests on the biomedical model, which is based on regimes of traditional science. Such regimes are largely reliant on objective (rather than subjective) experiences, cognitive and visual language (to the exclusion of kinaesthetically felt and articulated knowing), and numerous dualisms (such as mind/body). There have been many steps made toward incorporating a language of embodiment to enable another understanding of these problems and the people who suffer from them (e.g., Piran, 2002; Piran, Carter, Thompson, & Pajouhan-deh, 2002; Piran & Teall, 2012); however, further work is needed to ensure that this push is continued.

Recent research indicates that eating disorders do not get better on their own (Hay et al., 2012). Furthermore, despite our best efforts, disordered eating continues to be a prevalent and largely “treatment-resistant” problem for thousands of women, men, children, and their loved ones (Levine et al., 2012). There is a great need for further research in all areas of conceptualization, prevention, and intervention. EFC and embodiment offer another way to understand and approach disordered eating, and this research is one more step in this direction. The stories of the women who took part have further shaped a small part of this discourse by exploring and sharing their corporeal ways of being.

Their experiences also point to certain implications for addressing disordered eating. For example, the connection to emotion that being with horses seemed to foster is particularly important, as women who are challenged by these patterns often have difficulties in corporeally attuning to emotion as a felt experience. Relationally attuning to another through emotional resonance is another way to help those living with disordered eating to viscerally experience emotion (rather than speak intellectually about it). Perhaps there are other ways to bring this type of attuning into our practice (e.g., attuning emotionally through or with another).

The theories, ideas, and participant story recounted here also highlight a novel way to challenge patterns of disordered eating through corporeal performance. Our bodies in motion are always subtly adjusting and changing in relation to our living in the world, but we do not normally notice these small shifts unless they call us up short in some way. The horses that the women worked with in EFC allowed for a number of such encounters and moments—times when the women had to respond at a corporeal, preverbal level that in some instances challenged or interrupted their typical ways of being. In more traditional therapeutic approaches, preferred ways of attuning and being are talked about, but there may be limited opportunities to actually feel them, in the moment, and at such a direct corporeal level. EFC presents a different sort of approach to working with those suffering from eating disorders that may be particularly helpful in conceptualizing how eating disorders manifest, how they are felt and experienced, and how we can help clients to disrupt these patterns and begin to create preferred ways of being.

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## Appendix A

### *Session Outline*

Session	Theme or Topics	Summary of Activities	Suggested Homework
1	Building connections—getting to know the horses and each other	Introductions and tour; relaxation activity; approaching and meeting the horses in the barn; creating group norms	None
2	Identifying needs and boundaries	Exploring horses' needs and our needs; relaxation activity; grooming horses; communicating boundaries with horses (inviting them into personal space and asking them to back up)	Writing Exercise #1 and Story: Skye's Nap
3	Managing frustration, fear, and anxiety	Exploring and normalizing uncomfortable feelings; grooming horses; leading horses through a "maze" in the barn with objects that some horses might be scared of (working together to navigate these)	Describing Your Emotion Worksheet
4	Keeping safe	Noticing/paying attention to intuition; discussing and demonstrating safely riding; relaxation activity on horseback (while staff lead horses); riding and practicing emergency dismount	Writing Exercise #2 and Calm Place Worksheet
5	Change and hope for the future	Collage of hopes for the future and discussion; unstructured time with horses; riding; painting horseshoes with goodbye messages for each other	Survival Kit Worksheet
6	Closure and farewells	"Painting" the horses (depicting what they want to take with them/lessons learned); group interview; unstructured time with horses; presenting certificates	Story: One More Day with Penny

## Appendix B

### *Guideline for Interview #1*

1. Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research. This project is something that is close to my heart because of my own experiences with horses and my work counselling women with eating disorders. I'm really curious about this and I'm hoping that through the conversations we have, we can start to piece together what the experience is like for you. Before we begin, do you have any questions or concerns?
2. What was it like when you first met your horse?
3. Describe your horse to me.

4. What were your first impressions of him?
5. How did the horse respond to you?
6. What do you think that first contact was like for your horse?
7. Was there anything that the horse communicated to you?
8. Was there anything about this experience that was important to you?
9. Now I'd like to see if we can focus a bit more on the sensations involved in this first meeting, if you're open to it. Try to remember that moment as if you were in it right now, the sounds, the smells, the feel of that moment. Just hold onto it and see if you can explore it. Just breathe and relax, imagining yourself back in that time and place. This is not about evaluating or judging the moment, but just being in it. Think about what you can sense in that moment.
10. Are there any sounds that you remember?
11. Are there any smells that you remember?
12. What does the horse feel like?
13. What can you sense in that moment?
14. Now I want you to let yourself connect to a word, phrase, or image that describes your horse or that moment. It doesn't have to make sense, just let it come to you.
15. How well does that fit your experience?
16. Are there any changes or expansions that this word/phrase/image brings to your description of that moment?
17. Are there any memories or new feelings that this experience brings up for you?
18. (Repeat with other memories/moments of interaction with the horses if participant is open to this.)
19. Is there anything else about these experiences that you think is important?

### *Guideline for Interview #2*

1. Thanks again for your help in this project. During our last interview we focused a lot on the horses that you worked with. Today I'd like to change the focus just a bit and explore more about your relationship to the horses at L. L. and what this has meant for you. In my experience with horses, I've found that it's kind of like a dance and that the horse and the person need to coordinate their movements and let the dance evolve. I'm wondering about what your experience of this has been, what your interactions with the horses have been like, and how you coordinate this dance. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?
2. (Reflect on my perceptions and understandings of our first interview. Ask for any comments, clarifications, or additions that participant may have.)
3. I'd like you to shift your focus back to your experiences with the horses at L. L. and pick one memory that sticks with you for some reason. I'd like to take a moment to reflect on this memory. Just breathe and relax, imagining yourself back in that time and place. Think about what you can sense in

that moment, what you can see..... hear..... smell..... feel. This is not about evaluating or judging the moment, but just being in it. How did you experience that moment?

4. What did you sense in the moment? (Reflect on bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings if participant is comfortable doing so.)
5. Now I want you to let yourself connect to a word, phrase, or image that describes that memory. It doesn't have to make sense, just let it come to you.
6. How well does that fit your experience?
7. Are there any changes or expansions that this word/phrase/image brings to your description of that moment?
8. Are you aware of anything in the situation that you haven't experienced before or that has changed?
9. What was it about that moment that was important for you?
10. How did your horse respond in that moment? What did you notice about his response?
11. How might this moment affect your relationship with your horse?
12. How do you make sense of that moment in the larger context of your life?
13. How might this moment affect your relationship with yourself?
14. How might this moment affect your relationship with others?
15. How might that moment make a difference for you in the future?
16. How are you feeling about the interview so far?
17. (Repeat exploration process with other moments if participant is open to doing so.)
18. Is there anything in our conversation that helped you to make sense of your experiences?
19. Is there anything that you'd like to add or explore further?

### *Guideline for Interview #3 (Group Interview)*

1. Thank you for your continued participation in this research. During our individual interviews I hope you were able to explore and make some sense of your experiences with the horses and perhaps how these have impacted you. This interview is going to be a little different because I'd like us to deepen this understanding together. Perhaps your experiences are similar to other group members, or perhaps they're quite different. There are no right or wrong answers in this discussion. What has been your experience of participating in this research so far?
2. Have any new understandings or descriptions come up for you since our last interview?
3. What has your relationship with the horses been like?
4. Was there anything that surprised you?
5. Was there anything that confused you?
6. Now I'd like to explore some of the significant moments that might have happened during your time here. Maybe you lost yourself in what was happening between you and your horse, or maybe you became aware of

- a different bodily sensation. These moments are often difficult to put into words, so just take your time and reflect on one or two that really stick out for you. Maybe this is one of the moments that we spoke about last time, or maybe it's something new.
7. I'd like to take a moment to explore some of these memories within the group if you're comfortable doing that. Just breathe and relax, imagining yourself back in that time and place. Think about what you can sense in that moment, what you can see..... hear..... smell..... feel. This is not about evaluating or judging the moment, but just being in it. How did you experience the situation?
  8. What did you sense in the situation? (Reflect on bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings. Try to elicit at least a few responses from different participants. Explore similarities and differences in experiences.)
  9. Now I want you to let yourself connect to a word, phrase, or image that describes that bodily memory. It doesn't have to make sense, just let it come to you. Try to elicit at least a few responses from different participants. (Explore what these words/phrases/images mean for participants.)
  10. What was it about these moments that stuck with you?
  11. Does the word "transformational" fit, or is there another word that describes the importance of this experience for you?
  12. How do you make sense of that moment in the larger context of your life?
  13. How might this moment affect your relationship with yourself?
  14. How might this moment affect your relationship with others?
  15. How might this moment make a difference for you in the future?
  16. (Repeat exploration process with other moments/memories. As participants become more comfortable, introduce more body-focused questions: How has that affected how you feel in your body? Has your experience of your body shifted or changed at all throughout the sessions?)
  17. Is there anything else that you'd like to add or go back to before we end the discussion?

### *About the Author*

Hillary Sharpe is a counsellor at Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse and a recent graduate of the University of Calgary. Her main interests include animal-assisted therapy, trauma research and practice, and women's issues.

Address correspondence to Hillary Sharpe, Calgary Communities Against Sexual Abuse, Northland Building, Suite 700, 910 – 7th Avenue S.W., Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 3N8; e-mail <hsharpe@calgarycasa.com>