

Study: How horses and people connect

A horse's heart rhythms reflect their emotional state and can respond to the emotional state of a nearby human, according to a pilot study conducted by Alliant International University Professor Ellen Gehrke and the Institute of HeartMath.

When in contact, a horse's heart rate may mirror a human's emotions, signifying a close unspoken form of communication between man and beast. The horse as emotion detector may be the key to eliminating invasive procedures such as those that measure cortisol, a stress hormone.



Alliant Professor Dr. Ellen Gehrke with one of her horses.

Horses have long been known to be sensitive to their environments. The preliminary research project "Horses and Humans Energetics: The study of Heart Rate Variability (HRV) between horses and Humans" is the first step to proving horses to be as equally sensitive to the humans within that environment.

For years humans have reported emotional bonds with animals. Horses are often used therapeutically with emotionally and mentally ill and handicapped children and adults. This pilot study is the beginning of many studies to provide the research and data to support these reported bonds.

The study took place at Dr. Gehrke's San Diego ranch where ECG recorders were placed on her and four of her horses. The subjects were monitored during a 24-hour period in which the horses experienced normal conditions and activities such as eating, grooming, being alone, and being ridden and accompanied by Dr. Gehrke.

The ECG recorders projected increased coherent heart rate variability (HRV) patterns for the horses during times of close, calm contact between them and Dr. Gehrke. Coherent HRV patterns are the result of positive emotions and facilitate brain function.

"Horses receive information from body language and give feedback. They don't think very much, they feel. They are very emotional and honest," said Dr. Gehrke. "They also have a powerful impact on your sense of self and ability to lead."

As a professor at the Business Management Division of Alliant's Marshall Goldsmith School of Management, Dr. Gehrke often brings students to her horse ranch for human development, leadership and team-building.