

## Why study with Athena Herd Foundation?

Director and co-founder Jennifer Geach and facilitator and trainer Graeme Green tell Helen Sharp what's involved in practitioner training with Athena Herd Foundation



**Helen Sharp**  
HORSE CARE > CAREERS & EDUCATION  
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EQUINE Facilitated Interactions (EFI), sometimes referred to under the wider definition Equine Assisted Services (EAS), is an umbrella term that describes the increasingly recognised benefit of facilitated interactions between humans and horses (or other equids such as donkeys) with the purpose of providing individual learning and development, or deeper therapeutic healing.

These interactions are often referred to more specifically in terms of the primary scope of practice and qualifications of the facilitator such as Equine Facilitated/Assisted Learning, or Equine Facilitated/Assisted Therapy or Psychotherapy. For example, one has to be a qualified therapist to practice therapy alongside horses.

The work is principally ground-based facilitated activities. These can vary from observational reflections or being present around horses, to everyday care such as brushing or feeding, to hand-led or at liberty exercises. The wider term Equine Assisted Services seems to include ridden work that provides physical benefit and therapy, such as Hippotherapy, Equine Facilitated Occupational Therapy and Therapeutic Riding.



### An experiential process

It is widely recognised that being with horses is beneficial for people, but EFI is not just about the horse. Whether for personal development or therapy it is the art of effective facilitation that draws out the meaning and insight, and ultimately from there, the potential for transferable personal learning. EFI is often described as an experiential process. It is a whole-person, or somatic, experience. It recognises that both mind and body shape individual's behaviours. By definition, one has to be fully engaged in these exercises, one cannot just think through the task, nor can one simply issue the horse a verbal instruction. Somatic interactions create a powerful behavioural honesty, such that therapists will often state that one session with a horse can surface content that in-the-room might take several sessions.

In this process whether observations or reflections, or actual interactions, the horse serves as an active metaphor for the real world. This is where the transferable power of the experiential process comes to the fore, it is not just about creating self-awareness but providing skills and practices that can be taken away and provide everyday benefit for a learner or therapee.

### Why equines?

By their nature horses are situationally and socially present and to work effectively with them humans need to be the same, and so must develop and engage these qualities. As a herd-based flight animal, horses are sensitive to their environment and consciously aware of the energy, emotions and intentions of those around them. They are adept readers of non-verbal communications to which their reactions and responses are honest and unconditional. As a result, they respond to people as they are and if people change, they will change with them, providing the feedback that is essential for the human learning.

### Athena® and EFI



Athena Herd Foundation (Athena®) was founded by Jennifer and Brent Geach in 2014 to create a beneficial space for all their animals, not just horses. Its foundation is in the wellbeing of all their animals. As part of this commitment horses generally live out 24-7 as a single herd on a track system. This way of life aligns to the 'Five Domains' (a positive approach to animal welfare developed by Professor David Mellor) of nutrition, environment, health, behaviour and mental wellbeing.

In creating an environment with animal wellbeing at its heart, there was a clear benefit also for people. Today, Athena® provides a safe space from which it offers EFI onsite in Kent for local vulnerable communities and those in need. In support of this Athena® has created a team that brings together significant experience in this field and a diversity of professional practices.

The Athena® vision has developed on the basis that ethically founded approaches could both be delivered and trained. In this context, Athena® has developed a unique suite of externally accredited vocational qualifications (from UK level 2 to 7 (post-graduate)) which it delivers in Ireland, the UK and internationally; face-to-face or online. As an organisation it uniquely respects the professional practice and knowledge of its learners, working with them to develop the skills required to enable them to develop their own professional EFI practices.

### Grounbreaking regulation

In recognition of its standards and ethical commitments Athena® is working with the UK's Professional Standard Authority (PSA) to establish the very first formally accredited register to cover the field Equine Facilitated Interactions. The PSA website defines the value of accreditation in that it "demonstrates commitment to high standards and public protection, which increases public confidence."

- Athena Herd
- Equine Assisted Learning
- Equine Assisted Services
- Equine Therapy



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