


# Building Internal Resilience Through Horses

*A Trauma-informed, evidence-based community program for young women living with interpersonal trauma*

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BUILDING INTERNAL  
RESILIENCE THROUGH HORSES  
DÉVELOPPER LA RÉSILIENCE  
INTÉRIEURE GRÂCE AUX CHEVAUX



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## Project Partners & Funder

### Kawartha Sexual Assault Centre

- Not-for-profit, charitable organization providing sexual assault services and public education in the City of Peterborough, City of Kawartha Lakes and throughout the Counties of Peterborough, Northumberland and Haliburton, ON.

### Trent University's Emotion and Health Research Laboratory

- Public liberal arts and science-oriented university in Peterborough, ON, with satellite campus in Oshawa. The Emotion and Health Research Lab promotes research, knowledge translation, and training in the areas of emotions, health, resilience, and life success.

### The Mane Intent Inc.

- Offers health and wellness workshops, coaching and leadership development, working in partnership with horses using a facilitated experiential learning approach. Located in Indian River, ON.

### Public Health Agency of Canada

- Contribution fund through the Supporting the Health of Survivors of Family Violence investment.

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## Project Objectives



- To design, deliver, and evaluate through intervention research an innovative community program with strong evaluative outcomes.
- To enhance personal resiliency for young women who have experienced trauma due to domestic violence and/or child abuse.
- To demonstrate that EAL is an effective intervention approach for building resilience in young women who have experienced interpersonal trauma.
- To build capacity for trauma-informed practice in the community of Peterborough and surrounding area, for service practitioners who are working with youth who have experienced trauma.
- To produce a Program Manual that includes the research project and the program details so that it can be replicated in other parts of Canada.

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## Why Horses?



Emotion  
Regulation

Sense of  
Mastery

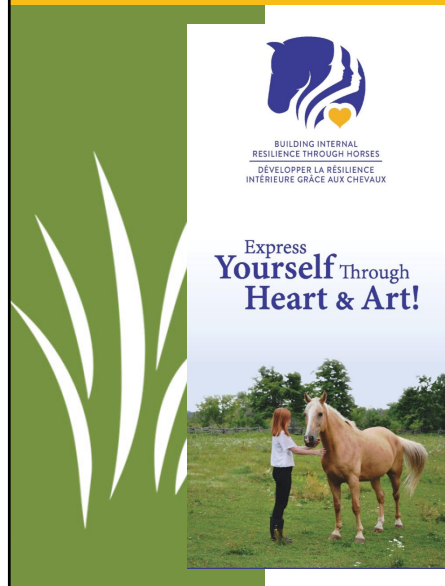
Sense of  
Relatedness

*"Dear Samson, you made me  
feel special – like I mattered to  
someone."*



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## Building Internal Resilience Through Horses

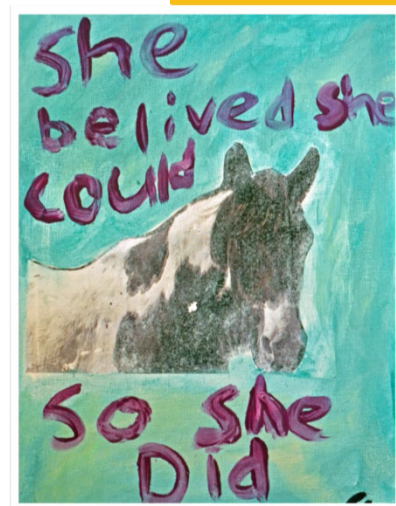


- Free community-based trauma-informed program for building personal resiliency
- Offered to young women (age 13-18 years) who have experienced or witnessed family violence
- 12 weeks, including 8 weeks of Equine Assisted Learning (EAL), with 1-month, 6-month, and 12-month check-in or booster sessions
- Combines education, expressive arts, and working in partnership with horses to teach coping and life skills

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## Participants Learn About

- Trauma and how it impacts our bodies and health
- Strategies for emotion regulation, coping, self-care, grounding, and forming trust and relationships with other group members
- How to assert healthy boundaries
- Setting goals and managing choices, obstacles, and challenges
- Developing confidence and personal awareness
- Developing communication and leadership skills
- How to vision success and believe in one's potential to achieve what's possible



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## Research Results

*"I grew a lot in the last couple of weeks with this group."*

*"[I learned] how to let go after something so long going."*

*"[The horses] taught me things I thought I could never learn. The horses are exceptional teachers."*



*"It really helped me; can easily apply this to school/social environments."*

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## Program Feasibility

- Completed 12 groups, 83 participants in total
- High attendance:**  
77% of participants attended more than half of the sessions
- High perceived value:**  
For any given session, at least 70% rated the session as "mostly" or "very" satisfying, helpful, and empowering

### Average Session Ratings



*"Today's session was very good. It made me feel like the boss and confident. I felt strong and completed."*

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## Outcome Measures



### Standardized Questionnaires:

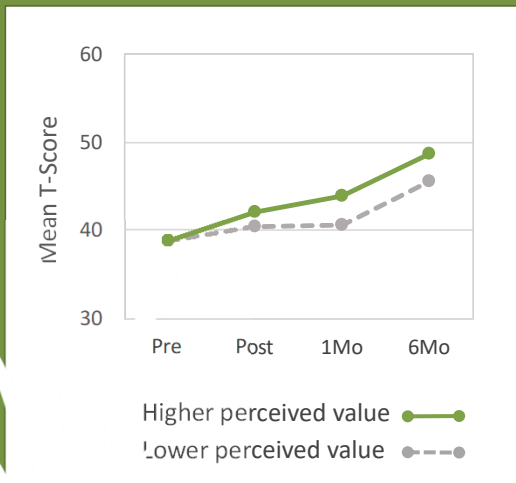
- Resiliency Scales for Children and Adolescents *(Prince-Embury, 2007)*
- Emotional Quotient Inventory – Youth Version *(Bar-On & Parker, 2000)*
- Children’s Depression Inventory – 2 *(Kovacs, 2010)*
- Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children *(Brierer, 1996)*

### Analyses:

- Looked at changes from Pre-test to Post-test, 1-month, and 6-month
- Compared participants with Higher vs. Lower perceived program value

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## Emotional Awareness



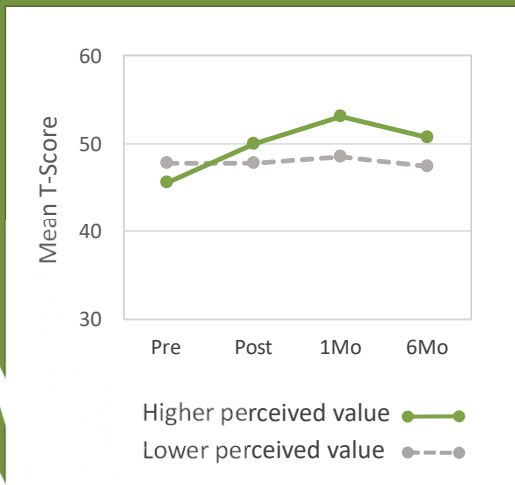
*“I learned how to look at my emotions and had the horses help with understanding them.”*

*“I learned that I have needs and they can be met, and I’m not selfish for thinking that.”*

*“When you have stress, so does the horse you’re working with. You have to be calm to help the horse be calm.”*

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## Interpersonal Skills



*"The horses taught me about how to understand personal space and respect others space."*

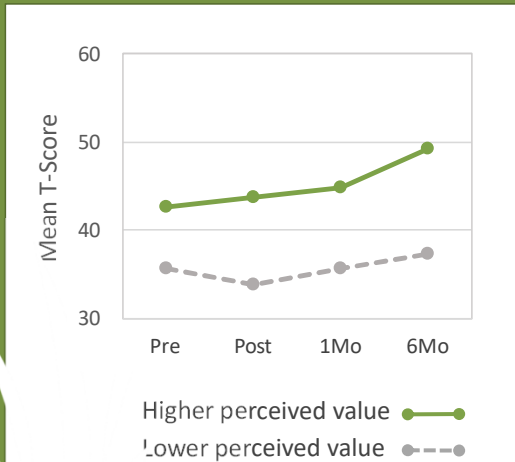
*"Today, I felt very courageous/proud. I felt this way because I learned how to say no, which is difficult."*

*"[I learned] how to communicate what I need."*

*"[I learned that] I can still trust even after having my trust broken a lot."*

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## Sense of Mastery



*"I discovered that there are many things that can make you feel proud of yourself. I will use the strategies of pushing myself past my comfort zone."*

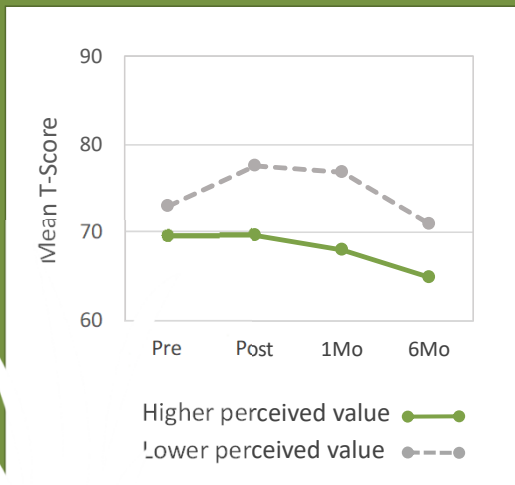
*"I can impact my own wellness in positive ways. Small changes can make big differences."*

*"Having a grasp on leading the horse without feeling any sense of doubt - I can apply what I learned today to my personal life."*

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## Depressive Symptoms



*"Thinking of my past week, a lot has gone on with my case and the horse made me light up and stand taller."*

*"At one point I was feeling sad because I thought of some bad memories, but the horses made me feel happy again."*

*"I feel like everytime I come my depression goes away more and more."*

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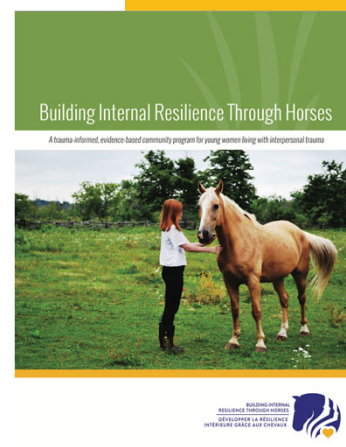
## Key Lessons

### Promises:

- EAL is a promising approach to building personal resiliency among young women who are survivors of trauma.
- Participants found EAL sessions to be appealing and helpful.
- Those who derived more value showed greater improvements in core resiliency domains, and experienced smaller declines in mental health.
- Improvements were directly linked to the intervention processes, and many were sustained over the long term.

### Limitations:

- Weaker impact on mental health outcomes than on resiliency outcomes—EAL is not a substitute for clinical therapy. Not equally suitable for everyone.



Program Manual can be downloaded at  
<http://www.invitingresilience.ca/>

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