

Animal assisted interventions and addiction.

Anche noi a cavallo has designed, implemented and carried on a project for a group of five users from the department for addictions, in collaboration with the local health department. The project consisted of six group meetings, each of one hour, divided in two parts: a first one with various experiences with the horse, a second one about the elaboration of the session. The aim of this project was to stimulate the participants, beyond their previous experience with animals, to improve their body awareness. The physical appearances of addicts have common characteristics: lack of care, an appearance of sickness, negligence... this visually represents the gap between the subject and its own reality. There is a split between body and mind, as a defense mechanism (G. Mammana, *Il corpo del tossicodipendente*, "Salute e Prevenzione", 1991). The addict



tries to deny his bodily dimension, drugs help him in this objective, giving an illusionary sense of psychosomatic wholeness, purely mental, that gives a transitory feeling of wellbeing. All the emotions in the addict (calm, excitement, focus...) are triggered artificially by drugs, and this prevents them to be in relation with their body. This, gradually, makes the body just the channel for a substance, without the connection of the body with its corresponding mental states. Elaboration and mediation are not required when the drug triggers the feelings, the natural psychophysics

processes are a lot different from the fast, intense pleasure given by drugs. With this, the body and its functioning become useless. Only when the compulsion towards the drug is passed, the body can cover again his place, his functions, finding his voice, his listening, to enter in a healthy communication. While this develops, body and mind can become one again, with the experience of wholeness. It's in these aspects that the work with horses has potential, as it gives the opportunity to enter in relation with the body, making it a tool to actively participate in life (V. Tondi Della Mura, E. Del Gottardo, *Ippoterapia e formazione emozionale*, Armando Editore, 2010).

The project focused on a confident knowledge of the horse, increasing the sense of responsibility, increasing confidence (towards oneself and others), develop of motor coordination and non verbal communication. Each meeting had on of these as main topic, within a given structure: welcoming, focusing on the present, arrival of the horse, activity without and with the horse, reflection on the experience.

Working with the horse has been gradual: the first meeting was focus on knowledge and safety; the second had the users interact with the horse, free in the riding hall; then various exercises about managing the horse from the ground without the usual tools (harness), to increase a deep contact with the animal.

The project is being evaluated with the use of a scale for emotional disregulation, in addition to the video recording of the sessions. Overall, the project has had a good response, the participants were happy to participate even though at the beginning they were not all convinced. The professionals who have those people in charge were also very happy with the positive effects of this project, considering the delicate situation of people with addiction, they found big changes on their attitude and were surprised by the compliance of the group. A small but significant experience, evidence that the work with animals can benefit a wide range of people, including challenges that with the usual methods are hard to face.