



GALLOP TO GREATNESS

Where horses heal hearts & humans find hope



Gallop to Greatness – Clinical Rationale

Program Overview

Gallop to Greatness is a trauma-informed, ground-based equine-assisted learning program designed to support individuals experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Complex PTSD, and trauma-related stress injuries. The pilot program delivers **three individual 60-minute sessions**, utilising retired Thoroughbred racehorses (OTT horses) in a controlled, non-riding environment.

The program is not psychotherapy and does not involve trauma disclosure or cognitive processing of traumatic events. Instead, it operates as a **complementary, experiential wellbeing intervention** focused on nervous system regulation, agency, emotional control, and safe relational engagement.

Participants in the pilot are police officers, veterans, and first responders referred through external mental health professionals.

Theoretical Foundations

Gallop to Greatness is grounded in well-established psychological and neurobiological principles, including:

1. Autonomic Nervous System Regulation

Trauma frequently disrupts autonomic regulation, leading to chronic hyperarousal, emotional reactivity, or dissociation. Horses are highly sensitive prey animals that respond immediately to changes in human physiological state. Calm, regulated human presence produces observable changes in equine behaviour, creating real-time biofeedback that supports down-regulation of the nervous system.

2. Polyvagal Theory

Consistent with polyvagal theory, the program prioritises establishing safety, predictability, and social engagement without threat. Sessions are semi-structured, non-confrontational, and choice-based, allowing participants to experience calm connection without loss of control.

3. Interoceptive Awareness

Trauma can impair the ability to recognise internal bodily states. Ground-based equine interaction enhances interoceptive awareness by linking internal sensations (breathing, tension, posture) with immediate external feedback from the horse.

4. Agency and Control

A core feature of PTSD is perceived loss of control. All Gallop to Greatness activities are voluntary, non-coercive, and participant-led. Horses respond to clarity, consistency, and calm intention rather than force, reinforcing a sense of personal agency and self-efficacy.

5. Experiential Learning

Learning occurs through direct experience rather than verbal instruction. Participants practice emotional regulation, boundary setting, and intentional communication in the moment, supporting durable behavioural change.

Why Ground-Based, Individual, Non-Riding Sessions

The program deliberately excludes riding and group work to align with trauma best practice:

- Maintains participant choice and control
- Minimises risk of dissociation
- Avoids power imbalance
- Reduces sensory overload
- Enhances safety for both participants and horses

Individual sessions allow pacing to each participant's tolerance and needs, reducing the risk of emotional flooding.

Session Design and Intent

Each 60-minute session follows a consistent structure to promote predictability and safety:

- Orientation and baseline self-assessment
- Regulation through presence and breath
- Intentional, structured horse interaction
- Guided reflection and meaning-making
- Grounded closure

Each session has a primary focus:

- **Session 1:** Physiological regulation and grounding
- **Session 2:** Agency, confidence, and emotional control
- **Session 3:** Boundaries, trust, and relational safety

Expected Benefits for PTSD and Trauma Participants

Based on existing peer-reviewed research and clinical observations, expected benefits include:

- Reduced physiological arousal
- Improved emotional regulation
- Increased sense of control and confidence
- Improved awareness of stress responses
- Enhanced capacity for calm, assertive interaction

The program does not replace psychological treatment but supports therapeutic goals already being addressed by clinicians.

Measurement and Accountability

Outcomes are assessed using:

- Pre- and post-program self-report questionnaires

- Session-by-session wellbeing ratings
- Participant reflective feedback
- Clinician-aligned outcome measures where appropriate

This ensures the program remains evidence-aligned, accountable, and outcomes-focused.

Ethical and Welfare Considerations

- Participants are referred by external agencies
- Informed consent is obtained
- No trauma disclosure is required
- Horses are selected based on temperament and welfare suitability
- Sessions are capped to prevent overuse of horses

The program prioritises safety, dignity, and respect for both humans and horses.

Conclusion

Gallop to Greatness is a semi-structured, trauma-informed, evidence-aligned equine-assisted learning program that leverages the unique responsiveness of retired racehorses to support genuine, measurable wellbeing outcomes. It avoids unstructured or emotive approaches and instead delivers targeted experiential learning grounded in neuroscience, psychology, and best practice trauma principles.