**Online Scripts for Mindfulness with Horses intro course**

**Week 1 Horses, Nature and Mindfulness (10 mins)**

Normally we would be at the farm with the horses and nature around us. Although we’re online, we’re going to do our best to get across to you something of the flavour of that.

First of all, a little bit of background for people who don’t know what Horses Helping People is all about. We’re a therapeutic horsemanship centre, which means people come to us to spend time with our lovely horses, out in nature, to help those people feel better in some way. We welcome people of all ages, who may have mental health issues, learning disabilities, autism, caring responsibilities - anyone who can benefit from being at Sunrise Farm – which is pretty much everyone, actually. We have 8 horses here at the farm, each with their own personality. Each week we’ll be introducing you to some of the horses, through photos and video. To start with, here’s a picture of some of our herd. At the farm you would be meditating alongside some of these horses, who will be part of this online course.

So, how come we’re doing mindfulness with horses? How could horses possibly help us with mindfulness?

We found that people who came to us for therapeutic sessions would increase in areas such as confidence, calmness, communication skills and a sense of community. So we knew that being around horses could help people in a lot of ways – and, crucially, that didn’t have to involve riding them. Taking that a step further, we wondered if horses really could help us with our mindfulness sessions, simply by being alongside us. We found that they could – here’s how…

Wild or free living horses are very similar to us, their everyday lives full of family, friends, food, shelter and rest. But, just by being horses, they live life mindfully, and that’s largely because horses are prey animals. Imagine life as a wild horse, not knowing when a predator might appear. You have to be constantly aware of your surroundings, living in the moment as you use all your senses to scan your ever changing environment. Is that something moving in the hedgerow? What’s that strange sound on the breeze? It’s this awareness of what’s happening in their environment now that keeps the horses safe.

It seems like it would be quite scary to have to constantly live with the knowledge that a life-threatening attack could happen at any time. But one of the amazing things about wild horses is that they don’t usually suffer from the same stress conditions that humans do – heart attacks, ulcers etc They are aware, but that doesn’t tip into hyper vigilance. Their bodies are brilliant at balancing their needs – for example, their life is generally led at a slow pace, conserving energy for when it’s unexpectedly needed to run from danger, while their diet of eating little and often means that their digestive system is never overloaded, and therefore ready for a fast escape. Those bursts of adrenalin filled energy, when they run from a threat, actually work to disperse the adrenalin, so they’re not carrying the stress around all the time. They have no control over a threat which may or may not happen, but their bodies physically are in a state of gentle preparation, and mentally they are always aware of their surroundings and any changes, while they get on with their day to day lives in the herd.

Another reason that horses can help us with mindfulness is the fact that just being in the presence of a calm, well regulated horse can feel really calming for humans. Horses have big hearts, around 10 times the size of a humans, while their pulse is slower at 20 – 40 beats per minute compared to a human’s 60 plus. A horse’s resting breathing rate is slower than a human’s. Horses and humans have remarkably similar limbic systems, with similar emotional patterns in social bonding – the way we connect with others. Since the horse does not have a largely developed analytical brain, it enables them to come from a nonjudgmental place. They respond to what is happening in the moment – based on comfort and safety. The horses’ natural state of rest, combined with being nonjudgmental, can create a healing space of calm and trust.

There’s also the factor that being in the horses’ presence usually means being close to nature. Research shows that just 2 hours a week in a natural environment has a positive effect on our wellbeing. There’s a lot of talk about the need for people to connect with nature, but of course we are nature, so when we lose contact with the natural world, we lose something of ourselves. Horses can help us tune into the natural rhythms of the days and the seasons, and how the weather affects us, which can help us feel more balanced and connected.

By this point you might be asking yourself, what’s in it for the horse? For a domesticated horse, there are quite a few perks. I think one of the most interesting is the fact that it gives the horses a chance to spend time with humans whose energy is regulated and calm. We’ve found time and again that horses are drawn towards the energy of people who are meditating – to the horse this feels safe. Earlier I talked about free living horses, and their full lives – we’ve found that the life of the mindful horse is compatible with a lifestyle that allows the horse to follow natural behaviours, spending all or most time outdoors in the company of other horses. A lifestyle which is inclusive of all horse ages, and most personalities. We might contrast this with, for example, the life of a racehorse, travelling in a lorry to race meetings, to an unknown place with strange sounds, smells, and heightened human emotions, plus spending a lot of time in a stable without being able to make physical contact with his friends.

Another perk for the horse is that there can also be the element of choice in this activity. For a lot of domestic horses, life consists of being told what to do, and being valued for how submissive you are. We’re interested in what horses do when they have a choice, so when we were developing how we were going to combine mindfulness and horses, we spent a lot of time seeing how different horses reacted to being involved, and trying different practices and locations. The horses are all individuals, and we like them to be able to express that. So when our youngest playful horse clearly found the whole meditation thing boring, we listened and made sure she wasn’t expected to join any practices she didn’t want to. What we did find though, in sometimes surprising ways, was how much the horses were drawn to us when the energy was calm – and this has also extended to other animals on the farm, including a wild rabbit who joined me for a 20 minute meditation.

So, I hope you can now see that when you’re looking into this picture of the horses, you’re looking at masters of mindfulness. We’ve found that meditating alongside the horses, and spending time with them in their natural environment has certainly enhanced our mindfulness practice. On this course, our aim is to for you to experience something of that too. Later in the session we’ll be meeting the first of our horses, who I’m looking forward to introducing you to after the break. Before that, it’s back to Chris for a short breathing practice.

**Week 1 Meet Commander**

At Sunrise Farm, we’ve got a herd of 7 horses who all know each other well. They are spilt into 3 smaller bands simply because of differing needs, living in adjacent fields within sight and touching distance of each other.

Each week we’ll meet the horses that make up our herd.

Today I’d like to introduce Commander

  

**Photo 1**

Commander is a black and white horse

Our horses come to us from different places and for different reasons. Commander came to us in 2019 aged 24, after a very active physical life. He can now take things easier physically while still keeping occupied and getting plenty of attention. Commander is one of our oldest horses, at 29 years old (*March 95*). To give you an idea of the human equivalent you multiply by 3, which means Commander is in his eighties.

**Photo 2**

All our horses share a field with friends. Here are Commander and Louis together.

**Photo 3**

Our next exercise is the body scan. If we were doing this at Sunrise Farm, we would be sitting in one of our stables with low partitions, with Commander in a stable on one side of us, and Louis in a stable on the other. They might be on the far side of their stables eating hay, or they might choose to stand alongside the adjoining partition to soak up some of the mindful energy – the choice is always theirs. As we go into the body scan, you might like to imagine you have the gentle presence of Commander and Louis alongside you.

**Week 2 Intro to Breath & Body, and Horse meditation (Mindfulness teacher)**

We’re now going to do a guided breath and body meditation, which will lead straight into a 10 minute meditation using photos of the horses here at the farm. This part isn’t a guided meditation, so there will be no sound, but don’t worry, there’s no right or wrong way to do this. Give it the same approach as you have the other meditations, take your seat, focus on your breath and, if you find your mind wandering, bring your attention back to the photo. Experience whatever you experience – perhaps curiosity, peace, maybe a sense of the horse’s energy, maybe just a quiet way of spending 10 minutes.

**Week 2 Horse Movement**

As a bit of inspiration before we start our mindful movement, we thought we’d show you some short video clips of the horses moving. All the clips are of the horses moving freely of their own choice rather than being controlled by a rider.

As I was saying last week, the horses’ bodies are brilliantly evolved and balanced for the life they lead. A foal is up on its feet within an hour of being born, because the ability to move can be the difference between life and death. Therefore it makes sense to have a body that is supple and agile, and remains so for as long as possible.

So here’s some clips of the horses

First we can see Corran grazing, which is what horses spend a lot of their lives doing – free roaming horses eat for around 17 hours a day. This shows typical movement when grazing - moving slowly forward and eating in an arc around the front legs. There’s no wasted energy going on here!

When horses start to move with purpose, they often do so as a herd. Here they are moving slowly together. Look out for the synchronicity as the two dark horses move into trot and effortlessly bypass the obstacle (me!)

Here they’re going to move a bit faster, again matching each other’s easy stride.

Here’s Louis, moving faster this time on his own as this movement is for play

And now the herd moves faster still, maybe to run from danger (or get to the fresh grass quicker!)

And finally, another use of movement is self care, rolling on the ground to get rid of itches, using those muscles to roll right over to take care of both sides, finishing with a good shake

Hope you enjoyed that, and are inspired by the ease and freedom of the horses’ movement, as we join in some mindful movement with Chris.

**Week 2 Meet Dollar**

Each week we’re meeting a few of the horses that make up our herd.

Today I’d like to introduce Dollar

  

**Photo 1**

Dollar is our biggest horse. Like dogs, horses have different breeds, or can be a mix of 2 or more breeds. Dollar’s dad was an Appaloosa, which is an American breed, first bred by the Nez Perce Native Americans, and often associated with horses with colourful spotted coat patterns. If you look at Dollar’s face you can see grey areas around his eyes and nose, but in his case it isn’t a sign of old age, it’s the speckled coat of his Appaloosa heritage. Dollar was born on a farm, and given to us as a Christmas present when he was a baby. He moved in when he was a year old, and is now 18 (*June 2006*).

**Photo 2**

Dollar is one of the big characters in the herd, often the first to investigate new things, and usually at the heart of any mischief. One of his favourite tricks is to pull the electric fence stakes out, to let himself and his friends onto fresh grass.

Horses have friendships and relationships within the herd. Because we keep our horses until the end of their lives, they have time to form strong relationships. The horses in the herd with Dollar have been together for 15 years, so it feels like family. Here’s a photo of Dollar typically at the front of the herd, checking out the surroundings.

**Week 2 Breathing video**

The next exercise with Chris is a breathing space. Horses have a slow breathing rate of 8 – 16 breaths per minute, compared to a human’s 12 - 18. It can help us to slow and deepen our breathing by focusing on the horse’s breath. Here’s a short video clip of Sushi at rest, to lead us into the breathing space with Chris. If you focus on his belly area, you’ll see it rise and fall as he breathes – it is very subtle, as he was very relaxed.

**(Video of horse breathing)**

**Week 3 Energy connection between horses**

**Photo 1 herd soft gaze**

So far, when I’ve introduced you to the horses, we’ve met individuals and partnerships. We know that these individual horses live together as a herd, in other words a big horse family. Living in a herd provides security and safety for horses who are vulnerable to predator attacks. If you are one of 10, you have a better chance of survival than if you are on your own.

**Photo 2 herd spread out**

But when we watch the horses in the field, they are not necessarily standing or grazing near each other. They might be spread out across the pasture, or just with one friend, seemingly in their own individual worlds.

However, these separate horses somehow remain connected to each other, so if one of them spots danger, the herd can immediately bunch together, either ready to run, or already running, as you can see in the next photo.

**Photo 3 herd bunched (standing/running)**

How do they do know to do this? There’s no verbal warning, no equivalent of a human shouting ‘fire’ – for a prey animal, making a noise draws attention to you, so it’s not safe. Do they see one horse reacting and follow their example? This could actually lose them valuable seconds as they each watched and copied another horse – this could be the difference between life and death.

**Photo 4 herd mirrored body language**

So let’s think of the herd as having an invisible web of energy, connecting all the horses however separate they may seem. The connection may be very subtle, but if you spend time watching the herd you might see the signs that the horses are aware of each other. You might notice mirrored body language between horses at opposite ends of the field. One horse might start to move and immediately another quietly heads in the same direction. You might observe one horse summon another one simply with a fixed stare –Corran and Goldie are masters of the piercing gaze which can make you turn round even from a distance.

So when a sudden threat appears and one horse notices it, that energy web immediately tugs at all the members of the herd. I experienced this myself when I was in the field one day, not observing the horses, but just busy with the repetitive job of clearing up the muck – a never ending task but one which in this case put me in a meditative receptive state. Suddenly, seemingly from nowhere, I felt a jolt in my solar plexus. Before I could work out what was going on, I became aware of the horses running past me. Something had startled them, and I was privileged enough to be part of their alarm system. A direct and immediate connection of the energy of a community.

One day when we were doing this part of the course at the farm, we were lucky enough to witness the web in action when there just happened to be a loud bang nearby while we were watching the herd in the paddock. What was fascinating in this case was that the 6 horses immediately all connected with their individual friend before the partnerships came together as the herd. It happened instantaneously and seamlessly, as if it was a pre-planned choreographed dance – but it was just a beautiful example of the strands of the web pulling the herd together.

**Photo 5 connection web - herd photos and person at centre**

So, when the horses are at opposite ends of the field, physically far apart, they still feel a connection. I wonder if, although you’re not in the physical presence of the horses, if you can feel something of that connection too. Take a few minutes to look at this picture and consider. Maybe you feel the energy of the herd? Maybe you feel a stronger sense of connection towards one of the individual horses? Just take a quiet few minutes to see what comes up for you.

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**Week 4 Sensory Trail**

At the farm, we would walk mindfully from the cabin towards the horses’ field, stopping every few minutes to open one sense fully. So the first stop might be hearing (we would close our eyes to help, and focus on the different layers of sound, without trying to identify them). We would then walk a bit further, then stop and focus on sight (using a soft wide gaze then a narrow focus). Back to mindfully walking for a few minutes, then stop to concentrate on smell (which might change with the seasons) and, if people were feeling adventurous, perhaps we’d also explore taste, maybe with the sweetness of clover. After another bit of walking we’d finally focus on touch (the feel of the long grasses at our fingertips, the feel of the breeze on our skin).

At the horses’ field, we would stand and watch the herd for a little while, observing how the horses are constantly using all their senses to scan their environment. We’d observe their ears, working like satellite dishes to pick up and locate sounds, familiar or unfamiliar. We’d observe their large eyes, on the side of their head for optimum range while grazing (nearly 360 degrees), seeing a hazy version of their environment. We’d notice their nostrils, taking in information brought to them on the breeze, or on the ground. We’d imagine what they could feel, maybe noticing their fur, or their manes and tails, being ruffled by the breeze, or perhaps the feel of the grass on their whiskers. Maybe one of the horses would notice something that needed closer attention, bringing their head up to concentrate all their senses, ears pointed to the possible danger, eyes bringing the haziness into sharp focus, nostrils dilating to bring as much of the strange scent in as possible.

Then we would turn and walk back to the cabin, this time experimenting with opening all our senses together, trying to experience the world as the horse experiences it, with full sensory awareness.