STEELS SIGNALS

Horse connection harbours hope

Report: Joe Clapson Pictures: Graeme Main

N UNUSUAL psychotherapy treatment that brings sufferers of post-traumatic stress face-to-face with wild horses is achieving surprising results.

The Dare to Live programme helps ex-Servicemen and civilians "re-centre" their minds and reduce stress levels by walking among herds and carefully interacting with them.

At a quiet farm in East Sussex, participants with no previous equine experience approach the untamed animals under the guidance of professional therapists.

Before stepping into the steeds' domain, they are taught that horses respond best to what humans are feeling, not what they are thinking.

Sun Tui (pictured above), a former member of the Territorial Army and lead trainer at Dare to Live, told *Soldier* how her own experiences led to the idea

"With the loss of my child I developed severe depression and, coming out of a military

environment after a divorce, the transition to civilian life left me in a mess," she explained.

"But I noticed that when I got involved with horses the depression lifted."

The scheme may seem quirky, with some detractors championing more traditional methods of treatment, but those involved say they are experiencing positive changes to their mental health.

"When we are being soft and relaxed, horses want to know us," Tui said. "It's when people are stressed in their minds that they aren't interested.

"We are using the animals to rewire the pathways to the brain, giving a more relaxed route.

"When people find success with this – even for just 30 seconds – it is bliss."

Qualified in psychotherapeutic counselling and influenced by Zen martial arts philosophy, the founder of the International Foundation of Equine Assisted Learning now hopes the technique will assist others affected by bereavement and trauma.

"Soldiers who have been on the course say it's just incredible because they are able to forget everything else," the former Reservist with the Royal Corps of Transport explained.

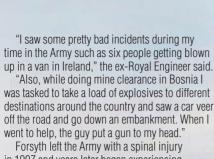
"The development of neuroscience has really helped our understanding and studies are

showing that when you are relaxed, and the more you stay in that state, the better your body can unwind."

Hugh Forsyth, a former explosive ordnance disposal operator, spoke candidly about why he was willing to give a day walking with horses a go.



Animal interaction: Ex-Royal Marine Jay Coen (right) attends a Dare to Live course along with other former military personnel



in 1997 and years later began experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

"I started having difficulties with my marriage and I tried to commit suicide twice," the veteran

space that I feel okay and where is the space that the horse feels okay?'," said Tui. "Through that process the body begins to calm."

Thanks to the techniques offered by the progamme, Forsyth now feels optimistic about his future.

"It was like a miracle when the horse lifted its head up and wanted to engage with me," he said.

"It's a lovely warm feeling and I got a real buzz out of it - it's the calmest I've felt in years."

The project's organisers are liaising with various charities to get more people – especially those connected to the Armed Forces - to work with the horses.

"I have learnt how to take a deep breath and centre myself without having a twisted stomach," said Forsyth. "It's worth giving it a go and those in charge of others should consider it because it will help soldiers who are trying to understand what's going on in their heads.

The father-of-four added: "I will never be cured of post-traumatic stress disorder, I have to learn to live with it, but working with horses has made me more aware of when I'm getting anxious."

For more information about Dare to Live visit

