

LESSONS FROM THE HERD



Eklavya Foundation - Chennai Support Group Lecture Series



Introduction

Eklavya Foundation organized a special lecture titled “*Lessons from the Herd*” delivered by Ms. Mirabelle Lindemann, founder and facilitator of Horse to Human, Auroville. The session explored the psychological, relational, and regulatory insights derived from working closely with horses, particularly in therapeutic contexts involving neurodiverse individuals and persons experiencing emotional dysregulation. The lecture integrated personal narrative, experiential learning, and applied frameworks developed through years of equine-assisted work.

Background and Personal Context

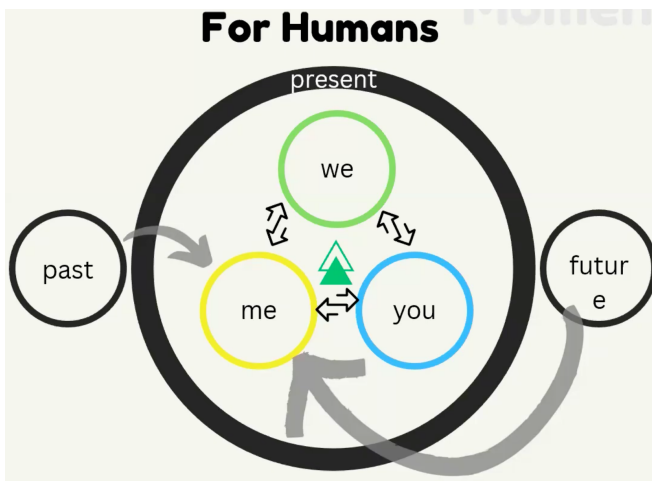
Ms. Lindemann began by sharing her personal journey. She has worked with horses since the age of five and described them as her life’s calling. After a severe facial injury at age twelve caused by a horse kick, followed by the death of a childhood horse companion, she experienced a period of significant depression. Re-engaging with horses

later in life marked a turning point, leading her to develop a relational, non-violent, and positive-reinforcement-based approach to horsemanship.

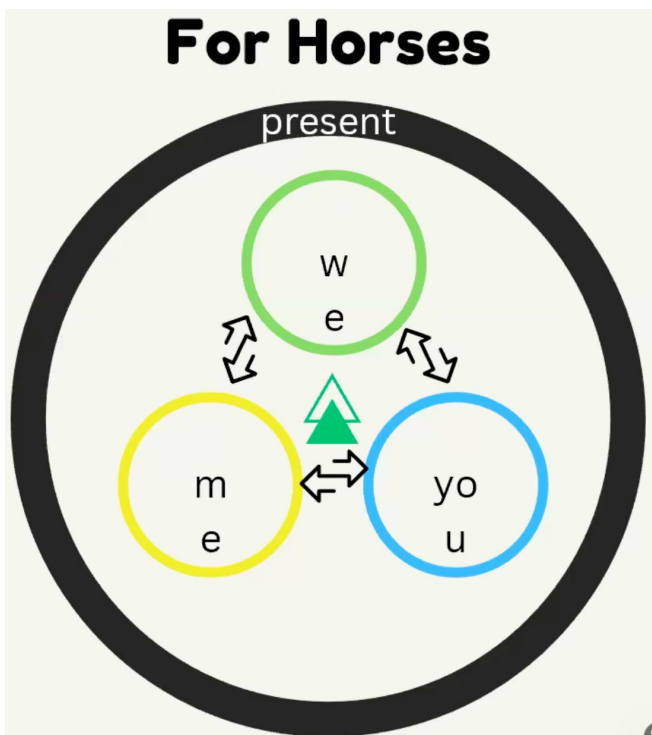
She emphasized that relinquishing control and fostering collaboration rather than dominance opened new perspectives on communication, self-care, and emotional regulation.

Human–Horse Differences and Collaboration

A foundational distinction discussed was that humans are predators (forward-facing eyes) while horses are prey animals (side-facing eyes). Despite this physiological difference, horses demonstrate willingness to collaborate with humans. This willingness, according to the speaker, reflects curiosity and an intrinsic drive for connection.



Horses were described as living authentically in the present moment, responding to sensory input rather than narrative memory. They recreate patterns to achieve outcomes but do not “lie” or manipulate. Their responses are rooted in immediate physiological and environmental cues.



The Seven Basic Needs Framework

Ms. Lindemann presented seven basic needs observed in horses that also apply to humans:

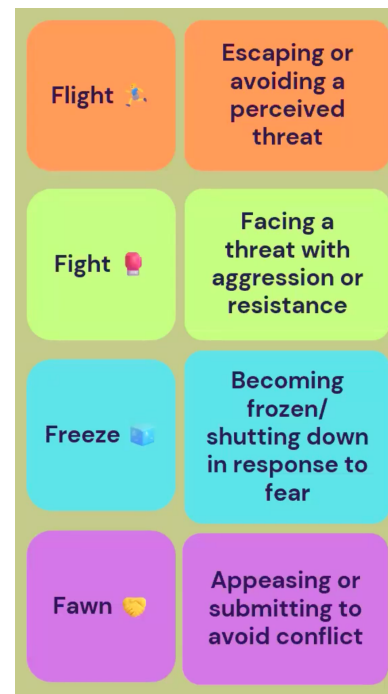
- I. Safety and Comfort
- II. Ingestion and Excretion (breathing, hydration, nutrition, bodily regulation)
- III. Body Care (including sleep)
- IV. Movement

- V. Association (connection with others or environment)
- VI. Play (intersection of movement and association)
- VII. Territorialism (space and boundaries)

She highlighted that unmet needs often underlie behavioural responses. A practical tool introduced was a self-check-in system rating safety, ingestion, and body care on a scale of 1–10 to create a neutral and objective understanding of one’s state without comparison or emotional competition.

Trauma Responses

The lecture detailed four trauma responses shared by horses and humans:



Particular emphasis was placed on fawning, described as a pre-emptive appeasement strategy that often suppresses one’s own basic needs. Recovery from fawning was explained as softening rigid constructs and exploring alternative interpretations (“constellation” thinking).

Horses demonstrate a pause before reacting, assessing threat and returning to neutral if safety is established. This inspired a five-step regulatory sequence used in her work:

1. Find neutral
2. Bring attention inward and outward
3. Set intention
4. Thought (determine pathway)
5. Action

Co-Regulation and Neurodiversity

A central theme was *co-regulation*, the capacity of one regulated nervous system to stabilize another. Horses were described as having a wide electromagnetic heart field and high sensitivity to heart rate, breathing, and hormonal cues. Their presence can facilitate shifts from sympathetic (survival) states to parasympathetic (regulated) states.

Ms. Lindemann shared experiences from collaboration with Deepam School for differently-abled children. Observed outcomes included improved emotional expression, increased awareness of bodily needs (e.g., asking for meals), and development of vocational potential. Progress occurred through presence and attunement rather than force or structured imposition.

Triggers and Glimmers

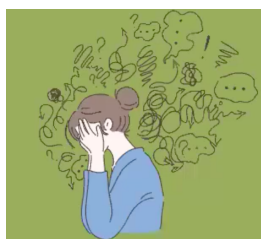
The speaker distinguished between:

- *Triggers* – cues that evoke feelings of unsafety or overwhelm
- *Glimmers* – moments of felt safety, connection, and joy

She emphasized that human attention tends to amplify triggers while minimizing glimmers. Actively recognizing glimmers helps rebalance the nervous system and promote resilience. For horses, unexpected touch may trigger a flinch response; however, slowing breath and embodying calm can create softening. Safety, she noted, is contagious.

Mindfulness vs. “Mind-Fullness”

The presentation differentiated between:



- *Mindfulness* – grounded, present, sensory awareness
- *Mind-fullness* – racing thoughts, rumination, anxiety

Grounding practices involve sensory check-ins: noticing sight, sound, smell, texture, and bodily sensations. These practices assist in transitioning from survival-based processing to reflective thought.

The Present Moment: Humans vs. Horses

A visual model illustrated that humans frequently extend beyond the present through preoccupation with past and future. Horses, by contrast, operate almost entirely within the present moment. Although they retain sensory memory, they do not ruminate narratively. This makes them consistent and unbiased partners in therapeutic engagement.

Herd dynamics were described as fluid and diplomatic. Conflict arises only when need outweighs availability. Horses use avoidance rather than prolonged confrontation and maintain relational networks without hierarchical rigidity.

Nature, Nurture, and Language

In discussion, Ms. Lindemann addressed the interplay between nature and nurture, suggesting that nurturing one's basic needs can reshape reactive patterns. She emphasized the importance of shared language and awareness of connotation, as words carry different meanings for different individuals. Clear communication prevents unnecessary emotional harm.

Conclusion

“Lessons from the Herd” presented an applied framework rooted in lived experience with horses and neurodiverse individuals. Core principles included:

- Regulation before reaction
- Meeting basic needs as foundation for well-being
- Presence over control
- Recognition of triggers and glimmers
- Sensory grounding to restore balance
- Partnership rather than hierarchy

The session offered a practical, experiential approach to emotional regulation and relational awareness. Through equine-assisted learning, Ms. Lindemann demonstrated how nonjudgmental

presence and co-regulation can foster meaningful psychological growth.

Q & A

Q] Can this be done with cows instead of horses?

⇒ Mirabelle explained that while she has not personally worked with cows in a therapeutic framework, she believes all animals possess an innate ability to co-regulate and connect with humans. However, horses have a specific sensitivity and relational dynamic that she has deeply studied and built trust with. She emphasized that her work is rooted in long-term relational experience with horses rather than a general animal therapy model.

Q] Why don't humans learn more from animals? Why this superiority?

⇒ She suggested that humans have gradually separated themselves from nature through modernization. Historically, humans lived in closer harmony with animals and the natural world. Over time, society created a hierarchy that placed humans “above” nature. She described this separation as a kind of illusion, emphasizing that humans are part of nature, not outside it.

Q] Do horses form relationships if they only live in the present?

⇒ She clarified that horses do retain memory, particularly sensory memory (smell, heart rate, tension). They can recognize other horses even after many years. However, they do not ruminate about past events in a narrative way like humans do. Their responses are sensory-based rather than story-based.

Q] Nature vs Nurture – Can we change reactive patterns?

⇒ She explained that nurturing one's basic needs can reshape reactive “nature.” For example, instead of reacting in anger, asking “What do you need right now?” can interrupt escalation. Meeting basic needs consistently can gradually shift behavioural patterns.

Q] Meditation, Regulation, and Animal Response

⇒ She affirmed this as an example of co-regulation and nervous system mirroring. Animals sense internal states beyond outward behaviour.

Q] Where can we access more information?

⇒ She invited participants to connect with her through social media and visit the Horse to Human space for further engagement.

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