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£5,000 to help therapeutic horsemanship programme

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In Sussex, our love of horses goes back a very long way.

In fact, some of the earliest horse remains in Britain (a shoulder bone), dating back to 500,000 BC, was discovered at Earham Pit, an important archaeological site at Boxgrove, near Chichester, showing that early tribes were using horses in the area at that time. Of course, the South Downs lend themselves to racing horses and working horses were central to Sussex life for many centuries.

Recent research from the University of Sussex has found that horses can read human facial expressions. "We have known for a long time that horses are a socially sophisticated species but this is the first time we have seen that they can distinguish between positive and negative human facial expressions," said Amy Smith, who co-led the research.

It has been found that working with horses in a therapeutic way can help people with mental health issues to overcome fears, build up trust, respect and compassion, to develop communication skills, problem-solving and coping techniques, self-confidence and self-esteem. These skills are transferable to many other areas of ordinary day-to-day life.

Equine Partners CIC was recently given a £5,000 from our Cragwood Fund to develop its 'therapeutic horsemanship' programmes, a one-to-one sessions with teenagers who are self-harming or at risk of suicide. Participants receive the reliable, consistent support of a weekly session with the horses to enable them to relax and find a place where they enjoy being. The horses are used as a means of therapy which may, at first, simply consist of spending quiet time alone with a horse, and then develops into therapy, using neuro-linguistic programming skills to reframe situations and help the young people see life differently. "We are able to give these young people the time they need to develop a trusting relationship and be able to talk about the things that distress them," says director Fran Hibberd. "The time spent with the horses, which are non-judgmental and simply accept the young person as they are, has a profound effect on them. We mirror the horses as best we can to be accepting and just listen to what the young person says when they are ready to talk to us."

Taking the time needed means that difficulties are quickly and positively dealt with, before the young person starts hurting themselves again. One family came to Equine Partners CIC to support their daughter - the day after she came out of hospital following a suicide attempt. "We were able to help the young woman voice what she needed and for her family to understand that what she had done was not done deliberately to hurt them. Together, they were able to create a safety plan. The family relationships improved and, with it, the young person's mental health. Being able to advocate and help everyone understand each other turned the family round and the young person is much healthier now."

For more information about Sussex Community Foundation, visit www.sussexgiving.org.uk