

Mention horses, prisoners and rehabilitation and it's more than likely that a lot of cynical eyebrows will be raised. However for prisoners at Guys Marsh, a weeklong course in natural horsemanship brought about some remarkable results. Jenny Lindstrand reports.

Natural horsemanship works on the premise that a horse reacts to how people are feeling. There is no riding involved; instead participants try to encourage horses to move in a certain direction using the powers of energy and persuasion.

The students practice ways of getting the horse's attention, moving them around without forcing the horse by just pulling on the lead rope. The result is that the horses behaviour get prisoners to think about their emotions and how to handle them. They soon learn that it is pointless getting angry with a horse as they just run away or get scared. They learn how to control their anger and frustration when things don't go according to plan.

Tricia Day, facilitator of the horse course, explained: "It's about communicating and using your energy and knowing what impact your body language and energy can have on the horses. The horses pick up on what seems to be an issue for the individual. If you get cross or frustrated the horse knows and it doesn't work." As well as managing their emotions, prisoners also confront some deeply held beliefs and benefit from personal growth and development. Tricia remembers one particular case: "One of the prisoners was brought up in East London and called himself a black ghetto kid. He believed that all the bad things that had happened to him were because he was black; he got into trouble because of the way he looked."

This view was challenged when the prisoner had to try to force lead the horse and stand firm, despite the horse trying to push him out of the way. "These horses are always pushing on people trying to get them to move their feet, and it took this one guy quite a long time to realise that actually it wasn't because he was black. It sounds trivial, but for him it was a life changing moment to have that really deeply held belief about yourself challenged," Tricia said. How Guys Marsh came to host the course is the story of fortunate circumstances and management support. The local Strode College had a bursary scheme to encourage teachers to work in prisons, and from this Guys Marsh could run the horse course without worrying about funding. On top of this the establishment had three stables already built behind the gym which were in a secure area big enough for the horses to roam, and far away enough from the wings to avoid disruption from other prisoners.

Governor Kieran Scanlan, was behind the idea from the start. He said: "It didn't fall within the remit of traditional therapeutic interventions. Not all prisoners are able to respond to conventional treatments and this was quite novel in what it was trying to do." Education Manager, Celia Hastie added: "We tried to get rid of all the barriers that might be in the way, and so we decided it would only be open to prisoners on enhanced regime. Their efforts were not wasted: "One prisoner who took part said he'd been in various prisons and treatment settings, but he'd been able to mask his feelings and emotions with bravado. But because the horse didn't communicate on that level he had to be himself and assert himself in a non-verbal way. He could fool human beings but he couldn't fool an animal," Kieran explained.

This philosophy rang true for all the participants. Prisoner Danny Lyndon, 23, explained what he got from the course: "I wasn't expecting too much from it, but when I'd done it I realised it's not only about communication with animals but also with people. To get the horse to do what you want and move where you want without putting pressure on the horse or frightening the horse was the tricky part. You can scare a horse into moving, anyone can do that, and you might get a reaction from the horse or you might not.

The most effective way that Tricia taught us is to put your energy into the direction you want the horse to move. It's amazing to see how it works." These skills have been transferred to how the prisoners interact with other people. Tricia said: "One of the guys on the course used the techniques on the wing. He found himself not getting his point across, so he persisted instead of throwing a tantrum or getting cross. He said it had got him what he wanted by staying calm and being persistent.

That's a huge lesson when you think about the amount of angry young men there are in prison. At the end of the course the participants put together a presentation with a practical demonstration and discussion. They spoke in front of a group of 30 staff, governors and IMB members, and managed to change the attitudes of some of the cynics. "After the presentation one member of staff who had been particularly sceptical came up to me and said 'I've seen exactly what you're trying to achieve'," Tricia said. As well as addressing how people communicate with one another, the horse course has a wider value within the resettlement agenda. For those wishing to work with horses, natural horsemanship is one of the fastest growing areas within the equine industry with insufficient trainers or workers. The Horse course fulfils a niche area and is unlikely to be rolled out across the estate if only because of logistical problems, but the course at Guys Marsh has certainly proved a success.