

THE SOMATICHE PROJECT

HEALING TRAUMA THROUGH WORKING WITH HORSES

The Somatiche Project focuses its attention and work towards the therapy with horses.

It is dedicated to the re-education of the nervous system through the awareness of the own body and mind. The main goal is to improve the own awareness of the self and the resilience capacity of the individual.

Introduction of the joint Project

The Somatiche Project has been developed at the Puig de les Basses penitentiary with the objective of enabling the self awareness in individuals who have several dysfunctional patterns in the way of thinking and analysing their own sensations and feelings. These patterns have been rooted in their basic behaviours from a really early age and have been extended to most of the areas of their lives.

Following that profile, there were selected seven inmates who were part of the rehabilitation itinerary of violent behaviour, and who had not been convicted for violent offenses related to gender or sexual violence. The initial selection was previously made by the referrals of the treatment itinerary (a psychologist and two social educators), and the final selection was made together with the reference of the project, once the cases were studied and it had been analysed which profiles could benefit better from the project and the strategies that would be carried out in it. All of the selected inmates are serving long sentences and had completed the intensive phase of the violent behaviour program (DEVI) when they were proposed to join the Somatiche project.

As a brief summary, the DEVI treatment itinerary is designed to modify those dynamic risk factors that are related to a disruptive behaviour. The most common risk factors are: cognitive distortions or beliefs that justify the use of violence, pro-criminal and antisocial behaviour patterns, dysfunctional family models, the personal history of

previous violent behaviour, and the personality traits that predispose to violent behaviours (recklessness, hostility, impulsiveness and emotional instability, etc.).

There are several areas addressed throughout the intervention: emotional awareness, empathy, defence mechanisms, cognitive distortions, emotional regulation, conflict resolution techniques, assertive communication, social skills training and analysis and development of values, among others.

The Somatiche project was integrated into the final phase of the DEVI itinerary, and it has been divided into seven sessions (one monthly session), from June 2018 to February 2019. The activities were divided between morning and afternoon, and always bearing in mind the emotional status of the inmates, who without pretending it, were predisposing the development of one exercise or another, depending on their personal mood. The project started with a number of seven inmates and two workers (a psychologist and a social educator) and ended with a number of four (last two sessions) due to the progression of the others under a 3 grade regime because of good behaviour. Parallel to these sessions, it was carried out a group follow-up after each session, in the penitentiary facility, in addition to periodic individual follow-up sessions carried out by the Somatiche project referent.

The sessions

The sessions were focused on a variety of activities guided by Marta Cirera as the referent of the Somatiche project, who acted as a link agent between the inmates and workers and the horses.

The main activities were focused on the interaction with the animal. The horse acted as an indirect (but essential) agent of projection of the emotional states of the person, but avoiding the value judgment that takes place when the interaction is only between people. This element is essential to understand the whole project because it is this lack of judgment in the horse what makes it easier for the inmates to see and appreciate their own feelings and reactions without feeling evaluated and judged by what they feel, think or decide.

At the beginning of the sessions, all the participants made an exercise of expressing how they felt and what they were expecting from that day. To evaluate how one feels, facilitates the awareness during the following exercises, and this is something that we do not usually pay attention to, either because of our lifestyles or because in the case of the inmates, these types of routines have not been of "apparent usefulness" in their previous lifestyle. Through these small dynamics of creating emotional awareness, their own and others, the interns have integrated in a more natural and fluid way, new tools of self-perception and self-listening, which would then be useful to perceive and listen to the environment in a more direct way. Furthermore, listening to the thoughts and opinions of others also facilitates the establishment of emotional connections between them.

The main purpose of the exercises carried out with the horses, either without directly interacting with them (guided breathing exercises, sharing common spaces) or in a direct interaction with them, was that the inmates became aware of their own disruptive patterns of functioning, which are rooted based on their life history, and how they can lose consciousness of the fact that this type of ways of feeling and acting are tainted.

Most of the participants have experienced situations that are considerably traumatic throughout their lives, and their vital trajectories have been characterized mainly by the integration of ways of surviving, instead of learning how to "live". Therefore, the perception of risk and alertness has been and currently is present, not only in their past lives but in their daily routines too. The fact of having to interact with other ways of functioning (the animals) that are also outside their comfort zone and control (or perception of control) provides them situations where their entire nervous system has to re-learn to evaluate that situation and how to react in a useful way. It is then, when the coping responses of each individual are brought to light, when a real or perceived danger takes place. In this way, the inmates integrated new ways of understanding the context and interpreting objectively when the environment acts as a real risk factor or it simply is the perception they have of danger. And it is this dysfunctional perception, what has facilitated in their past life history, episodes where they ended up creating risk situations that maybe were not initially risky. The horses, being animals of an extreme

perceptive sensitivity, react instantaneously to each energetic change that comes from the environment, and in this case, the inmates. This facilitates that they become aware of their "maladaptive" way of confrontation, and learn how to correct it. In the end, the participants might be able to modify not only their way of interacting with the immediate environment, but the way in which they perceive it.

Most of the adaptation responses that are elaborated in the process of overcoming a traumatic event stop being useful once that situation takes no longer place, but these operating patterns are integrated into the way of perceiving, thinking, feeling and acting of the person. Bringing this type of patterns to consciousness in a purely cognitive-behavioural way becomes very complicated when the person does not have the ability to consciously put into words this type of adaptive responses that are dysfunctional. It is through the exercise with a figure (the horse) that is energetically and behaviourally in another spectrum, when the person brings to consciousness this type of maladaptive responses, and then realises that they are not useful in this type of interaction.

The fact that inmates have become aware of the type of patterns on interaction they use and why they are not useful to them, and that they have achieved this goal through a living being that does not judge them (when being/feeling judged has been a constant in their life), acts as an agent that enhances the processes of self-perception and self-concept, making then easier that they also accept these personality traits that they have had more difficulties recognizing as part of themselves.

Results

In general, these interaction exercises have helped the inmates, in a non-invasive way, to consolidate a greater capacity of emotional regulation, instead of emotional containment. They are able to face the confrontation of complex situations, not using any violent behaviour or an escape response as a form of conflict resolution.

Another result obtained through the sessions is that the inmates have improved the management of high stress levels, learning not to offer an immediate response as a method of conflict resolution, but to hold the emotion that generates discomfort in order

to evaluate it and accept it, and realizing as well that it provides them helpful information in order to perform an adaptive response.

In addition, the participants have improved considerably their detection ability of the dysfunctional internal patterns that they tend to repeat, and the need to modify them. Most of the inmates who have participated in this project, are now able to accept and understand much easily situations from their own past life experiences and in some cases, from the figures associated with their traumatic memories.

As a final conclusion, the intervention has contributed in a way, to reduce the risk factors related to recidivism when it is related to the use of violent responses as a mechanism of avoiding stressful or unease situations. The techniques presented along the project: exercises of self-perception, assertive communication, relaxation and tension discharge, become now a part of the repertoire of tools that the inmates can use as elements of detection of these risk situations and consequently, help to prevent apparently irrelevant decisions (which seem innocuous, but can pose an imminent risk). These new integrated tools, can work as protective factors in order to reproduce new disruptive behaviours and facilitate instead new adaptive confrontation responses.

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